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in Sociology**

**Persisting or Dropping Out:
A Grounded Theory of School-to-Work Transitions
of Young Migrants in China**

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*To all the remarkable young people
who shared their stories with me.*

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Abstract

This thesis inductively develops a grounded theory of school-to-work transitions of young rural-to-urban internal migrants in China. It seeks to explain why some young people persist, whereas others drop off their pathways beyond compulsory education. It draws on intensive interviews with young migrants (n = 35) and their parents (n = 15) conducted during 11 months of fieldwork in an outskirt district of Shanghai. The scope of this thesis covers school-to-work transitions of young people, particularly those in restrictive institutional and social contexts.

It finds that an empirically grounded, multidimensional concept, ‘interest-environment fit’, and its link to motivation explain persistence and dropping out on all three major pathways beyond middle school: the academic, the vocational school and the work track. The underlying mechanism suggests that finding a good interest-environment fit around middle school graduation leads young people to subjectively link their interests to their pathway, achieve a higher level of motivation and persist, while the reverse holds for those who do not achieve a good fit. The concept of interest-environment fit explicitly incorporates social class and institutional restrictions, underscoring the sociological perspective taken in this thesis. Moreover, the analysis highlights that the decision-making phase in middle school is crucial for understanding young people’s trajectories beyond middle school graduation.

The thesis adds to the theoretical literature on dropping out and persisting in the sociology of education and work by (1) conceptually integrating the decision-making process about pathways in middle school, (2) analysing all three main pathways beyond middle school within one comprehensive theoretical framework that highlights important parallels, and (3) grounding the theory in a Chinese context. Moreover, through its application of grounded theory methodology, this study emphasises the benefits and potential of employing an approach that prioritises data over pre-existing theoretical knowledge.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Meiling is a young female migrant who, after growing up with her maternal grandparents in Sichuan province in central China, moved to join her parents in Shanghai when she was eight years old. Her parents run a fishing pond under a highway bridge in Jinshan District on the outskirts of the city and sublet two nearby rooms for gambling and social events. She attended a public middle school in Shanghai and, as a high-achieving student, was encouraged by her homeroom teacher to pursue an academic track. However, the restrictive institutional framework in Shanghai blocks most young migrants from accessing public high schools in the city. The pathway into university for Meiling thus entailed returning to her home province for high school. When she was 14 years old, Meiling began to consider this option, albeit with the knowledge that her parents, who also had to look after her two younger siblings in Shanghai, would not be able to accompany her. Nonetheless, after discussing the possibilities with their daughter, Meiling's parents arranged for her to return to Sichuan and attend a boarding middle school for grade eight, one year before middle school graduation. During the weekends, Meiling had to stay with her paternal grandparents with whom she had a strained relationship. The grandparents' vocal conviction that educating girls was a waste of family resources brought about severe emotional distress for Meiling. Yet, she did well on her high school admission exam (*zhongkao*) and was accepted into a good public school, where she also boarded. Despite considerable academic and emotional challenges, she persisted on her pathway and, after three years in high school, secured a place on the chemistry programme of a second-tier Shanghai university through the university entrance exam (*gaokao*).

Jing, another female migrant from the same public middle school as Meiling in Shanghai, also comes from a modest socioeconomic background. Her father runs a tearoom and her mother had worked as a cook in a company canteen until recently retiring. Born in rural Anhui Province, Jing was taken to Shanghai right after her birth. She thus grew up in the city with her parents. Like Meiling, Jing was a high-achieving student in middle school. Following a proposal from her homeroom teacher, her father suggested that Jing return to the family's home province for high school. She had reservations about the idea but found it difficult to resist his will. She also returned in grade eight and, soon after her father had left Jing behind in her home province, the turbulence began. It turned out that the first boarding school she was supposed to attend did not accept incoming students in her grade level and the alternative school did not offer boarding, which required Jing to stay with her aunt's family. Jing felt disconnected from her relatives and had difficulty coping with the emotional distress. She soon begged her father to be allowed to come back to Shanghai, in the full knowledge that this would mean giving up the chance to gain access to university. Her father eventually relented. Jing thus dropped out and returned to Shanghai, where she reassessed her options and decided to pursue a vocational school pathway instead of an academic one.

Meiling's smooth and Jing's more turbulent school-to-work transition illustrate a recurring and puzzling observation that emerged from my interviews with 35 young internal Chinese migrants. In addition to 11 months of fieldwork, my study also included multiple follow-up discussions over the course of this four-year research project. Specifically, Meiling's and Jing's cases show how very similar starting points can lead to different outcomes during the transition from school to work. The two girls had several similarities in their cases. Both were migrants and both performed well in public middle school. In each case, the parents were in favour of returning to the home provinces for

high school. The girls also both felt a strong attachment to their families and homes in Shanghai. Even their socioeconomic backgrounds were very similar. Their parents ran small businesses and were committed to their children's education. The two girls also faced the same institutional exclusion from public high schools in Shanghai. Additionally, they both experienced emotional distress due to problematic relationships with their relatives in the home provinces. Yet, their school-to-work transitions unfolded in different ways. While Meiling persisted on her academic track and smoothly gained access to university, Jing dropped out to return to Shanghai. The contrast points to the main research question that this thesis addresses:

- **Why do some young migrants persist on their pathway beyond middle school, whereas others drop off?**

Pathways (or tracks), in the context of this thesis, refer to educational programmes, such as high school or vocational school, and professional trajectories, such as an apprenticeship or a particular job, that young people pursue after middle school. The main available pathways for young migrants in Shanghai are the academic, the vocational school and the work track (see figure below). A fourth possible pathway after middle would be going directly into unemployment, but this path was not an empirical reality of the cases examined in this study because they either opted for the alternatives of vocational school or an arranged job through family ties when facing the prospect of intermittent unemployment. The pathway of unemployment right after middle school is thus not further discussed in the course of this thesis. Meiling and Jing are examples of young people who attempt to pursue the first of these pathways, the academic track (see chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of this track and the cases of both migrant girls).

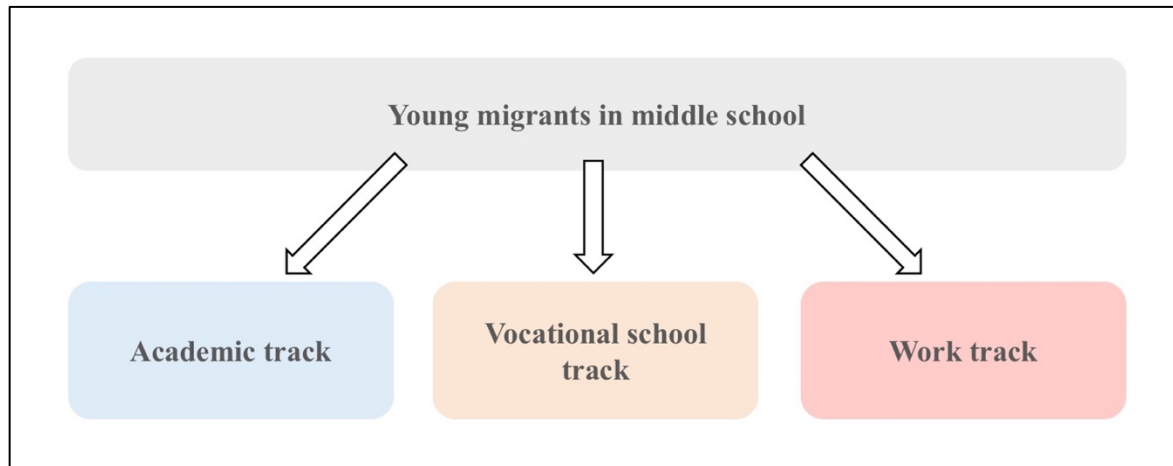


Figure 1: Major pathway options after compulsory education in China

The process involving the activities of young people as they move between compulsory full-time schooling and full-time employment is referred to as ‘school-to-work transition’. The school-to-work transition can vary and involve one or several different pathways. Some transitions, like Meiling’s, are smooth processes, with young people persisting on a specific path. Other transitions, such as Jing’s, are turbulent as students adjust plans and drop off their original pathways throughout the process. I observed turbulence and smoothness both during the decision-making phase in middle school and along all three main pathways after middle school graduation. Since turbulence and smoothness are central concepts in the remainder of the thesis, it is worth clearly defining them from the outset. There are two layers to the definitions of ‘turbulence’ and ‘smoothness’ which depend on whether the terms are used in connection with persistence *after* a choice about pathways is already made, or in connection with the *decision-making process itself*.

In the context of this thesis, I define *turbulence* in school-to-work transitions as (1) dropping off the pathway beyond middle school before the end of the pursued programme (for educational pathways) or before six months¹ (for work-related pathways), or as (2)

¹ I decided to take six months as a threshold for a premature change in the work pathway. However, the choice of exactly six months, rather than for example five or seven months, is

conflict or unexpected shocks during the decision-making period about different pathways.

I further define *smoothness* as (1) persisting in an educational programme until graduation or staying on a job for over six months, or as (2) the absence of conflict or unexpected shocks during the decision-making period about pathways.

In other words, the term persistence is associated with a relatively smooth school-to-work transition, while dropping out of an educational programme or prematurely switching a job is seen as an indicator of turbulence. The second part of the definition of turbulence and smoothness (as the presence or absence of conflict and unexpected shocks) refers specifically to the decision-making period which is at the centre of the discussion set out in chapter 4 of this thesis.

It is important to note that the terms smoothness and turbulence do not imply value judgements over which type of pathway is preferable for individual young people. Both smooth and turbulent transitions can lead to subjectively perceived success or improvements in well-being.

In sum, this thesis concerns itself with understanding and explaining patterns of smoothness and turbulence on all three main pathways available to young migrants in Shanghai.

arbitrary to some degree. In my study, there were no cases of young people who quit their first job after middle school three to nine months after they started it. They either quit earlier or much later. Choosing six months as a threshold thus seemed to be a sensible way to account for the difference in behaviour.

1.1 Research rationale

What is the rationale behind this study of smoothness and turbulence in school-to-work transitions? Why should researchers pay attention to young Chinese migrants either dropping out or persisting in their pathways beyond middle school? In this section, I address these two questions to explain the wider reasons for choosing the topic of this study. Based on these reasons, I justify the methodological choices that follow. These include both the decision to focus on the voices and agency of young people despite severe structural constraints as well as the choice of a research design involving an intra-group comparison of migrants instead of an inter-group comparison of migrants and local youth.

It is relevant to examine dropping out as a phenomenon because it has important *individual* and *societal* consequences. On an individual level, research has shown that adults who dropped out as adolescents earn less, have poorer health and are more likely to engage in crime (see Rumberger, 2011, for a comprehensive review of the negative consequences of dropping out). Whether young people drop out or persist on their pathway may thus impact their well-being and status in adult life (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). Persistence may thus improve life chances, but does this imply that it is desirable to persist on a pathway that is often assumed by others to be a dead end, such as working out of middle school? This thesis finds that persisting on work-bound pathways — when pursued with a high level of motivation — can also lead to considerable subjective success and should not be seen categorically as a dead end. For instance, a young migrant who decided to work as a personal trainer after middle school achieved higher earnings than most of his peers and a high level of subjective satisfaction (see chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion of his case).

Moreover, on a societal level, dropping out can decrease the human capital available for economic development (Rumberger, 2011). Additionally, reduced income and increased crime among dropouts could lead to the formation of an urban ‘underclass’ (MacDonald, 1997). Furthermore, persistence in the pursuit of a particular pathway can matter especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged and less educated young people, as scholars recognise that these youths face the most negative effects from increased instability and insecurity in school-to-work transitions (Gangl, 2002; Hannum & Liu, 2005; MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013). Therefore, turbulence or persistence in school-to-work transitions of disadvantaged groups, such as young internal migrants in China, may be linked to issues of social cohesion and social justice (Ngok, 2012).

Why should we study school-to-work transitions from the perspectives of young migrants? Beyond the individual and societal consequences of school-to-work transitions, the transition experience of young people in and of itself also merits scholarly attention. Scholars in the field of youth studies argue that the experiences of young people are worth exploring in their own right, without necessarily tying them to possible consequences (Furlong, 2013). Moreover, processes of economic and social restructuring and social stratification under conditions of global market integration and urbanisation are nearly always looked at through the eyes of adults, not children. Few studies examine these processes through children’s eyes, and this is especially true of migrant children in China, as observed by Zhang (2015).

What can be learned from studying the voices and agency of young people facing severe constraints? Focussing on young people under constraints allows us to address the question of how motivation can come about in limiting circumstances. My findings suggest that despite constraints, some young migrants find a good fit and thus muster the motivation to persist on their pathways. The various factors that constitute a good

interest-environment fit are what contributes to finding motivation in difficult circumstances and explains persistence. These insights could not be generated by focussing on young people whose choices are subject to fewer constraints. Moreover, by highlighting the journeys and motivations of young people facing multi-faceted constraints, it might also be possible to go some way towards redressing what Lamont (2018) calls 'recognition gaps'. If young migrants' lived experiences and persistence against numerous setbacks were more widely recognised, then two consequences might follow. First, wide-spread discriminatory assumptions about lower-class people's and rural people's innate inclinations (such as the prejudiced belief that they care about money rather than education and that they are lazy and unmotivated) and justifications for denying them worth and cultural citizenship would become harder to accept. Second, the structural factors behind young migrants' limited educational and socio-economic mobility would become harder to deny.

Sociologists of childhood (Punch, 2015; Tisdall & Punch, 2012) have grappled with the challenges of conceptualising children's agency because there is an enduring tension between regarding children as competent and responsible agents and casting them as helpless victims, vulnerable due to sometimes extreme structural constraints (as in the case of child soldiers, child prostitutes or extreme poverty). Therefore, in the global literature on migrant children and youths, it is recognised that agency can vary across domains and fields. While at the local level, young people might have thick agency, suggesting a higher degree of control over the life course, at the macro level this agency is thinned considerably, especially as far as the institutional context is concerned. However, the wider literature on children's agency does not adequately address how the tension between children's agency and the structural constraints affects motivation to pursue their pathway through the school-to-work transition. In this thesis, I contribute to

this discussion by theorising the link between agency (features of agency that contribute to a newly devised concept of ‘interest-environment fit’) and motivation. This conceptualisation problematises that motivation cannot be seen as independent from structural constraints. By drawing on the perspectives of young people, I focus more on the micro-level (where there is some room to navigate and negotiate agency) and less on macro-level (where there is hardly any room to affect institutional structures and policies). I also stress that young migrants are people whose agency is affected by the intersection of their migration status and their status as children or youth, which is a stage of the life course when individuals are still reliant in many respects on adults.

Why does this study focus only on the group of migrants instead of comparing migrants explicitly with local youth? While many quantitative studies take an inter-group approach and compare migrant youth and urban resident youth for different measures of well-being (Hu et al. 2014), this study explicitly takes a research design that focusses on intra-group comparison. Implicitly in inter-group comparisons is an averaging out of intra-group differences that treats migrants as a homogeneous group and overlooks possible intra-group differences. A major contribution of this study is that it complements existing inter-group studies by examining the considerable variation among migrants. One of the findings is that there is indeed substantial heterogeneity within the group of migrants.

Most qualitative studies of migrant children focus only on migrants, while the background contextual introductions to these qualitative studies note the particular barriers and constraints that migrant children face compared with advantages of children holding urban *hukou* (Koo et al., 2014; Ling, 2020). While qualitative studies of migrant children have examined gender differences (Goodburn, 2015; Ling, 2017), they focus less on other differences among migrant children. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge,

differences in migrant youth's socio-economic backgrounds and their school-work transitions have not been explored before.

Moreover, most of the existing literature looks at how migrant youth internalise the limitations on their educational mobility imposed by their marginalised residency status. While I acknowledge these *hukou* constraints, this thesis goes further than other scholars in that it charts heterogeneity in migrant youth's responses to institutional and socio-economic constraints. In other words, an important reason for focussing on the voices and agency of migrant youth is that it allows understanding internal (motivational) factors that shape how young migrants respond to constraints they face. Their responses matter for whether young people persist on their selected pathways. This insight is reflected in the central mechanism of the grounded theory constructed in the thesis which explicitly highlights the roles of both motivation and structural constraints.

Finally, it is useful to illustrate the focus of this thesis by highlighting that there are at least two sets of important questions that can be addressed about school-to-work transitions. One set of questions aims to understand *why* young people persist or drop off their pursued pathway. In other words, the challenge is to try to explain overarching patterns of persistence and dropping out (see, for instance, Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Another set of questions revolves around *which* young person decides to pursue *which* pathway. These questions about educational and occupational choice aim to understand the factors that shape why some young people pursue a particular educational or work pathway (see, for instance, Ginzberg, 1988; Holland, 1997). As the research question stated above indicates, the issue of persistence is the primary concern of this thesis. The issue of occupational choice is also considered to the extent that it impacted on the primary problem of persistence.

1.2 Historical and institutional context

How does the historical and institutional context impact the transition out of middle school for Meiling, Jing, and the other young migrants I met in China? One of the most relevant large-scale phenomena is rural-to-urban migration in China, which has unfolded at a rapid pace over the past four decades since the initiation of the Reform and Opening Policy in 1978. Following these political changes, new jobs in factories and the service sector have attracted millions of rural migrants to urban centres (Morrison, 2019; Yiu, 2016). Currently, 241 million rural residents live in Chinese cities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). Migrant parents have increasingly started to bring their children with them into urban areas (Chen & Liang, 2007; Lu, 2007). The rural-to-urban migration that Meiling and Jing have experienced in joining their parents in Shanghai is thus part of a broader trend. There are an estimated 35.8 million migrant children and young people under the age of 18 growing up in China's cities (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). All 35 participants in this study formed part of this group for a certain period of their childhood, adolescence and early adulthood.

In other societal or national contexts, the category of 'migrant' might not be applied to these young people since many of them were born and raised in the cities. However, in the Chinese institutional context, migrant status is tied to the household registration (*hukou*) that children inherit from their parents (Xiong, 2015). A remnant of socialist controls on internal freedom of movement, the *hukou* scheme is akin to a passport system in the international context which excludes aliens from certain entitlements (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Migrants with a rural *hukou* do not enjoy the same citizenship rights as the local population (Solinger, 1999). This regulation, which effectively turns migrants into second-class citizens, also applies to their children (Yiu, 2016). The scholarly literature highlights various dimensions of disadvantages of young migrants in Chinese urban

centres, especially concerning educational access. Prior scholarship stresses the institutional barriers to schooling for migrant children (Goodburn, 2009; Koo, 2012; Kwong, 2011; Ling, 2020; Ming, 2014; Montgomery, 2012; Wei & Hou, 2010; Xia, 2006; Yang & Wang, 2013). Due to their alien status in the cities, young urban migrants thus face unique challenges. Indeed, migrants in most larger cities are still barred from enjoying the same access to public services as their local peers (Xiong, 2015).

What are the reasons for restricting educational access for migrants? First, from the government's perspective, this exclusion is implemented in part to protect the interests of the local population which fears increasing competition in the race for the limited number of spots at top universities (Ming, 2014). Second, educational access for migrant children has been kept restricted in part to halt further growth of the urban population. In recent years, local authorities have increasingly tried to use regulatory powers to prevent overpopulation in cities. With the surge in urbanisation over the last decades, the municipal services provided in larger Chinese cities — the preferred migrant destinations — are often pushed to their limits. Not unlike rapidly urbanising regions in other parts of the world, city governments of Chinese metropolises are facing problems such as overcrowded transportation networks, struggling healthcare services, and strained educational institutions. Chinese official media authorities refer to this phenomenon as “big city disease” (Goh, 2017). In 2014, the central government initiated a policy of limiting the overall city population of megacities to combat these phenomena (State Council, 2014).

Cities in China have taken different policy measures regarding migrant education. Three distinct approaches can be identified. First, in Beijing, the bar for migrant children to access public elementary and middle schools remains deliberately high, despite central government requirements to include the majority of migrant children into the compulsory

nine-year public education (Ministry of Education, 2003). Migrant parents have to produce “five certificates”, including proof of residence and employment, to enrol their children in Beijing public schools (Beijing Municipal Commission of Education, 2014). Most of these certificates are hard to obtain (Wang, 2014). Many districts also use the leeway given by central authorities to create additional hurdles to keep migrants out of the public system (Liu et al., 2017). The Beijing approach is thus characterised by a sustained exclusion of young migrants from all levels of schooling.

Second, in Southern Chinese cities in the Pearl River delta, such as Guangzhou and Dongguan, the authorities have invested heavily in affordable private schools to improve compulsory education provision to migrants (Wang, 2016). By 2012, over three-quarters of migrant children in elementary and middle school age were enrolled in private migrant schools in the city of Dongguan (Department of Education of Dongguan City, 2012). This approach is characterised by *public* financial provision and *private* practical implementation.

Third, in Shanghai, the municipal authorities implemented reforms to loosen *hukou* restrictions on compulsory schooling in 2008 (Shanghai Bureau of Education, 2008). As part of this policy change, a large number of migrant students were transferred from migrant schools into public elementary and middle schools (Lan, 2014). By 2012, three-quarters of migrant children in Shanghai were in public schools (Shanghai Educational Finance Office, 2012). However, open access to the public education system in Shanghai remains limited to the compulsory elementary and middle school level, that is, up to the final grade in middle school (grade nine) when students are on average 15 years old. Beyond grade nine, current education policies allow only those migrant children whose parents meet a 120-point threshold to take the high-stakes high school admission exam (*zhongkao*) (Shanghai Education Committee, 2016). Points are awarded based on

desirability criteria set by the city authorities. These include migrant parents' age, educational qualifications, and work history, but also their criminal record and their compliance with China's family planning policies (see chapter 4 for more details). However, the point bar is set so high that the vast majority of migrant children are effectively still excluded from a high school education in Shanghai. Newly published data indicate that in 2017 and 2018 less than 0.5 per cent of the total number of migrants in the city were admitted via the scheme² (Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, 2019). Meiling's and Jing's cases underline the difficulty of obtaining access to public high schools via the 120-point-system. They both found themselves excluded from high schools in Shanghai and had to consider alternative options, such as returning to their home provinces, if they wanted to continue on the academic track beyond middle school.

The Shanghai approach is thus characterised by a marked contrast of elementary school and middle school *inclusion* and high school *exclusion*. As China's most prosperous city and one of the largest migrant magnets with a significant migrant population of just over 40 per cent (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics 2017), Shanghai is often regarded as a role model. Its pioneering policy decisions are carefully observed and often followed by other cities, such as Wenzhou, Shenzhen and Hefei (Lan, 2014). Therefore, it is an ideal field site for studying school-to-work transitions of young migrants and was selected as a suitable location for conducting this study.

² There is no publicly available data on the total number of applications for the point scheme, so the best alternative reference value is the total number of migrants residing in Shanghai.

1.3 Understanding the research process as a journey

Research can be understood through the metaphor of a journey, where the starting point, the travelled path, and the endpoint offer opportunities for reflection on the process as a whole. Reviewing this process at regular intervals is an important exercise that can elucidate the research rationale, recalibrate the researcher's focus, and pinpoint the gaps in the existing literature which the thesis addresses. It might, therefore, be beneficial for readers to understand the route I took to writing this thesis.

1.3.1 Where the project started

An initial engagement with the pertinent research literature indicated that there were three promising 'sensitising concepts' for investigating the process of graduating from middle school. These concepts were 'school-to-work transitions', 'critical moments', and 'social context'. Linking these sensitising concepts with the substantive literature on migrant youth in China, I identified two gaps that my thesis could potentially fill. The first gap was the dearth of studies focussing explicitly on critical moments (or turning points) of young migrants during the transition process; the second emerged from the absence of qualitative studies on the social capital of young migrants in school-to-work transitions that take the full spectrum of available pathways beyond middle school into account (see following initial literature review chapter). It seemed a worthwhile endeavour to (1) approach migrant school-to-work transitions out of compulsory nine-year education from the perspective of young people, (2) examine multiple pathways beyond middle school, and (3) focus on contingency and agency as well as social context. The initial two research questions that emerged from this understanding were:

- **How do young Chinese migrants navigate critical moments in their school-to-work transitions?**
- **What role does social context play around critical moments along all three main pathways (academic, vocational school, work) in school-to-work transitions of young Chinese migrants?**

These research questions prompted reflections on the appropriate methodological approach for addressing them. Since this thesis aims to develop a *theoretical* answer to the above questions, I found *grounded theory methodology* to be the most suitable as it is an approach that helps to facilitate “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). There are several reasons why grounded theory methodology is particularly appropriate.

First, grounded theory offers explicit and systematic procedures that direct researchers on how to integrate data collection and data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). These steps involve theoretical sampling, initial coding, focussed coding, memo-writing, and the constant comparative method. As the methodology chapter of this thesis shows in greater detail (see chapter 3), these measures facilitate a “continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis” (Myers, 2002, p. 9).

Second, these procedures position grounded theory as a distinctive approach for generating concepts (Glaser, 1978). Strauss and Corbin (1994) highlight that the unique aspect of grounded theory methodology in comparison to “other approaches to qualitative research was its emphasis on theory development” (p. 274). Grounded theory can thus help to construct concepts for middle-range theories that emerge from the subjective experiences of participants (Shanahan & Longest, 2009). Following the logic of grounded theory, researchers move back and forth between data collection and analysis to refine the

“emerging theoretical framework” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 23) which allows for a “fresh look” and creates “novel categories and concepts” (p. 33).

Third, through its systematic procedures that facilitate new theoretical insights, grounded theory has proven useful for building theory around phenomena which have yet to be (fully) explored academically, or which would benefit from a fresh perspective (McCann & Clark, 2003a; Payne, 2007; Polit & Beck, 2012). It is thus suitable for addressing the literature gap and the relative lack of knowledge on critical moments in school-to-work transitions of young migrants in China.

Fourth, thanks to the systematic techniques that trace how a phenomenon unfolds, grounded theory is recognised as a methodology designed for researchers interested in gaining an understanding of underlying social processes (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This aspect qualifies it as a tool for elucidating the underlying transition process in which critical moments are nested.

The initial purpose of this project was to gain a theoretical understanding of the factors which shape how school-to-work transitions unfold for the disadvantaged population of young migrants, from their own perspectives. In line with grounded theory methodology, the wide scope of the project reflected the variability around exactly which gap in the literature this thesis might seek to fill, not least because the actual outcomes and findings of the data collection exercise in the field could not be foreseen with any degree of certainty. While this uncertainty can be unnerving or even intimidating to some researchers, it can also be a great source of excitement.

1.3.2 How the project developed

The middle stages on the research journey were guided by the methodological choice of grounded theory as well as qualitative data collection and analysis. During 11 months of fieldwork in Jinshan District on the outskirts of Shanghai, I established rapport with a wide range of migrant families through my position as an assistant English teacher at two local public middle schools with significant migrant populations. Building on these connections, I implemented a combined prospective and retrospective research design. I accompanied two graduating classes in grade nine throughout their school-to-work transition process and followed up with recent graduates from these two middle schools, whom I interviewed about their transition experiences. Following grounded theory methodology, data analysis took place alongside data collection and involved systematic, yet flexible, measures, such as initial and focussed coding as well as memo-writing. My emerging theoretical categories shaped the next data collection efforts (see methodology chapter). This research process led to theory development by gaining a deeper understanding of the critical moments (or turning points) experienced throughout the school-to-work transition process. In total, during this stage of the research journey, I interviewed 35 young migrants ($n = 35$) and 15 parents ($n = 15$) in matched pairs.³ Twenty-three of these young migrants were interviewed independently and 12 in group interviews (six in a dyadic interview setting and six in two groups of three).⁴ Moreover, after the first round of interviews, I stayed in touch with all participants and continued to obtain regular updates through a Chinese messenger service. I also conducted in-person

³ I had initially sampled 40 young migrants, but a closer examination of the data led me to exclude five cases from further analysis because interviews and interactions did not offer the same depth as the other 35 cases. This step ensured data quality and reliability. The ensuing analysis is thus based on 35 cases.

⁴ See methodology chapter for more information on the rationale for choosing a combination of independent, dyadic and group interview settings.

follow-up interviews with 15 of my participants. Regarding parental interviews, I interviewed one of the parents of 13 migrant youths and both parents of two young migrants. During the process of data collection and interview transcription, I received support from a Chinese research assistant affiliated with Fudan University (see methodology section).

It was during this intermediate stage of the research journey that the wider scope of the study emerged as a strength. In combination with the inductive approach of grounded theory, this flexibility facilitated open research interviews guided by the initial ideas (also called ‘sensitising concepts’, see following literature review chapter) rather than solely addressing a particular narrowly defined gap or issue. During this stage, data collection and analysis began to suggest threads for the emerging theory construction. The further systematic comparison of data and codes led to further refinements (see empirical chapters and grounded theory chapter; chapters 4 to 8). Through the grounded theory approach of constant comparison, I sought to integrate newly collected empirical data and realised that the research project was moving into fresh and unforeseen directions. Other dimensions in the school-to-work transition process started to become more central to the analytical process than I had initially anticipated. Some codes were elevated to analytical categories of increased importance during this process of theory construction.

While some scholars might consider a divergence from the original conceptual starting point as problematic, I believe that such departures are part of understanding research as a journey, especially when employing inductive methodologies. I thus embraced these developments and incorporated them into the process of theory construction.

1.3.3 What the project achieved and contributed

In most grounded theory studies, the main finding or contribution is the constructed theory (Charmaz, 2006). This project eventually found an original mechanism that explains dropout and persistence of young people on three post-compulsory education pathways in a particular context, that of young internal rural-to-urban migrants in China. The theory prompts us to revisit our understanding of the phenomena of persisting and dropping out.

Before explaining how this mechanism operates, it is worth introducing a central, multidimensional concept that is empirically grounded and devised as a theoretical contribution of this thesis. This concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ captures the different factors that shape the decision-making process about different pathways during middle school and its outcome, the pathway decision. In my development of the concept of ‘interest-environment fit’, I draw on and recast a pre-existing conceptualisation of ‘interest’ proposed by Renninger and colleagues (Renninger & Hidi, 2015; Renninger and Su 2012) by extending it beyond the realm of education and highlighting its multi-directionality. Interests thus include educational ambitions, subject-based and professional interests as well as place affinity. Understanding school-to-work transitions through the concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ has important implications for educational policy, practice and outreach with marginalised young people (see final chapter). Moreover, the environment is conceptualised as comprising institutional restrictions, social class, as well as the relationships with teachers and family. Achieving a good ‘interest-environment fit’ thus depends on the presence and type of dominant interest of the young person involved as well as features of the environment, such as interest congruence with teachers or parents, the ability to overcome interest incongruence (if present), and the availability and accuracy of information. Interactions

between these factors play out during the decision-making phase in middle school and beyond.

How does the proposed mechanism of decision-making aimed at establishing an ‘interest-environment fit’ explain dropout and persistence of young people beyond middle school?

The main argument of the grounded theory is that young people who reach a good interest-environment fit by the end of their decision-making period in middle school develop higher levels of motivation on their respective post-compulsory education pathway. Stronger motivation comes from the subjective realisation of young people; they see the point in following their trajectory by tying their interest to their pathway. This subjective perception, reinforced through a context of social support and fulfilled expectations, reduces the emotional cost of pursuing the pathway, which in turn leads to higher persistence. By contrast, when young people fail to achieve a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making stage before middle school graduation, this failure prevents them from linking their interest to their pursued pathway and lower levels of motivation to pursue the current pathway. The absence of a strong motivation, in turn, makes it more likely that they will decide to abandon their pathways. The multidimensional nature of my devised concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ points to the variability in young people’s reasons for failing to establish a good fit.

The theory I advance is thus a motivational theory of persistence and dropout that is grounded in contextual, relational — social and institutional — decision-making.

However, my thesis also shows that while structural factors such as institutional access and social class matter, they do not predetermine the decision to drop out (see chapter 8).

The key point is that, in order to understand and explain dropout and persistence on a post-middle school pathway, the decision-making process itself should be taken into account. The impact of the decision-making process can be understood as a medium-term

factor that can be temporally located between long-term risk factors and short-term precipitating factors of dropout (cf. Dupéré et al., 2015).

Moreover, by explicitly incorporating the decision-making period prior to enrolment in high school or vocational school, the grounded theory of ‘interest-environment fit’ that I develop in this thesis challenges a prevalent view presented in established theories of dropout and persistence (Brown & Kayser, 1982; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993). These theories posit that persistence can be best understood through the interaction between students and the institution that they are currently attending. My new theory invites us to rethink the narrow focus on a single educational or vocational pathway when explaining dropouts. Instead, I argue that our understanding can be enriched by treating the phenomenon more broadly. Deeper theoretical insights can be gained by integrating all three of the main pathways —academic, vocational school, and work tracks — into a comprehensive theoretical framework. Through this comprehensive perspective, the theory I develop in this thesis contributes to the pre-existing theoretical literature on dropouts (Brown & Kayser, 1982; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975) and the empirical literature on dropouts in the context of China (Fang et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2019; Mo et al., 2013; Li et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2014; Yi et al., 2012).

In addition, this thesis contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. This thesis highlights that there is intra-group variation and that migrants are not a homogeneous group. First, migrants are heterogeneous in terms of their constraints and possibilities, such as differences in residency statuses reflective of their families’ socio-economic status (the residency statuses are more complex than the binary of rural or urban *hukou*) and their access to social support, including the relational dimensions of their agency. Second, these individuals have different interests, passions and inclinations that cannot be explained by factors necessarily observable to outside observers, such as

researchers. Since the literature tends to focus on migrant children's marginalisation, it tends to overlook their interests, passions and inclinations.

Another contribution is that this thesis reaffirms that injustice in the system is at the root of the problem, but it also highlights in which ways motivation can contribute to overcoming at least some setbacks along the way. This insight does *not* imply that all that is necessary is motivation, or that those who do not achieve a desired outcome are unmotivated or lazy.

In addition to these theoretical points, this thesis also makes a *methodological* contribution. The insights produced through the detailed process of theory construction and final in-depth engagement with the literature underscore the utility of grounded theory as a suitable approach for generating new theoretical understandings.

Directly challenging some of the empirical literature on vocational schooling in China (Ling, 2020), this thesis finds that pursuing a pathway of vocational education is not necessarily a sub-optimal choice for all young migrants, depending on their circumstances (see chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of this point). Certainly, many scholars point to the subpar quality of vocational education institutions in China, especially in central provinces (Smith & Chan, 2015; Woronov, 2015; Yi et al., 2018). However, the vocational education sector is subject to considerable heterogeneity. Based on 2008 data from the nation-wide cross-sectional survey China Family Panel Studies, one study found that not only are there significant differences between groups of vocational schools in terms of future income prospects and the probability of finding employment, but graduates from one common type of vocational school (*zhongzhuan*) even earn 10% more than graduates from general high schools and are 8% more likely to be in employment than graduates from general high schools (Wang, 2017). These statistics suggest that at

least some vocational schooling can be a more optimal choice in terms of employment and earnings than remaining in the academic track, if it ends at high school.

However, to the best of my knowledge, apart from this thesis, no research as yet explores the significant qualitative differences in the possibilities for individuals' socio-economic mobility that are associated with different vocational schools and even with different programmes within the same school. These qualitative differences in people's possibilities for socio-economic mobility vis-à-vis vocational schools both reflect individuals' differential access to vocational schools of different standing, and the different possibilities for learning and networking that different vocational schools offer.

Few of these contributions and engagements with the literature were anticipated at the beginning of the project. When reflecting on the research process as a whole, understood through the metaphor of a journey, I came to recognise that it was helpful to start with an adaptable initial idea of where the project might position itself and where it might contribute. It was useful to stay flexible throughout the journey, prepared to readjust the focus of the study in light of the emerging evidence. Judging the progress of the project from the point where it ended, the theoretical contributions of the study became more well-defined as the analysis matured.

1.4 Structure of this thesis

The structure of grounded theory studies can often seem unorthodox to readers who might not be familiar with the tradition of grounded theory research. This possible perplexity is related to the way grounded theory methodology works and the timing of literature reviews in the research process. In grounded theory studies, an initial literature review can orient the project early on and ideally should not cloud the researcher's vision when

interpreting empirical material (Charmaz, 2006). The material should not be forced into pre-existing theoretical categories, but rather help to construct new theoretical insights and concepts. Therefore, decisions about when and to what extent to conduct a literature review can have implications for the thesis structure.

There are two available options for structuring a thesis: the traditional literature review and the two-part literature review. These two options can be understood by drawing on two contrasting concepts: the ‘logic of inquiry’ and the ‘logic of presentation’. While the former describes the order in which research is *conducted*, the latter refers to the order in which findings are *presented* in writing.

The first available option for the high-level thesis structure involves a literature review, followed by findings and then discussion. While this approach might follow a suitable logic of presentation, it is not consistent with the logic of inquiry in a grounded theory study. The literature review, or at least part of it, is typically conducted *after* the grounded theory has been fully constructed (see the following initial literature review chapter for a more detailed discussion). Dunne (2011) suggests that although doctoral supervisors may often recommend the traditional structure, this structure can be opposed to the logical presentation of the study. Dunne (2011) further notes that “given that the grounded theory research process is non-linear, it is understandable that attempts to present it in a linear format should prove problematic.” (p. 120)

The second option involves including a short initial literature review that presents sensitising concepts and then delaying further engagement with the theoretical literature until after the findings and the grounded theory have been presented. This option thus effectively means having two parts of the literature review, one at the beginning of the thesis and one towards the end. This approach is consistent with the logic of inquiry in a

grounded theory study. However, this strategy can be met with confusion by readers who are not intimately familiar with grounded theory methodology. Dunne (2011) recalls being subject to “criticism and significant reworkings” (p. 120) due to attempting to follow this more unorthodox structure. Thus, it can be problematic to structure the written thesis in a way that “best reflects the focus and natural development of the study” (p. 121).

Reflecting on these challenges, Dunne (2011), who also wrote a doctoral dissertation using grounded theory methodology, offers a solution to this problem. He suggests that:

Whatever decision is taken, it is imperative that the researcher clearly articulate this issue from the outset and cogently outline and defend the preferred option in order to minimise the potential for misunderstanding between the author and the reader. (p. 121)

Therefore, in order to avoid undue confusion and achieve sufficient clarity, this introduction offers a justification for the thesis structure in the following section.

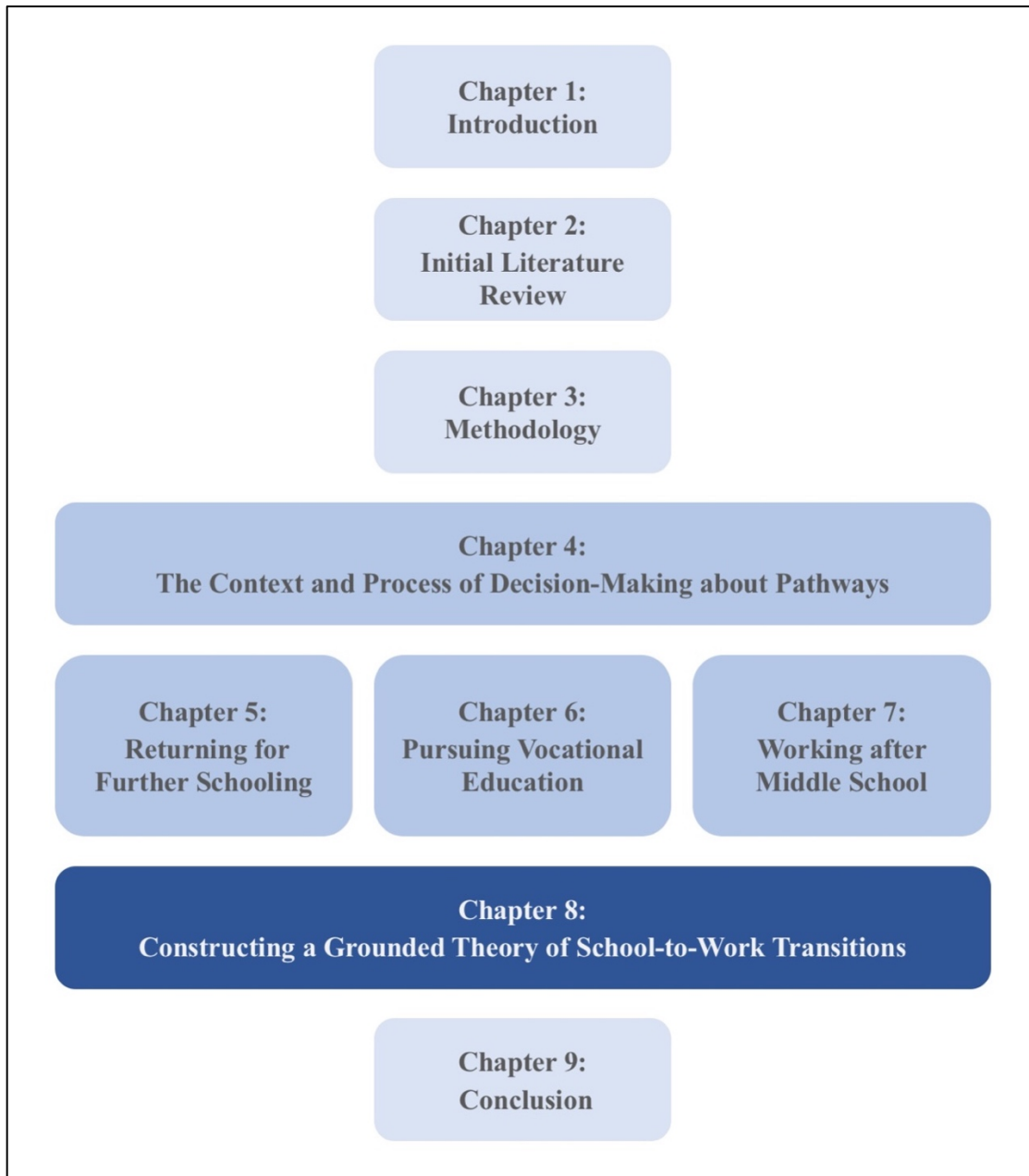


Figure 2: Diagram of thesis structure

This thesis follows a structure of nine chapters (see figure above). Following the introduction, I present an initial literature review that captures the starting point of the inquiry, as presented in the concept of research as a journey described above. This literature review chapter culminates in the formulation of the initial two research questions and provides a justification for the inquiry. It can be understood as a contextualisation of the starting point of the research rather than a traditional literature review. The chapter describes the gaps in the literature and demonstrates that a literature

review is useful for a grounded theory study since sensitising concepts can help to direct the approach to the fieldwork and data collection, while still giving priority to data over pre-existing concepts. Chapter 3 then introduces the methodology of constructivist grounded theory and how the research was conducted, including fieldwork, data collection and analysis. In this chapter, I also contextualise the cases of individual migrants and their middle schools within the wider Chinese context and reflect on how my identity impacted on the research process.

The following four chapters (marked in a slightly darker blue in figure 2 above) are empirical chapters that outline major categories of the analysis. Chapter 4 focusses on the context and the process of decision-making about pathways, the early stage of the school-to-work transition process during middle school. It shows how different pathway options were considered by my research participants and how two subprocesses of ‘gathering information’ and ‘negotiating pathways’ interact. The chapter also identifies the aforementioned theoretical category of ‘interest-environment fit’. Chapters 5 to 7 then review the dynamic of persisting and dropping out on all three major pathways (academic, vocational school, and work). Each pathway is reviewed through a detailed contrast between two cases. These four chapters purposefully delay detailed engagement with the relevant theoretical literature until the theory is fully constructed and presented in chapter 8, the grounded theory chapter. I include explicit signalling at relevant points in these chapters to address concerns of critical readers about the relative absence of engagement with the pre-existing literature in the empirical chapters until chapter 8 is reached.

Drawing on the empirical findings in the preceding four chapters, chapter 8 weaves together the analytical threads by constructing a grounded theory of school-to-work transitions of young migrants. After outlining the theory step-by-step with a diagram and

explanations in prose, the chapter engages with extant theoretical concepts in detail.

Finally, the concluding chapter 9 summarises the main findings, evaluates the research project, highlights its contributions, and discusses the main limitations. It also points to the implications for social policy and possible avenues for future research.

1.5 Summary

After introducing the research problem through two contrasting cases representing widely different school-to-work transitions experienced by young people with similar starting points, this chapter presented the main research question. I explained the usefulness of considering research as a journey and discussed the evolving research rationale and the methodological choices. I also introduced the main theoretical contributions of this thesis, a grounded theory of school-to-work transitions constructed from the perspective of young people. I pointed out that the grounded theory constructed in this thesis, which I flagged as the theory of ‘interest-environment fit’, contributes to the sociology of education and work by advancing theories of dropping out and persistence. The last section then discussed the importance of conveying a clear sense of how the thesis is structured given that inductive grounded theory methodology proposes theory generation as the culmination of the research process.

Chapter 2: Initial Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as an initial step of setting the stage and contextualising how the research project started. Drawing on the metaphor of ‘research as a journey’ developed in the introduction, it shows why embarking on this particular journey was warranted, even though unforeseen findings shifted the eventual main focus of the study. This shift led to the construction of a grounded theory that addresses a slightly different research gap than the one initially anticipated. Further detailed theoretical discussion, including the final research gaps and contributions of the theory, are purposefully delayed until the grounded theory is fully developed in chapter 8 towards the end of the thesis. While this organisation of the thesis might seem unorthodox to readers unfamiliar with grounded theory studies, it allows a transparent presentation of the logic of inquiry inherent in the inductive methodology (see previous introduction chapter and following methodology chapter).

Two parts of the literature review can be distinguished. The first part of the literature review justifies embarking on the journey while the second part engages with the relevant theoretical literature after the grounded theory is fully developed. To underline this distinction, I choose to refer to this chapter as “initial literature review” and the second part (see chapter 8) as “final literature engagement that relates the grounded theory to the scholarly landscape.”

This chapter first shows why in grounded theory studies conducting an initial literature review is a debated issue. It then argues that such a review is nonetheless useful because

reviewing ‘sensitising concepts’ can help to sketch the theoretical landscape without necessarily clouding the researcher’s vision and distracting from new theoretical patterns in the data. In the next step, three sensitising concepts — ‘school-to-work transitions’, ‘critical moments’ (or ‘turning points’), and ‘social context’ — are reviewed and discussed. Relating these concepts to the literature on young migrants in China’s urban centres then reveals two initial research gaps that warranted conducting this study, even though the final grounded theory (presented in chapter 8) ended up contributing to a slightly different research gap. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting the two initial research questions that guided the initial phase of this study.

2.2 On the role of an initial literature review in grounded theory studies

Grounded theory, the research methodology used in this study, is primarily associated with qualitative research and was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967.⁵ The explicit purpose of this approach is to facilitate “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Grounded theory can be contrasted with deductive approaches to research in that it does not begin with hypotheses generated from pre-existing theories. Instead, it relies on empirical data specifically collected to construct fresh theoretical insights. Grounded theory methodology purposefully privileges data over extant concepts.

Given the priority afforded to data over pre-existing theory in the grounded theory methodology, the question of how extant literature should be used has been subject to

⁵ For a more comprehensive overview of the history of grounded theory and the most important debates, see the following methodology chapter.

debate in the field (Dunne, 2011). In their discussion of grounded theory, Bryant and Charmaz (2007b) note that since the first development of the methodology “concerns have arisen regarding how students and researchers should approach and use the existing literature relevant to their research topic” (p. 19). While there is consensus in the grounded theory research community that a literature review is necessary, the problematic questions are *when* to do it and *how wide-ranging* it should be (Cutcliffe, 2000; McGhee et al., 2007).

2.2.1 Against an initial literature review

Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommended refraining from conducting an early literature review in the area of study. “An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study” (p. 37). This abstinent position has come to be termed “purist” (Dunne, 2011, p. 117) and is still reaffirmed by researchers (Nathaniel, 2006; Holton, 2007). However, it contradicts most methodological approaches in which an early in-depth literature review is a standard procedure (Dunne, 2011). What is the reasoning behind this call for delaying the literature review until after data collection and analysis?

First, the goal is to afford researchers the opportunity to engage directly with the empirical data and to construct theoretical categories which are uncontaminated by existing theories and related hypotheses (Glaser, 1998; McCallin, 2003; Ramalho et al. 2015). As Dey (2007) put it, the worry that motivates this divisive call is that researchers might otherwise be “inclined to plough ahead along an established theoretical furrow regardless of the diversity and richness of the data, thereby diminishing its potential for a wider repertoire of theoretical innovation” (p. 176). Similarly, McCallin (2003) identifies

the central concern that “the researcher may be side-tracked by received knowledge and interpretations that support taken-for-granted assumptions, which are not relevant in the new area of study” (p. 63). Second, on a practical level, reviewing the literature in the area of study before data collection and analysis is regarded as stifling as it could “detract from the quality and originality of the research” (Dunne 2011, p. 114). This suggestion is supposed to prevent researchers from following avenues that may eventually not be relevant to their research.

2.2.2 In favour of an initial literature review

Within the debate of how to engage with pre-existing literature in grounded theory studies, some researchers argue that the “purist” position is untenable. Contending that “no potential researcher is an empty vessel, a person with no history or background”, Cutcliffe (2000, p. 1480) suggests that it is unrealistic to assume that any scholar conducts research without at least some level of prior knowledge or awareness of ideas. In a similar vein, Eisenhardt (1989) views the purist notion as unworkable, stating that “it is impossible to achieve this ideal of a clean theoretical slate” (p. 536). Clarke (2005) also criticises researchers pretending to be “theoretical virgins” (p. 13). The expectation that experienced researchers could abandon their prior knowledge does indeed seem to be improbable.

However, instead of merely criticising the purist position as unachievable, scholars have also suggested several benefits of conducting an initial literature review for a grounded theory project. First, by showing how the phenomenon has previously been studied, a literature review allows researchers to identify gaps that the study can address (Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 2002; Hutchinson, 1993; McMenamain, 2006). In this way, it can frame the

project and provide a solid justification for the research direction and the chosen methodological approach (Coyne & Cowley, 2006; McGhee et al., 2007). Second, awareness of previous studies prevents the unknown repetition of a study (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). In other words, it helps researchers to avoid the “danger of doing the equivalent” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 157). Third, a literature review can allow researchers to become sensitive to existing concepts (McCann & Clark, 2003b; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory researchers can use these ‘sensitising concepts’ (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; McCann & Clark, 2003a) as “tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17).

2.2.3 Finding a middle ground through reflexivity

Scholars have suggested that the purist demands for guarding against the overdue influence of pre-existing ideas and the advantages of conducting an initial literature review for grounded theory studies can be reconciled. Dunne (2011) notes a tendency in the grounded theory community to try and find a middle ground between these two positions. The suggested solution is to give more “credit to the ability of researchers to be mindful of how extant ideas may be informing their research” (p. 117). Urquhart (2007), argues that “there is no reason why a researcher cannot be self-aware and be able to appreciate other theories without imposing them on the data” (p. 351). The fundamental issue then becomes how researchers can use pre-existing knowledge appropriately (Strübing, 2007). A proponent of finding a middle ground, Lempert (2007), suggests that a meaningful way forward is:

on-going researcher familiarity with the literature of the substantive area of study and its applicable theories. Engaging the literature provides the researcher with knowledge of

the substantive area in sufficient depth to understand the parameters of the discourse and to enter into the current theoretical conversation. (p. 261)

This middle ground could ensure that researchers “approach each new project with a mind that is sufficiently open so as to allow new, perhaps contradictory, findings to emerge from the raw data” (Dunne, 2011, p. 117). There is a crucial distinction between desirable open-mindedness and risky empty-mindedness (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

How can researchers strengthen their ability to be mindful of the extent to which they are influenced by prior research? One important way to achieve this is reflexivity in the research process. Reflexivity can be defined as “an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and background has an impact on the research process” (Robson, 2002, p. 22). In qualitative research, this concept is, of course, already well-established. It becomes a crucial part of the research process because researchers are actively involved in both gathering and interpreting qualitative data (Heath, 2006; see also following methodology chapter).

Two mechanisms that are already integral to grounded theory can be deployed to counteract the influence of pre-existing literature even though the researcher might conduct an initial literature review. The first measure is memo-writing, which refers to the process of keeping research notes on various aspects of data collection and interpretation and is based on reflective thinking. Memos “reflect the researcher’s internal dialogue with the data at a point in time” (McCann & Clark, 2003a, p. 15). This process could also cover the literature review. Using memos as a reflective measure means critically thinking and writing about the different ways in which pre-existing knowledge shapes all stages of the research project (Suddaby, 2006). It can be seen as a step towards “reducing the likelihood of hypotheses from extant theories subtly infiltrating, or more obviously hijacking, the grounded theory development” (Dunne 2011, p. 118). Using

memos in this way was a vital part of the research process that forms the bases of this thesis.

The second measure is the constant comparative method, another key feature of the grounded theory toolkit (see following methodology chapter). Grounded theory researchers following this method critically reflect on how pre-existing knowledge and newly collected empirical material can be combined in the grounded theory as it is developing (Holton, 2007).

Since I support the tendency towards finding a middle ground, I proceed to conduct an initial literature review in this chapter. However, I engage in reflexivity about the influence of my prior knowledge on my interpretations of the data. I am conscious of and mindful about the general guideline of *favouring data over literature and pre-existing knowledge* in the analysis (Ramalho et al., 2015). The final part of the literature engagement follows once the grounded theory is fully developed in chapter 8.

2.3 Setting the stage for the inquiry with three ‘sensitising concepts’

The following three subsections review the literature on the three sensitising concepts of ‘school-to-work transitions’, ‘critical moments’ and ‘social context’. Collectively, these sections set the stage for the argument that these concepts present useful angles from which to approach the substantive topic of young internal migrants in urban China.

2.3.1 ‘School-to-work transitions’ and their increasing complexity

As young people approach the end of compulsory education, they move into a crucial phase of their life course, the school-to-work transition. During this period, they face decisions that have important consequences for their life courses, for instance, for status attainment as an adult or future well-being (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019).

This transition period is recognised for its complexity, as young people have to respond to a set of overlapping questions: whether to continue with further schooling or start working right after the end of compulsory education; what profession to pick; whether to select a more easily attainable job that allows to make a living or instead opt for a delayed labour market entry after vocational education or training; and how to best navigate the evolving job market (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019).

Complexity also arises from interrelations with other transitions. Researchers recognise that school-to-work transitions do not occur in isolation but are instead interlinked with and influenced by multiple youth transitions across domains, such as family formation and housing (MacDonald & Shildrick 2013; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Thomson et al. 2002).

Due to this complexity, the term ‘transition’ itself has become the subject of debate. Critics argue that it suggests a linear development progressing towards a definite goal while most youth transitions are in fact “fluid, complex, diversified and fragmented” (Punch, 2015, p. 262; see also Bynner, 2005). Proponents rebut this argument by pointing out that the term ‘transition’ can still be considered useful as a metaphor for the complex period of key changes that young people experience (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). They further suggest that rather than doing away with the term ‘transition’, research should focus on how transition patterns unfold and change (Brooks, 2009). Conscious of this

debate, I continue to employ the term ‘school-to-work transition’ in the broader sense of being a catch-all term for the period of change around the end of compulsory education.

The degree of complexity in youth transitions seems to be increasing in many societies.

Elzinga and Liefbroer (2007) note that the way that youth transitions unfold has been subject to significant shifts. Such shifts can, for instance, be seen in the sequencing of major life events, such as graduating from school, entering the labour market, moving out of the family home, marrying, and having children. While in the past, such transition sequences have been relatively homogenous and occurred in relatively quick succession, transitions have become more prolonged and heterogenous in recent years (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Lesnard et al., 2010). The sequencing of transitions has thus become more varied, complex and less predictable (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Bynner, 2005; Thomson et al., 2002; Wyn et al., 2012). Berger et al. (1993) find that school-to-work transitions follow the trend towards greater complexity in youth transitions. School-to-work transitions become increasingly reversible since more and more young people revise their professional choice (Pais, 1996). Reversing transitions multiple times leads to ‘yo-yo’ patterns in school-to-work trajectories, a growing trend which some scholars term the ‘yo-yo’-isation of transitions (DuBois-Reymond and Lopez Blasco, 2003; Walther, 2013).

Reasons for increases in complexity of school-to-work transitions are seen in the de-standardisation of life courses as well as the flexibilisation and individualisation of labour societies (Stauber & Walther, 2013; Biggart & Walther, 2006). Drawing on Ulrich Beck’s concept of ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992), scholars regard the passage from youth into adulthood as becoming increasingly de-standardised, involving greater uncertainty for individuals. The increased flexibility is linked to changes in the workplace which, it is argued, has become increasingly precarious for workers because of the expansion of labour markets across national boundaries (Kalleberg, 2009; Western & Rosenfeld,

2011). Precariousness in the workplace can involve phenomena such as underemployment or lower job security (Quintini et al., 2007). In a recent study on Northern Europe, Lorentzen et al. (2019) found that over 20 per cent of young people followed “de-standardised and turbulent” school-to-work trajectories into adulthood while between 9 and 15 per cent followed an “exclusion trajectory.” Moreover, in a context of increasing de-standardisation, scholars recognise an increasing need for individuals to construct their own life courses in post-modern Western societies. Identifying individual planning as a feature of post-modern life, scholars see societies as putting the onus of biography-construction on the individual (Giddens, 1991). In this context, young people are expected to plan their future life trajectories autonomously.

Increasing complexity in school-to-work transitions has not been a phenomenon limited to Western societies but is equally recognised in the Majority World (Punch, 2015; Tian, 2014). In China, broadened educational access, decreasing job security, and a harshly competitive labour market have rendered school-to-work transitions more complex (Hannum & Liu, 2005). Tian (2014) argues that in this context, young people in contemporary China have to plan their school-to-work transitions carefully. Hansen (2015) identifies a Chinese variant of Beck’s and Giddens’ individualisation, which she terms ‘authoritarian individualisation’. Confirming observations by Yan (2010), Hansen’s variant stresses that — through the role of the authoritarian state — individualisation in the Chinese context brings about a different citizen-subject than in the West. She highlights that “the state promotes the vision of a self-reliant and responsible individual who willingly contributes to the neoliberal economy, but it requires at the same time unquestioned loyalty to a Chinese socialist ideal of a one-party state that is ruling individuals” (Hansen, 2015, p. 180). Based on her ethnography in a rural township in Zhejiang Province, she argues that young people in China grow up in a field of tension

between being educated to take individual responsibility for making choices and leading successful lives and being left without institutional rights and opportunities to challenge authority (see also Murphy, 2020).

A striking feature that is recognised in both the Minority and the Majority World is that socioeconomically disadvantaged and less educated young people are affected most by increasing instability and insecurity (Gangl, 2002; Hannum & Liu, 2005; MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013). This point is relevant for this thesis since young Chinese migrants can be seen as a disadvantaged group in the Chinese societal context.

2.3.2 ‘Critical moments’ in complex school-to-work transitions

This section argues that ‘critical moments’ (or ‘turning points’) represent a second useful ‘sensitising concept’ for approaching complex school-to-work transitions. Analysing transitions from school to further education into work, a growing body of literature has examined critical moments that were particularly consequential for young people in transition (see, for example, MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013; Thomson et al., 2002; Thomson et al., 2004; Holland & Thomson, 2009; MacDonald, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2001). The theoretically most advanced discussion of critical moments can be found in the qualitative, longitudinal study *Inventing Adulthoods* (Henderson et al., 2007; Holland & Thomson, 2009; Thomson et al., 2002). Some studies have used the concept of critical moments to examine how these moments arise as well as how young people respond to them (see figure below). Critical moments have also been located on a continuum between choice and fate (Holland & Thomson, 2009; Thomson et al., 2002). One study has found that critical moments experienced by individuals from disadvantaged groups

tended to be located further to the “fate end” of this continuum (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013).

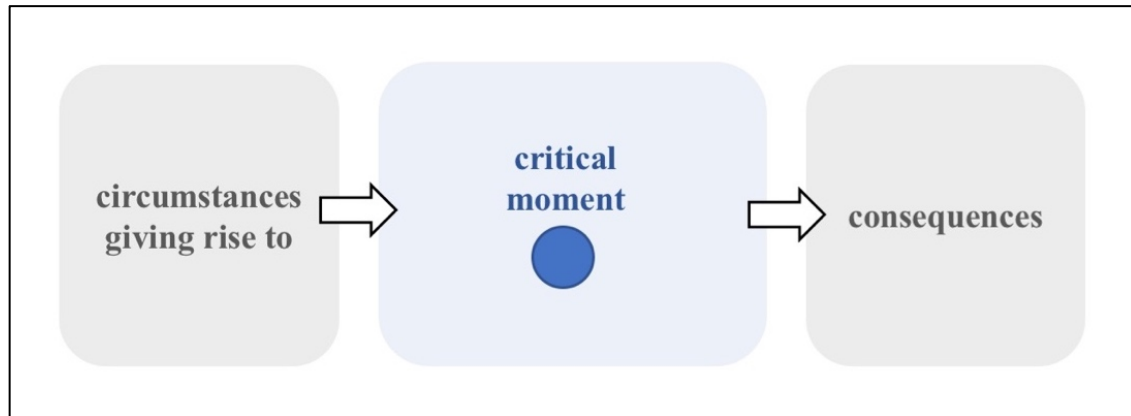


Figure 3: Processes surrounding critical moments

The literature on critical moments draws on prior research examining ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991) and shares parallels with analogous concepts, such as ‘turning points’ (Coles, 1995; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). How are critical moments defined in the literature? In the *Inventing Adulthoods* study, the working definition of a critical moment is “an event described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities” (Thomson et al., 2002, p. 339).

Two points are worth noting. First, I would argue that the definition shows that critical moments and turning points can be seen as analogous in fundamental respects. The “important consequences for the lives and identities” are likely to affect the direction of a person’s life trajectory, either subjectively perceived or objectively defined. Why would they otherwise be consequential? The similarity can be seen in the definition of turning points. As a key concept in the scholarly tradition of life course research pioneered by Glen Elder, they are defined as “changes in the direction of a person’s life course” (Elder, 1974). Because of this similarity, whenever I mention the concept of critical moments, I intend to refer to both critical moments and turning points.

Second, this definition gives both participants and researchers the right to define which moment counts as a critical moment. It is not required for participants to recognise a critical moment as relevant as long as the researcher regards it as important. This ambivalence leaves the possibility that participants and researchers may disagree on what is a critical moment. Subsequent scholars have modified this point. MacDonald and Shildrick (2013), for instance, limit their definition to those moments that have been actively identified by the young person in question. They defined critical moments as “events and experiences identified by informants, not by us as researchers, which they emphasised in seeking to explain the course of and changes in their lives to us” (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013, p. 155). The shift in the definition is related to a discussion on the role of subjective perceptions of participants and seemingly objective categorisations of pathways and consequences by researchers. The next section further explores this difference and argues why the definition by Thomson et al. (2002) is preferred for this thesis.

Diverging value attributions to objective markers of change and subjective perceptions

As mentioned above, turning points are an important concept in the scholarly tradition of life course research (Elder, 1974). Scholars in this tradition tend to emphasise the objective change in the pathway of a person in their definitions. For example, Laub and Sampson (2005) define a turning point as “an alteration or deflection in a long-term pathway or trajectory that was initiated at an earlier point in time” (p. 16). In life course studies, turning points are identified when particular life events (such as military service, marriage or employment) are linked to changes in direction. Such events must objectively redirect paths to count as turning points (Elder, 1985).

By contrast, the research tradition of biographical life history has emphasised the importance of the *subjective* experience of the individual during turning points (Rosenthal, 1995; Clausen, 1996; Strauss, 1959). For Strauss (1959), for instance, the transformation of identity is the key marker of a turning point. Moreover, Rosenthal (1995) regards biographical turning points that “shape people’s life history into a *before* and an *after*” (Reimer, 2014, p. 6) as the most interesting type and terms them ‘interpretation turning points’. Harever and Masaoka (1988) summarise this subjective aspect in their definition of turning points:

Turning points are perceptual roadmarks along the life course. They represent individuals’ subjective assessments of continuities and discontinuities over their lives, especially the impact of earlier life events on subsequent ones. (p. 272)

These understandings of turning points privilege the subjective perception of individuals over the life course approach of examining life events from the researchers’ perspective. As Clausen (1995) puts it, “subjective perceptions of discontinuity do not necessarily entail a[n objective] change in direction” (p. 369). This perspective has led some researchers to require the individual’s self-awareness for the existence of a turning point.

A turning point involves a fundamental shift in the meaning, purpose, or direction of a person’s life and must include a self-reflective awareness of, or insight into, the significance of the change. (Wethington et al., 1997, p. 217)

This discussion has shown the relative value attributed to objective markers of change and subjective perceptions of change in two research traditions that examine turning points (or critical moments). The most promising approach to reconcile these viewpoints might be to remain sensitive to interactions of objective changes in school-to-work transitions (such as graduation, enrolment in institutions, dropping out, entering the labour market, migration) and subjective perceptions by young people (see Reimer, 2014). This sensitivity can help to gain an in-depth understanding of processes and

mechanisms of meaning-making underlying critical moments. In this thesis, I thus treat Thomson et al., (2002) and their definition of critical moments as a sensitising starting point. Their definition affords the flexibility to compare instances where perceptions of participants and the researcher as to what constitutes a critical moment (or turning point) converge or diverge. Critical reflections on why this might be the case can prompt an in-depth engagement with the data.

Diverging methodologies of studying turning points and critical moments

In addition to diverging valuations of objective markers of change and subjective perceptions, there is also a methodological dimension to the distinction of the role of turning points (and critical moments) in life course research and biographical life history approaches. In life course research, turning points are typically studied through large-scale longitudinal quantitative studies (Elder, 1974; Werner et al., 1977; Sackmann, 1998; Ludwig, 1996). Such study designs allow researchers to capture changes in the life courses of different generations and gain insights into social change (e.g. Elder, 1974). These studies also allow for comparisons between groups of people, such as victims of violence (Spano et al., 2011), people suffering from chronic illnesses (Alonzo & Reynolds, 1992) or criminal offenders (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Schumann, 2003a, 2003b). Life course studies focus in particular on events (e.g. military service) that allow people to move their life circumstances away from a position of disadvantage (Reimer, 2014).

By contrast, in biographical life history research, turning points are studied through individuals' own perceptions. By analysing the ways in which individuals view their own trajectories, life history researchers aim to understand the meaning of experiences and

events as well as how these evolve (Banyard & Williams, 2007; Denzin, 1987; King et al., 2003; Öjesjö, 2000; Pinder, 1994). Data sources for this approach are typically cross-sectional and qualitative, such as life history interviews or diary entries. Thanks to its reliance on tracing biographical trajectories, this approach is particularly suitable to explore individual obstacles, coping mechanisms, perceived help, and subjective interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Wolf & Reimer, 2008). This qualitative approach promises deeper insights into how perceptions of young people matter in processes of social exclusion.

In sum, this section has argued that critical moments (and turning points) represent useful ‘sensitising concepts’ for a study of increasingly complex school-to-work transitions and that much can be gained from exploring these moments or points qualitatively through a life history approach. The next section discusses the insight that critical moments do not occur in a social vacuum but are instead situated in a social context.

2.3.3 ‘Social context’ around critical moments

This section argues that the ‘sensitising concept’ of ‘social context’ is useful for this study because it points to the importance of the social environment as well as its influence on shaping critical moments in school-to-work transitions. It is therefore reasonable to approach school-to-work transitions with a sensitivity towards not only critical moments but also their social context. In general, social context directs our attention to the way that critical moments come about and how young people and their families respond to them (see figure below).

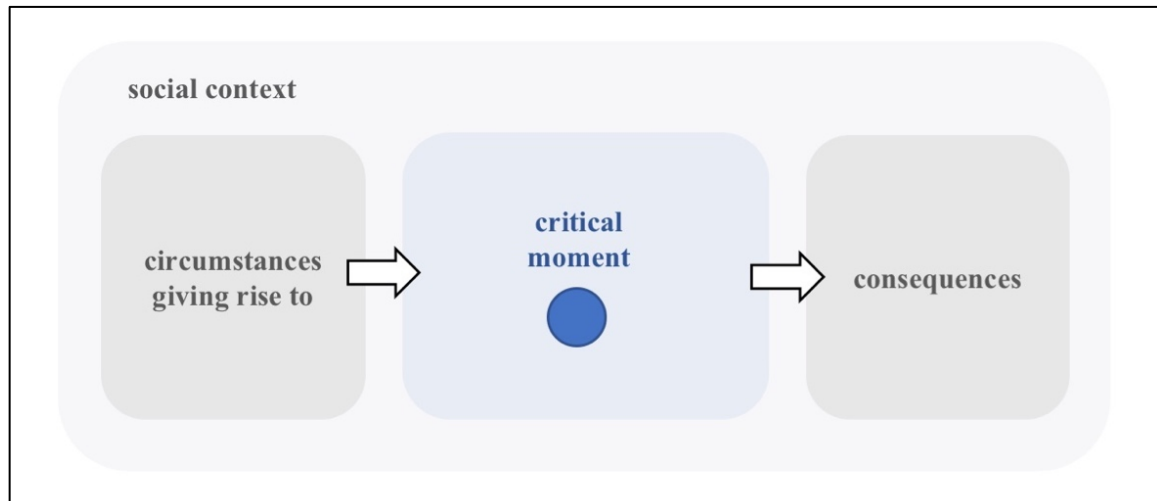


Figure 4: Processes surrounding critical moments including social context

The concept of social context

The concept of social context captures personal relationships and interactions. The literature on adolescence recognises the importance of social context during youth transitions and distinguishes between social pathways and social convoys (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011). Social pathways refer to the sequence of different institutional roles and activities assumed over the life course (ibid.). In the literature on school-to-work transitions, two formative institutions have received special attention: school (Buchman & DiPrete, 2006; Gamoran & Hannigan, 2000; McFarland, 2006; Riegle-Crumb, 2006) and work (Marsh, 1991; Newman, 1996; Staff & Mortimer, 2007). Social convoys refer to the continuity and change in the “matrix of social relationships” during the time of adolescence (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011: 444). Important dimensions of these social relationships include family members, such as parents, siblings and grandparents (Crouter et al., 2004; King et al., 2003; Larson et al., 1996), peers (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002; Brown & Klute, 2003; Falci & McNeely, 2009; Haynie, 2001; Harding, 2009) and romantic relationships (Kreager & Staff, 2009; Shulman & Collins, 1998), but also formal

and informal mentors (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; DuBois et al., 2002, 2011; Erickson et al., 2009).

The usefulness of social relationships

When considering the way in which social convoys shape social pathways, the question of how young people utilise or draw on their social context is crucial. The literature on social capital proposes one way of thinking about this question. Social capital theory, albeit rarely discussed explicitly by researchers employing the concept of critical moments, examines how social resources (e.g. social support or connections to helpful sources of information) are accumulated and deployed (Ellison et al., 2014). Coleman (1990) regards social capital as direct and indirect resources embedded in social networks among family, friends or community members. A *relational* view of social capital considers the types of relationships people have (Singh & Dika, 2003) and assists researchers in explaining how connections to different types of people can be more or less advantageous for different individuals (Ellison et al., 2014).

Social context and agency

Social context also shapes the way that young people exercise their agency. As Evans (2002, 2007) highlights through her concept of ‘bounded agency’, agency is constrained by social, cultural, socio-economic and institutional structures. “Bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions” (Evans, 2007, p. 93). An awareness of the social context in which young people are situated, a context that Evans

(2007) refers to as “social landscapes”, can thus inform our understanding of both the boundaries and the opportunities of individual agency: “[a]s actors move in social landscapes, spaces open up for action that are not wholly reducible to the effects of social reproduction or underlying structural features” (Evans, 2007, p. 93).

Drawing on the concept of ‘linked lives’ which highlights inter-dependency between people’s lives in life course research (Elder, 1974), agency is best understood as a *relational* concept that can be explored by examining the role of family, friends and other individuals (Locke & Llyod-Sherlock, 2011). Studies of the trajectories of young people highlight the extent to which the “potential benefits of younger people’s ‘agency’ could be undermined by those to whom their lives were closely linked” (Locke & Llyod-Sherlock, 2011, p. 1142). It is thus important to acknowledge this relational aspect of agency when understanding the constraints but also the possibilities of young people’s agency in their specific social context.

Social context and decision-making during school-to-work transitions

Prior research in the career development literature has stressed that social context, and especially the relationship between parents and children, is crucial for career decision-making during youth transitions (Blustein, 2011; Ginevra et al., 2015; Kenny & Medvide, 2013). During adolescence, children renegotiate their boundaries with their parents (Soenens et al., 2007), which renders parental involvement in their decision-making during the school-to-work transition a delicate matter (Gati & Saka, 2001). In this sensitive context, it has been shown that parents can shape the degree to which young people remain open to explore diverse career pathways and assess their viability (Guan et al., 2015). Moreover, the way that parents interact with their children can affect young

people's interests, intentions and goals (Ginevra et al., 2015; Kenny & Medvide, 2013; Zhao et al., 2012). One theory that particularly emphasizes the interpersonal context is self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This theory stresses the role of significant others, including parents, siblings, peers and non-family adults in young people's decision-making process (Deci & Ryan, 2011). The literature in this research tradition posits that people's motives can be placed on a continuum indicating their degree of autonomy, ranging from high to low. An autonomous motivation to act is present if the person can integrate the action with their personal values and beliefs. By contrast, autonomous motivation is absent if motives stem from internal demands, such as perceived obligations or guilt, or external forces, such as striving for a reward or avoiding punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The social context of young people can affect their autonomy. For instance, parents, concerned about their children's future, might attempt to control the career decision-making process and exert pressure on their children to choose a pathway that seems appropriate to them (Katz et al., 2018). Studies in self-determination theory have shown beneficial consequences of supportive, rather than controlling parental behaviour. When young people regard their parents as autonomy-supporting, they report higher levels of well-being, emotional adjustment, persistence in learning and academic achievement (Grolnick et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2011).

In sum, this section on the sensitising concept of social context suggests that social relationships can be important in shaping critical moments for young people during their school-to-work transitions. In other words, the social context can have complex interrelations with young people and their decision-making process (Granfield & Cloud, 2001). Therefore, it is reasonable to approach school-to-work transitions of young people with a sensitivity to the role of social context.

2.4 Relating the ‘sensitising concepts’ to young Chinese migrants

How can the three sensitising concepts be tied to the literature on the particular group under investigation, young migrants in Shanghai? This section establishes links between the concepts and the literature on young migrants in China. It identifies two literature gaps and shows how these can be addressed through two research questions. The first one relates to critical moments (or turning points) experienced by young Chinese migrants, while the second one is linked to the role of social context on all three main pathways beyond compulsory education.

2.4.1 Justification for research question on critical moments

Previous work on young internal migrants in China suggests that the segmented institutional structure in Shanghai “channels the majority of migrant youth into becoming the new source of manual labour for low-end manufacturing and service industries” (Ling, 2012, p. 19). This process of partial integration and partial exclusion is described as ‘segmented incorporation’ (Lan, 2014) or ‘segmented inclusion’ (Ling, 2012). Lan (2014) suggests that vocational education, in particular, funnels young migrants “into exploitative and oppressive labour conditions” (p. 261). Both studies thus characterise the structure of the education system as directing young migrants into lower strata of the labour market and society. While the identification of a channelling process is plausible on aggregate, there is room for adding nuance to the characterisation of the process by focussing on the possible ruptures and turbulences that may involve the individual trajectories within this larger process. Examining school-to-work transitions with an explicit sensitivity to critical moments (or turning points) could highlight the potentially

fragmented nature of these transitions and their underlying complexity. However, to the best of my knowledge, no study of young migrants in China has examined their trajectories with a focus on critical moments (or turning points). Therefore, this research project set out to address this gap through the first initial research question:

- **How do young Chinese migrants navigate critical moments in their school-to-work transitions?**

Answering the above question could add further nuance to the channelling of young migrants into certain strata of society by taking into account the “contingency of young people’s lives” (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013, p. 155). Based on the insight that “risk derives as much from the meaning attributed to the event as from objective qualities of the event itself” (Rutter, 2000, p. 390), analyses of young people’s perspectives onto critical moments might help to explain why youths situated in similar social and economic circumstances respond in dissimilar ways (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013). In this way, this thesis could build on the work of scholars such as Lan (2014) and Ling (2012) and shed new light on processes of social exclusion and disadvantage that affect young migrants in Shanghai.

2.4.2 Justification for research question on social context

Prior scholarship on Chinese migrant children and young people highlights the importance of social networks and social capital, mostly by using a macroscopic quantitative approach (Wu, 2014; Wu et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2011). Due to the methodological difficulty of tracing young migrants beyond middle school when they embark on diverging pathways, these studies have been limited to those young people

attending compulsory education. Among the few studies that approach social capital in school-to-work transitions qualitatively, most focus on *one single pathway*. For instance, Koo et al. (2014) evaluate how social capital affects returning to home provinces for further schooling beyond middle school among migrants. I argue that widening our attention beyond one single pathway could offer fresh insights. A focus that *spans multiple pathways* (academic, vocational school, work) allows us to observe phenomena such as shifting of pathways, dropping out and restarting along different pathways. A more comprehensive view of pathways thus provides a fuller account of the complexity of school-to-work transitions and allows for comparisons and switching between these diverse trajectories. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no such study has yet been conducted in the context of China. The following research question addresses this second literature gap:

- **What role does social context play around critical moments on all three main pathways (academic, vocational school, work) in school-to-work transitions of young Chinese migrants?**

In sum, this section has linked the literature on young Chinese migrants to the previously examined sensitising concepts of ‘school-to-work transitions’, ‘critical moments’ (or ‘turning points’) and ‘social context’. It has argued that two literature gaps could be addressed by answering the two research questions developed in this section.

2.5 Justifying the initial research orientation and retaining flexibility

As the above sections have shown, it was warranted to embark on the research project with the initial focus on critical moments and the social context of school-to-work

transitions of young Chinese migrants. By referring back to the metaphor of ‘research as a journey’, we can understand the two abovementioned research questions as having formed the starting point of the inductive inquiry. Understanding research as a journey allowed me to see, in retrospect, the usefulness of these two initial research questions. First, following these two research questions led to the identification of patterns of smoothness and turbulence outlined in the following empirical chapters and already briefly summarised in the introduction. New and unanticipated dimensions in the school-to-work transition process began to take centre stage. These patterns eventually addressed a slightly different research question about *persistence* and *dropping off pathways* in school-to-work transitions and led to the construction of a grounded theory that helps to gain a deeper understanding of these phenomena. Second, the research questions and the associated initial literature review equipped me with a theoretical awareness which aided in the construction of the final theory.

For the inductive research process, the research gaps the study sought to address needed to be set out in relatively flexible terms. As explained in the introduction, there were definite advantages associated with remaining flexible during the process of data collection and analysis. Following a successful application of grounded theory methodology, guided to new insights by the collected data, the thesis contributes to a somewhat different literature gap. The literature engagement with the fully developed grounded theory in chapter 8 outlines the final contributions in further detail. In my view, having an initial and a final literature engagement spanning the thesis between this chapter and the grounded theory chapter is the best way to bring the logic of presentation in line with the logic of inquiry of an inductive grounded theory study (see introduction chapter for a more detailed discussion).

2.6 Conclusion

After arguing for the usefulness of conducting a literature review in a grounded theory study, this chapter reviewed and discussed the literature on three ‘sensitising concepts’: ‘school-to-work transitions’, ‘critical moments’ (or ‘turning points’), and ‘social context’. In the next step, the three sensitising concepts were linked to the literature on young migrants in China. Bringing the abstract concepts and the substantive literature together led to the identification of two initial research gaps that could be addressed through two initial research questions. These questions sought a deeper understanding of critical moments and social context in school-to-work transitions of young Chinese migrants.

As the last section of this chapter highlighted, the two initial research questions set the stage of the inductive inquiry, and the eventual theoretical contribution answered a slightly different research question, as presented in the introduction. There is, nonetheless, an important link between the research questions presented here and the final thesis contribution. The attention to these above research questions led to the identification of patterns in school-to-work transitions that helped to construct the final grounded theory. In this way, the narrative arc of this thesis spans all chapters, from this initial literature review to the grounded theory chapter (chapter 8).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

How does this thesis go about addressing the research questions? Which methodological choices were involved? This chapter is divided into three main parts. The first part discusses the theoretical rationale for choosing qualitative grounded theory methodology in general and the strand of constructivist grounded theory in particular. The second part explains the practical steps of how I applied the methodology during data collection and data analysis. The final part of this chapter critically discusses the issue of reflexivity. I reflect on my identity as a researcher and how it impacted on the study. This discussion also covers the challenges encountered during the research process and how they were overcome.

3.2 Theoretical rationale for choosing methodology

This part of the chapter has two goals. First, it aims to show why grounded theory methodology *in general* represents an appropriate way of addressing the research problem of this thesis. Second, since scholars have developed three strands of grounded theory over the last decades, it also seeks to explain why, given my epistemological stance, *constructivist* grounded theory is the most suitable.

3.2.1 The suitability of grounded theory methodology *in general*

During the planning phase of the research project, I considered several qualitative approaches, such as an ethnographic study or a case study, and compared their suitability for addressing the research questions presented in the introduction and initial literature review chapter. Several reasons supported the appropriateness of grounded theory methodology, an approach that helps to facilitate “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1), for addressing these research questions. First, grounded theory is a useful methodology for phenomena on which there has been relatively limited prior research (McCann & Clark, 2003a; Payne, 2007; Polit & Beck, 2012). It is thus suitable for addressing the literature gap and the relative paucity of knowledge on critical moments in school-to-work transitions of young migrants in China. Second, grounded theory is recognised as a methodology that enables researchers to gain insights into the social processes underlying a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, it is an appropriate approach to understand the underlying transition process in which critical moments are nested. Third, grounded theory can help to explore empirical terrain and build middle-range theories that emerge from the subjective transition experiences of participants (Shanahan & Longest, 2009). It is a well-established approach for constructing theory from empirical data and thus fits the inductive research questions. Fourth, grounded theory allows for flexible usage of multiple data sources, such as interviews or participant observation (Charmaz, 2006). Lastly, the grounded theory framework provides clear guidelines with a well-structured approach toward data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory methodology thus tied in with the nature of the problems that this thesis initially aimed to address.

3.2.2 The historical development of three divergent strands of grounded theory

Using grounded theory involves learning to distinguish between three different strands of the methodology: (1) *classic* grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), (2) *evolved* grounded theory developed by Strauss and Corbin (1994), and (3) *constructivist* grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2014). This section discusses the historical origins and the development of these three strands. It highlights important differences between the approaches, preparing the ground for the argument of why I selected constructivist grounded theory for this study.

The classic version of grounded theory

Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser developed the first version of grounded theory (GT) in response to a perceived overemphasis on theory *verification* at the expense of theory *generation* in the social sciences in the 1960s (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Moore, 2009). The two researchers disagreed with the wide-spread practice of *a priori* theory building followed by attempts at verification. Instead, they suggested that it would be more beneficial to shift at least equal focus to generating theory inductively from empirical data. Therefore, the two researchers pioneered a methodology to address the “embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2). They decided to term this new approach ‘*grounded* theory’ because this name reflected the fundamental objective of grounding theory in empirical research.

For Glaser and Strauss, the goal of grounded theory is for researchers to conclude their studies with hypotheses (in the form of a theory) which summarise the contributions of

the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kenny & Fourie, 2014). To achieve the goal of discovering an underlying theory, rather than verifying a preconceived one, Glaser and Strauss emphasised the need for an inductive approach in which scholars do not approach the research with preconceptions of what the study might prove or disprove. This leaves room for researchers to uncover and conceptualise the main concerns of their participants. While grounded theory is predominately an inductive methodology, it should be noted that it also contains deductive elements, albeit to a lesser extent. Researchers work deductively in the last step of grounded theory research, when they compare their fully developed grounded theory with the collected data and verify it through this comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As part of their methodology, Glaser and Strauss developed unique techniques that guide practitioners in conducting grounded theory research. They suggested that data collection and analysis should take place concurrently and follow the procedures of *theoretical sampling, coding, constant comparison, saturation and memo writing*. Each of these steps is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. In general, these techniques offer guidelines on how to move from empirical data to theory generation. The process ensures that as data is coded and conceptualised in increasingly abstract categories, a maturing theory emerges (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Newly collected data allows for editing and refining the evolving theory, leading to a process in which growing abstraction of theoretical categories remains grounded in the empirical data. According to Glaser and Strauss, their approach brings together empirical research and systematic theory generation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

While adoption of the methodology was slow in the first two decades after Glaser and Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, grounded theory has become increasingly popular and found appeal outside the discipline of sociology. Over

time, it has been employed by researchers from a wide range of academic fields. As Kenny and Fourie (2014) note in their comprehensive review, grounded theory is used in the fields of speech and hearing sciences (Skeat & Perry, 2008), nursing (Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2009), psychology (Fassinger, 2005), medicine (Bhandari et al., 2003), cinematography (Jones & Alony, 2011), business (Goulding, 1999), information systems (Urquhart et al., 2010), social work (Gilgun, 1994), religion (Gottheil & Groth-Marnat, 2011), anthropology, and education (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), the wide-spread adoption of grounded theory shows that the methodology features rigorous and systematic procedures and is a testament to the value of the approach.

The evolved version of grounded theory

During the 1970s and 1980s, Glaser and Strauss continued to refine the methodology of grounded theory. However, they discontinued their collaborative work and began publishing their contributions separately (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). Strauss increasingly worked with Juliet Corbin, and together they began to diverge from the original conception of the methodology, often termed “classic” in the literature (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). One revision included a new prescriptive coding framework designed as a systematic guideline to derive theory from data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Moreover, Strauss and Corbin also explicitly situated their approach within the philosophical traditions of Chicago school pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, which had only been hinted at in the classic conception (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Nagel et al., 2015). Lastly, they also questioned the prescription that researchers should refrain from conducting a literature review prior to their research, a claim associated with the

classic approach (see discussion in the previous initial literature review chapter). These changes characterised the emergence of an “evolved” or Straussian approach in grounded theory (Mills et al., 2006a,b).

Strauss’ divergence from the classic approach led to a scholarly rift between him and Glaser, although the two former collaborators still maintained a personal friendship (Birks & Mills, 2011). While Strauss and Corbin’s work was still pending publication in 1990, Glaser wrote disapproving letters to Strauss, which Glaser later published (Glaser, 1992). In these letters, Glaser claims that Strauss “distorts and misconceives grounded theory, while engaging in a gross neglect of 90% of its important ideas” (Glaser, 1992, p. 2). Glaser demanded that Strauss and Corbin withdraw their work and “rewrite the book by mutual consent” in collaboration with him (Glaser 1992, p. 1). However, Strauss and Corbin did not waver and published their book *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990) with the partial reconfiguration of GT methodology.

In the years following the publication of their book, Strauss and Corbin continued to refine their rendition of grounded theory in a number of articles (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). When Strauss passed away in 1996 while they were working on the second edition of their book, Corbin went on to publish the edition by herself (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) and even completed a third one (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). She paid attention to distinguishing her perspective from that of Strauss and highlighted sections of which Strauss might have been critical.

Similarly, Glaser also continued to develop the classic approach in response and opposition to Strauss and Corbin’s suggestions (Glaser 1992, 1998, 2001a, 2001b). He saw himself as the defender of this classic, pure and authentic rendition of grounded

theory (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). His efforts resulted in further advances of the classic approach, especially concerning sampling, coding and theoretical memo-writing (Hunter et al., 2010; Moore, 2009). In this way, the theoretical debate among the chief proponents of the methodology led to progress in both camps.

The constructivist version of grounded theory

Kathy Charmaz, a former doctoral student who had worked with both Strauss and Glaser at the University of California, San Francisco, introduced a third sibling to the grounded theory family. In 2000, she published an article presenting a constructivist approach to grounded theory and asserted a new position in the academic debate (Charmaz, 2000). Motivated by the desire to adapt grounded theory methodology to the evolving contemporary research agenda, Charmaz forged a constructivist paradigm within grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In doing so, she followed an invitation to use grounded theory flexibly, which Glaser and Strauss had presented in their first book in 1967 (Charmaz, 2006). She continued to develop her approach during the 2000s and 2010s (Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2014). Charmaz (2014) defines constructivist grounded theory as:

A contemporary version of grounded theory that adopts methodological strategies such as coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling of the original statement of the method but shifts its epistemological foundations and takes into account methodological development in qualitative inquiry occurring over the past fifty years. (p. 342)

Charmaz' approach differs mainly in terms of the underlying philosophy and proposed coding procedures⁶ (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). She argues against the notion that a theory

⁶ Charmaz' constructivist approach also differs in terms of how engagement with pre-existing literature should be shaped, but this aspect has already been discussed in the previous initial literature review chapter.

can be *discovered* which is inherent in the classic approach. Instead, she suggests that “neither the data nor the theories are discovered” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). The fundamental difference is that in classic grounded theory the researcher needs to be in some way removed from the research process, a position linked to a positivist or post-positivist epistemological paradigm (Annells, 1996; Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 1990, 2003; Mills et al., 2006a, 2006b). By contrast, Charmaz argues that it is impossible to avoid the researcher’s influence on the research process (Ramalho et al., 2015). In her constructivist reading, grounded theories are constructed “through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). As Charmaz argues, the goal of removing the researcher from data collection and analysis is unattainable because both are “created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 239). She fully accepts the constructivist stance in qualitative inquiry, including the notion that knowledge is co-constructed between participants and researchers as well as the view that interpretation is a crucial feature of the analysis (Nagel et al., 2015). As Ramalho et al. (2015) put it, the main idea is that:

a theory cannot be grounded in the data by an active passivity that allows its emergence, but rather by a proactive focus on the data, acknowledging that it is not the research methodology that aims to discover a theory despite the researcher, but it is the researcher who aims to construct a theory through the methodology. (p. 14)

As far as coding procedures are concerned, Charmaz disagrees with Strauss and Corbin’s exceedingly systematic coding prescriptions and instead suggests more flexible guidelines that divide coding into an ‘initial’ and a ‘focussed’ stage and leave room to “raise questions and outline strategies to indicate possible routes to take” (Charmaz, 2006, p. xi). Therefore, Charmaz’ constructivist grounded theory parts ways with classic grounded theory concerning the underlying philosophy and diverges from evolved grounded theory by proposing a more flexible coding process.

Charmaz' contribution received both criticism and praise within the literature. Glaser reacted by criticising the departure from classic grounded theory, in the same way as he had done in response to Strauss and Corbin (Glaser, 2002). In particular, he argued that Charmaz' approach did not lead to conceptualisation, the goal of grounded theory, but to descriptive capture. In his view, Charmaz' constructivist variant falls short of providing the tools to reach abstraction, conceptualisation and systematic theory generation, which he regards as the core of his classic grounded theory. However, Glaser's response has also been subject to criticism. Anthony Bryant, for instance, argued that Glaser's remarks provide "very little to counter or clarify the arguments put forward by Charmaz" (Bryant, 2003, para. 23). Bryant defended Charmaz' rendition by stressing that she rightly criticises the view assumed by Glaser that a grounded theory can be "neutrally discovered" by an impartial observer. Instead, he confers, researchers are bound to have interpretive influence over their research, and grounded theories are constructed rather than discovered. Bryant concludes that Charmaz' approach is thus "far more potent and coherent" (Bryant, 2003, para. 25).

Glaser's reaction might also hinge on different views on how much control inventors can retain over their creations. Glaser seems to "feel proprietorial" about grounded theory but might have to recognise that the methodology "has outgrown his grasp" as researchers can develop their own interpretations and variants of the methodology (Bryant, 2003, para. 25). By contrast, Strauss and Corbin had a more open view towards further developments and changes to the methodology, contending that it is impossible for any creator to retain permanent control over their brainchild (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). They openly acknowledged that grounded theory might "change with the times" and that it should resonate with new scholarly developments (Strauss & Corbin 1994, p. 276). Consequently, Corbin reacted more positively than Glaser. She responded with an

affirmation of Charmaz' position (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Due to Strauss' death in 1996, his likely reaction to constructivist grounded theory remains speculation. Corbin suggests that Strauss may not have agreed with the constructivist turn in the same way that she did (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The above sections have explored the history of grounded theory and highlighted the *differences* between the three main strands that have emerged since the first publication of Glaser and Strauss in 1967. However, there are still considerable *similarities* between the approaches. For instance, all approaches draw on the original techniques of theoretical sampling, memo-writing as well as the constant comparative method outlined in the initial version. Therefore, while the three approaches can be regarded as distinct siblings with their own characteristics, they certainly remain members of the same methodological family (Kenny & Fourie, 2014).

3.2.3 The suitability of constructivist grounded theory *in particular*

It has already been argued above that grounded theory is an appropriate approach for addressing the research questions and achieving the dissertation goal of theory generation. However, while the last section has shown that grounded theory is a widely used approach in the discipline of sociology and beyond, it has also outlined the existence of three divergent strands within the methodology. For researchers conducting a grounded theory study, the choice of any of the three approaches has to be carefully justified (Nagel et al., 2015). Ramalho et al. (2015) encourage researchers engaging in grounded theory projects to explore their epistemological and ontological positions and state them explicitly in order to convey to readers which underlying philosophy informs the

research. In the case of this thesis, this process has led to the selection of constructivist grounded theory.

The main reason for selecting constructivist grounded theory relates to the appeal of the underlying philosophy of constructivism. Exploring my paradigmatic inclinations towards research and knowledge development, I support the notion that individuals perceive reality in different ways and that people who encounter the same phenomenon experience it differently. Moreover, I think that based on these differing perceptions and the complexity involved in interpreting the meanings associated with the same phenomenon, it is not possible to judge a singular truth objectively or measure it directly. This insight is particularly relevant in the field of social science. These views align with the philosophical stance of constructivism, an epistemological stance which recognises subjectivity in the construction of knowledge through research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sandelowski, 1993).

Furthermore, I recognise that the meanings people attach to phenomena are influenced by social interactions that take place in a specific context and are subject to changes over time. These views correspond with the notion of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) which forms the intellectual underpinning of grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Lastly, I also acknowledge that the way that people construct meaning is shaped in no small extent by the interpretive nature of social interactions. These can be understood through constructivist research approaches. The undeniable importance of interpretation in the process of theory generation is recognised by Charmaz (2014). I agree that interpretation is a central feature of being a constructivist qualitative researcher.

The goal of both the classic and the evolved approach is to make an ‘objective’ theory emerge from the data (Ramalho et al., 2015). In my view, Charmaz’ characterisation of an active role for the researcher in the co-construction of theory is more convincing than the positivist notion of a passive emergence of an objective theory that is independent of the researcher involved in data collection and analysis. I argue that to make sense of a certain phenomenon conceiving grounded theory as being co-constructed between the researcher and the participants is the more plausible account.

The flexibility of the research approach was a further argument in favour of choosing constructivist grounded theory. The analytical framework of constructivist grounded theory respects that researchers jointly construct knowledge about phenomena with study participants (Charmaz, 2014; Nagel et al., 2015). This flexibility is crucial for this study as the dynamic interactions with participants is central to understanding critical moments (or turning points) in school-to-work transitions.

Finally, the importance attributed to reflexivity also contributed to choosing constructivist grounded theory as a methodology. The approach recognises that researchers bring their own experience and philosophical orientations to the study and urges scholars to engage in reflexivity to transparently acknowledge how their background has a bearing on the research (Charmaz, 2014). I share the belief that the open recognition of these aspects is an advantage of the methodology.

In sum, this section has argued that there are valid reasons for ascribing to the research paradigm of constructivism. Consequently, this thesis relies on constructivist underpinnings and is justified in selecting constructivist grounded theory for reasons related to epistemology and suitability for addressing the research questions.

3.2.4 Young people's perspectives taking centre stage

In addition to the points discussed in the previous section, a further reason for choosing constructivist grounded theory methodology is that it affords the flexibility to prioritise young people's perspectives. This flexibility enables the study to generate valuable insights into young people's agency and social relationships.

This study prioritises developing an understanding of critical moments (or turning points) from the perspective of young people themselves. This deliberate methodological decision is informed by a central paradigm of youth and childhood studies as well as, in particular, the new social study of childhood: the view that social relationships and experiences of young people (and children) in and of itself are worthy of investigation (James & Prout, 1997; Montgomery, 2009; Prout & James, 1990; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). By privileging young people's perspectives over those of adults, the study purposefully highlights the importance of young people's perceptions.

Through the perspectives of young people, it becomes possible to explore their perceived control and agency related to various critical moments. A focus on agency and young people's potential to actively construct their own social lives and the lives of those around them is also a further tenet of the new social study of childhood (Holt & Holloway, 2006; Prout & James, 1990; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Vanderbeck, 2008). Taking into account young people's agency does not, however, imply that it should be presupposed or "uncritically celebrated" (Murphy, 2014, p. 48). Indeed, Tisdall and Punch (2012) rightly point out that some young people might not want to be active agents and that researchers should be cautious not to place an excessive emphasis on the individuality of young people. This thesis argues that taking a primary focus on the perspectives of young people

allows for an exploration of issues surrounding their agency and can lead to “a more problematised and nuanced understanding” of agency (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 259).

Moreover, a prioritisation of young people’s perspectives allows for an insightful exploration of their social relationships (Jamieson & Milne, 2012). With its focus on the social and institutional circumstances during school-to-work transitions and critical moments, this study takes seriously the suggestion to pay attention to the relationships of young people. Social relationships, when explored through young people’s perspectives, can help to understand the “intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people’s lives” (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 259).

What practical consequences does this decision have for the study? This thesis focusses on young people as the main interview participants because young people are the subjects experiencing the transitions first-hand. While interviews with parents, mentors and teachers are also included to provide a better understanding of the social context and uncover possible contradictions in perspectives and accounts, young people — to the highest degree possible — take centre stage in data collection and analysis.

3.2.5 Using retrospective accounts through qualitative interviews

In this section, I discuss a related methodological issue. It is linked with using retrospective accounts collected through qualitative interviews, an important data source of this study. I chose to address this issue before explicating the practical details of the data sources (see following section) to confront a potential criticism towards relying on retrospective accounts straight away. This section presents ways of addressing the limitations of retrospective accounts through triangulation (Flick, 2004; Denzin, 1989).

Value and limitations of retrospective accounts

As discussed in the initial literature review chapter, critical moments and turning points can have subjective and objective dimensions. The subjective aspect of what constitutes a critical moment or turning point implies that they might only be identified in hindsight. This insight is widely recognised in biographical research and life course research (Abbott, 1997). Young people's own accounts and perceptions are thus of central importance. Researchers can use qualitative interviews to prompt participants to reflect on and share their life experiences retrospectively. Participants then look back from the moment of the interview and think about which past experiences might have been particularly important and became turning points.

The fact that retrospective accounts are used for evaluating critical moments and turning points raises methodological issues (Harever & Masaoka, 1988). There are questions about the accuracy of retrospective data due to recall bias when participants present incomplete recollections about past events or experiences (Cherry & Rodgers, 1979). It has, for instance, been shown that interviewees might reassess their recollections based on their current life situation (Holland et al., 1999). Cognitive psychologists have assessed these limitations in some detail (see Sudman & Bradman, 1973). In particular, there is the problem that interviewees might share critical moments that they consider important from their current temporal perspective rather than at the time at which they occurred (Hareven, 1986). The relative importance of particular events or moments can vary as life perspectives are being revised and reassessed over time. As Hareven and Masaoka (1988) put it:

Turning points that individuals perceive as critical at one point in their lives might not be viewed as such several decades later. Past critical events may fade in importance while earlier or later turning points may suddenly assume new importance. (p. 275)

For these reasons, retrospective accounts have to be treated critically and carefully. While the data generated in such accounts through qualitative interviews can be valuable for analysing how participants think about their own lives and transitions, researchers need to be aware of their limitations.

Dealing with limitations of using retrospective accounts

How can we address this issue of recall bias? In the following, I discuss two possible responses: (1) triangulation through the integration of prospective interviews and ethnographic observations, and (2) reflecting on the need of perfect accuracy in recall for the research project.

First, instead of relying exclusively on retrospective interview accounts, this research project attempted to triangulate data sources by integrating prospective interviews as well as ethnographic observations throughout the extended fieldwork (Flick, 2004; Denzin, 1989). Interviewing young people and their social network during the time of transition, before and after critical moments occurred, allowed for an analysis of transitions as they unfold, not just through retrospective recall. Moreover, triangulation was implemented by combining interview data and an extended period of 11 months in the field during which I was able to get to know participants better. Besides, interviewing parents and teachers, where possible, was another form of triangulation of the retrospective accounts of young people. As mentioned in the previous section, priority was given to young people's perspectives, but adult interviews were integrated as a contextual background. In this way, the reliability of retrospective accounts could be strengthened.

Second, a critical reflection on the goals of the research project suggested that, for at least some aspects of the project, the focus was on how young people's perceptions affected their behaviour. As Bell (2005) argues, inaccuracies in retrospective accounts do not present an issue "for those sociologists for whom the focus may not be on what actually happened, but what participants believe happened and how they act as a consequence" (p. 52). Indeed, for those parts of this research project focussing on perceptions of young people, the problem might not be a central concern. However, it remains an essential task for researchers to distinguish between more relevant *immediate* interpretations by participants and later interpretations, which may be *posthoc* rationalisations.

In sum, the first part of this chapter outlined the theoretical rationale for selecting constructivist grounded theory methodology, prioritising young people's perspectives, and drawing, at least partly, on retrospective accounts. It argued that this thesis relies on a purposeful, reflected and appropriate research methodology.

3.3 Practical application of the chosen methodology

How was this methodology applied in practice? This second part, divided into two sections, focusses on the practical application of the methodology throughout the research process. The first section describes how constructivist grounded theory methodology guided data *collection*, including the approach to fieldwork and sampling. Moreover, this section contextualises the set of cases on which this thesis draws and discusses ethical considerations concerning data collection. The second section focusses on data *analysis* for this thesis, and presents the applied procedures of coding, memo-writing, and, diagramming for theory construction involved in this grounded theory study. Moreover, this section also describes the usefulness of peer debriefings in the research process.

3.3.1 Data collection

Appropriate data sources to address research questions

Rich data is required to understand the complex nature of school-to-work transitions, the role of social context, and the subjective transition experiences of young migrants related to their critical moments (or turning points). Since the process of school-to-work transitions unfolds over time, it is sensible to trace young people's steps and decisions in a longitudinal design. This approach allows us to explore how youths encounter and respond to critical moments in changing circumstances. Because qualitative data lends itself to the study of subjectivities, data sources, such as intensive interviews and participant observation, were deemed most appropriate for addressing the research questions (Charmaz, 2006). In this thesis, intensive interviews played a primary role, while participant observation and informal conversations served to contextualise and triangulate the data. In sum, the choice of these sources of qualitative data stems from both the nature of the research problem and from grounded theory as the methodological approach towards collecting and analysing data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013).

Intensive interviews

The choice of intensive interviews as a data-gathering approach stems from its proven usefulness in different kinds of qualitative research projects (Charmaz, 2006). “[It] permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience” (p. 25). As a type of directed conversation (Lofland & Lofland, 1984), intensive interviewing allows the interviewer to explore a topic through a participant with the relevant experiences

(Seidman, 1998). Intensive interviews are also very suitable for a grounded theory study because they are “open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). Lastly, “the combination of flexibility and control inherent in in-depth interviewing techniques fit grounded theory strategies for increasing the analytic incisiveness of resultant analysis.” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 27).

Successful interviews require both skill and sufficient preparation. Researchers must “remain active in the interview and alert to interesting leads” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 33; see also Holstein & Gumbrium, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 1998). Also, using phrases such as “tell me about”, “how”, “what” and “when” helps to yield rich data, especially if they are followed up on with requests to provide more detail, such as “could you describe this further” (see Charmaz, 2002).

A second critical skill involves establishing trust and good rapport during, before, and after the interview. In order to ensure that trust and rapport are well-established, I spent several months in the field to build relationships with migrant families before I began interviewing (see the section on fieldwork below). Interview preparation involved thinking about relevant questions that relate to both the research issue and the experiences of interviewees. As Charmaz (2006) points out “these kinds of questions are sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and elaborate the participant’s experience” (p. 27). The open-ended and non-judgmental nature of questions allows the researcher to “encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge” (p. 26). The structure of intensive interviews can vary widely from “loosely guided exploration” to “semi-structured focussed questions” (p. 26). Experimenting with different formats in the field to determine which ones yielded the best results, I used individual and dyadic interview settings, as well as focus groups. Sometimes, the choice of the interview format was guided by practicalities; for instance, female participants

occasionally preferred to be interviewed in small groups. Overall, however, the majority of interviews were conducted in one-on-one settings. While interview time for each participant in a group interview was typically more limited, interviewing in small groups also had advantages. During some of the small focus group discussions, interviewees voluntarily took over the role of interviewers and prompted each other to respond to queries (Kirby, 2004). This practice often yielded unexpected insights.

Finally, Charmaz (2006) suggests setting up an interview guideline with initial open-ended questions, intermediate questions and ending questions. Ending questions are designed to elicit positive responses that aim at leading the interview to “closure at a positive level” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 30). The interview guideline for this study can be found in the appendices (see appendix E).

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audio-recorded with explicit and informed written or oral consent by parents/guardians (see ethics section below). In cases where adults were interviewed, participants gave informed consent for themselves. I was present at all interviews and conducted all but two myself; a research assistant conducted the others (see the section on research assistance below). I am sufficiently proficient in Mandarin Chinese to conduct interviews with the necessary fluency. Whenever possible, interviews were organised in public places (e.g. cafés or restaurants). I sought to balance the goal of gathering high-quality data through private interviews with what was practically feasible in the field; for instance, the housing situation of Chinese migrants did not always allow for a private interview space without parents present in the neighbouring room during the interview.

Participant observation

To gain a better understanding of the context of the interview data and to triangulate, I also relied on participant observation and extensive field notes. The advantage of participant observation is that “understanding derives most directly from the immediacy of our participation in social actors’ shared worlds” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25; see also Prus, 1996). Sociologists have already applied this method to migrant studies in China with great benefit (see, for instance, Lee, 1998, 2007). To participate in young people’s lives, I also made use of the method of neighbourhood walks, where feasible, to explore young people’s perception of their social and physical environment (Morrow, 1999). As Bassani (2007) suggests, young people should be studied as members of their groups (family, school, friendship groups, community) and not in isolation. For this study, participant observation offered insights into the role of social context during the time of transition. While in the field, I always carried a notebook with me and took notes as often as practically possible. Later, I digitalised these notes, and they entered the data analysis process alongside the primary interview data.

Informal conversations

During my time in the field, I also had a range of relevant informal conversations with migrant families, cab drivers, local residents, shop owners, factory workers, and young people of different backgrounds that provided further contextual depth. These were not part of the abovementioned intensive interviews, but they also informed this research project. Typically, they entered the analytical process as secondary fieldnotes that I took on these conversations and interactions.

Obtaining the data through an extended period of fieldwork

Doing fieldwork as a suitable way of obtaining the data

Doing fieldwork in China was a necessary step for obtaining the required data mentioned above. The timing of the fieldwork from July 2017 to June 2018 followed a practical rationale. The Chinese school term started in September 2017 and arrival in the field in July provided sufficient time to establish rapport with participants before the beginning of the following school year. It was thus possible to interview young people throughout their final middle school year, grade nine, as they approached the transition at the end of middle school and the choice among different pathways. Moreover, being present in the field for the full Chinese calendar with major festivals offered opportunities to follow students who returned to their hometowns.

Selecting a suitable field site and gaining entrée.

The choice of Shanghai as a field site was purposeful. It was selected because of its significant migrant population and its relevant policy setup (see introduction chapter). Migrants make up just over 40 per cent of the total population of Shanghai (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics 2017). Moreover, Shanghai is known for its progressive migrant education policies that have recently created new openings for migrants, including the introduction of a credit point system for migrants to enable qualified migrant families to access public high school education (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2015; Shanghai Education Committee, 2016). These two reasons render Shanghai an interesting field site for investigating transition processes for urban migrant youths.

I planned on selecting a migrant district in Shanghai as the field site for this study. However, I left the decision on the precise district open. Before I arrived in the field, I had already identified two potential field sites with significant migrant populations, Minhang District and Baoshan District in Shanghai, in collaboration with my doctoral supervisor, Professor Ren Yuan, at the local cooperating institution, Fudan University. While it seemed tempting to make an *a priori* decision on which migrant district might be the most suitable, I chose to prioritise access and rapport in selecting the final field location.

Indeed, when I arrived in the field in July 2017, an opportunity presented itself. I was introduced to Professor Xiong Yihan of Fudan University, and he, in turn, arranged a meeting with his friend Zhou Jiping, previously principal of an academically reputable middle school in an outskirt district of Shanghai, Jinshan District, which translates as “Golden Mountain”. He suggested that he could use his network to find two suitable middle schools with significant migrant student populations as a base for my fieldwork. After he had reached out to two school principals, I soon met them in Jinshan.

After the meeting in Jinshan, I was allowed to spend time at their two schools, Javelin and Shield School, acting as an (unpaid) assistant English teacher and was permitted to audit any class (cf. Fong, 2004). Moreover, the principals allowed me to participate in parent-teacher meetings and school activities, such as excursions or sports competitions. Besides, I could also contact students and their families for interviews. This access allowed me to be present at schools and to observe interactions among young migrants and their peers as well as adults in a daily setting (Bassani, 2007).

In the following days, I arranged for housing in Jinshan District. My rationale was that I would be able to understand the context of my participants better if I based myself in the

same district, rather than staying in university accommodation in the city centre (cf. Swider, 2016; see also Whyte, 1993). With the help of local acquaintances, I found an apartment in a typical Chinese residential block (*xiaoqu*) that was conveniently located half-way between both middle schools. Over time, my presence in the neighbourhood allowed me to build a network among both migrant families and locals.

In sum, the selection of the field site and middle schools was purposeful and gaining entrée was facilitated through a double strategy of working as an (unpaid) assistant English teacher and living in the migrant neighbourhood.

Conducting en-route research to obtain more data

While Jinshan District served as the central fieldwork site and my base for the entire fieldwork period, following up with recent middle school graduates involved *en-route* research and visits to several other provinces, including Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang. In the lead-up to all these trips, I reached out to participants over a Chinese messenger app, obtained consent for their research participation, and agreed on a schedule. I then used the local high-speed rail network to reach these other locations. Tracing middle school graduates' steps after leaving school in Jinshan in this way allowed me to better contextualise their decisions at various stages and obtain ethnographic data on their current situation. This method especially helped to better understand the important path of returning to home provinces for schooling (see chapter 5 on return). Out of all 52 young migrants I approached for interviews, 40 agreed to be interviewed. I had a similar acceptance rate when considering those young people who returned to their home provinces. When I followed up with 13 young migrants who returned to their home provinces, 10 agreed to be interviewed. I recognise that the fact that I was not able to

interview all of those whom I approached means that the set of cases might be biased towards those who were willing to continue communication with me.

Sampling

Establishing a presence in the field and building a network among key contacts

At the beginning of the fieldwork, my official affiliation with the two middle schools provided a strong starting point for my sampling strategy. Initially, I took a few months to become acquainted with the field setting and started to build rapport with key people who might become crucial for further sampling efforts. Two such people were the two school principals whose support ensured that all schoolteachers were willing to help me when I asked for their support. Since migrant students in both schools were segregated from local students and schooled in “migrant” or “outsider” classes (*waidi ban*) in separate classrooms, the homeroom teachers of two of these migrant classes — one in each school — were also important contacts. Most importantly, I began building rapport with the migrant youths themselves at these two schools. I played basketball, badminton and Chinese hackysack (*jianzi*) with them, went for walks with them as they showed me their neighbourhood after school (Morrow, 1999), accompanied them on shopping tours and for meals in their leisure time. Over time, I grew increasingly familiar with many migrant students from both migrant classes in grade nine.

After familiarising myself with the field site and building up connections with gatekeepers, I proceeded to implement a two-stage sampling strategy that first employed principles of stratified purposeful sampling and then shifted into theoretical sampling, a central feature of grounded theory methodology. The sections below trace these two stages in the sampling efforts throughout the fieldwork.

The first sampling stage: stratified purposeful sampling.

During the first stage, I planned on using stratified purposeful sampling in order to achieve variation in the set of cases in key dimensions that might be of theoretical importance. Purposeful sampling is a common approach in qualitative studies that facilitates the selection of suitable cases that might be particularly knowledgeable or experienced with the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002; Creswell & Piano Clark, 2011). If more narrowly defined samples that vary in a critical dimension are nested within larger purposeful samples, this approach is called *stratified* purposeful sampling (Patton 2002). Patton (2002) suggests that the goal of such a sampling approach is “to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis” (p. 240). In other words, the advantage of a stratified purposeful sampling strategy is that it aims to cover variation as well as common patterns that may emerge within and between individual young migrants.

How was this technique implemented in practice for this study? The original plan was to sample purposefully based on four aspects. Two aspects indicated commonalities; these were the migrant status of young people and being a graduating middle school student in grade nine. In contrast to these commonalities, two further aspects offered variation; these were gender and attended middle school (one of my two main fieldwork schools). Gender was chosen as a selection aspect because the literature suggests that filtering mechanisms may play out differently for different genders (Goodburn, 2015; Ling, 2012; Ming, 2014). Moreover, in order to capture possible contextual differences in different schools, two fieldwork schools were chosen.

However, after a few months of exposure in the field, I decided to revise the original sampling strategy to include recent graduates. This change was motivated by informal conversations with migrant students and teachers which led me to realise that by limiting the sample to graduating students I would only obtain an understanding of how migrant youths *prepare* for the school-to-work transition and not how they *implement* it or how they adapt to pathways and change plans. The qualitative methodological literature recognises that sampling strategies may have to be adapted flexibly to conditions encountered in the field (Errante, 2000; Janesick, 2000; Proweller, 1998). Therefore, after consulting my supervisors at Oxford University and Fudan University, I proceeded to adapt the strategy and shifted to include recent middle school graduates who had left one of these two schools. I mostly focussed on recent graduates (in the last 1-3 years), but also included a few who graduated 4-6 years ago. The varying time since graduation allowed for an examination of different stages of the transition process.

I restricted the set of cases to those students who had attended either one of the two schools.⁷ The rationale behind this decision was that the sampling remained manageable and the narrative tied to the local context at these two schools, even if a few years might have passed since recent graduates attended the schools. Moreover, when I approached and interviewed recent graduates, I could draw on my experiences of spending several months at their respective previous middle schools and learning about middle school students' everyday lives and daily routines. My familiarity with their previous school context allowed me to ask more specific questions and establish a better rapport with interviewees.

⁷ However, there was one exception. Towards the end of my extended stint in the field, I also chose to include one particularly interesting case of a young girl who had previously attended a private school in Jinshan District.

Having decided on this extension of the target group, I started by interviewing migrant students who were preparing to graduate as they were easier to reach in the two classes in which I acted as assistant English teacher. To reach previous graduates, I leveraged the connections I had built with teachers at both schools during the first few months. These teachers put me in touch with a range of former students of theirs. It was beneficial for these efforts that teachers at the two middle schools often stayed in contact with their students over a Chinese messaging app.

The second sampling stage: theoretical sampling

During the second stage, I started to focus more on theoretical sampling as I began to construct initial concepts and write theoretical memos (see data analysis section below for more detail). This type of sampling means identifying and gathering data that grows and hones categories in a developing grounded theory (Ford, 2010). As Charmaz (2006) puts it, “theoretical sampling involves starting with data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical enquiry” (p. 102). As theoretical sampling unfolds, cases are sought to explore categories and determine their properties. Moreover, the approach helps to understand how processes develop and change. The unique feature of theoretical sampling is that it is related to the principle in grounded theory methodology that data collection and analysis take place concurrently. As questions arise from the collected data, grounded theory researchers are asked to address these through returning to individuals or seeking related information from additional participants. By directing the researcher where to go and what to look for based on the theoretical analysis, this process aims to augment the understanding of the analytical categories developed (Charmaz, 2014).

How did this second stage of sampling unfold in practice in the field? Through the analysis of initially collected data from the first interviews and participant observation, persisting and dropping off chosen pathways began to develop into two central categories structuring the experiences of young migrants. In order to explore these concepts further, it was important to capture cases that tapped into a range of experiences beyond compulsory education. I directed sampling efforts towards obtaining variation in initial pathway decisions beyond compulsory education. Variations in experiences of my first participants and their peers included returning to home provinces for schooling, attending a vocational school in Shanghai, attending private educational institutions in Shanghai, or attempting to enter the labour market.

At this stage, I began to draw on snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), an approach in which participants identify and introduce researchers to other respondents for inclusion in the sample. Having conducted the first few interviews with students who had been recommended by teachers or principals, I asked interviewees to reach out to their friends in order to reach participants who had embarked onto specific pathways beyond middle school.

The second step in theoretical sampling involved identifying critical cases. Emerging data analysis also directed my attention to include several critical cases, that is, young migrants who were judged as particularly successful or unsuccessful in their school-to-work transition, with assessments based on peers and other informants, such as teachers or principals. Some had been expected to drop off their chosen path but did not, others were expected to succeed in pursuing a particular path but also did not. In this way, I was, for instance, introduced to a middle school graduate who had not pursued an academic or vocational education pathway but had achieved a successful career from a modest background (see chapter 7 for more details on Liu Jun's case). Another example of a

young man whom I met in this way was that of interviewee 19 who came from an advantaged socioeconomic background and was currently unemployed after having dropped out of vocational school and worked in several odd jobs. These critical cases helped to generate insightful variation in the final set of cases.

Theoretical sampling also involved many subsequent follow-up interviews with participants which allowed for addressing emerging issues around turning points (Charmaz, 2006). For example, I had interviewed a participant in grade nine who had settled on a plan to return to her home province for further schooling but ended up changing her mind when she found out more about vocational school options through an older sibling of a friend and saw her peers decide to stay in Shanghai for vocational training (interviewee 13, see also chapter 4). In a subsequent follow-up interview, I had the chance to explore this decision-making process that incidentally led her to change her pathway decision. I was able to explore the links between her social context, her available information and her pathway decision. These sampling steps helped to elaborate and refine the emerging grounded theory.

While I gave priority to the viewpoints of young migrants themselves, I also included parents in matched pairs with those 40 young migrants that I had already interviewed.⁸ The purpose of this extension of scope was that interviewing parents allowed me to gain a more holistic perspective on young people's transition environment. Sometimes conflicts and contradictions became evident when comparing and contrasting the perspectives of parents and young people. Overall, I conducted 15 intensive interviews with parents. The other 25 parents rejected my interview requests for different reasons, often related to tight

⁸ As stated in the introduction chapter, I had initially sampled 40 young migrants, but a closer examination of the data led me to exclude five cases from further analysis because interviews and interactions did not offer the same depth as the other 35 cases. This step ensured data quality and reliability.

work schedules or unfamiliarity with academic research. Based on the interviews with the young people, I could not discern a systematic difference between those 15 parents who accepted my interview request and those 25 who rejected the request.

Reaching theoretical saturation or theoretical sufficiency.

Theoretical sampling in grounded theory studies typically comes to a conclusion when theoretical saturation is achieved (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Saturation can be understood as ‘data adequacy’ which implies collecting data up to a point where no new insights are obtained (Morse, 1995). In constructivist grounded theory, theoretical saturation is similarly described as a situation in which new data does not generate new theoretical understanding, and no new properties of core theoretical categories are developed (Charmaz, 2006). This means that the analysis has accounted for the full spectrum of variation.

The concept of theoretical saturation has been criticised for suggesting a state that is not practically attainable by real-life researchers. As Gilgun (1994) argues, “researchers may never reach an absolute saturation” (p. 118). She suggests instead that grounded theory research is “forever open ended”, as it remains “open to the possibility that the next case will challenge the existing constructs” (p. 118). Indeed, Morse (1995) notes that “there are no published guidelines or tests of adequacy for estimating the sample size required to reach saturation” (p. 147). Therefore, claims about reaching saturation may be questioned (Charmaz, 2006).

The sample size is also not a suitable indicator for theoretical saturation as saturating one’s categories in a grounded theory study “supersedes sample size” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 214). Patton (1990) states that there are “no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry”

(p. 184). He argues that the purpose of the study should determine what is useful and what provides credibility. Moreover, the practical constraints of a study in terms of time and resources can be a further factor to take into account. Indeed, while the sample size of a grounded theory study is typically relatively small, the critical issue is whether it meets the requirements of the project (Charmaz, 2006).

As an alternative and more attainable concept, the notion of ‘theoretical sufficiency’ has been introduced as a goal for theoretical sampling (Dey, 2007; Charmaz, 2006). It can be used to describe a state in which the coding process is adequate (see the section on data analysis below). In the case of this study, the end of the second sampling stage was reached when I was approaching a point at which I felt increasingly confident that I kept hearing similar stories from additional interviewees again and again and no new insights were emerging through additional interviews. This stage was reached after interviewing 40 migrant youths.

Contextualisation

This section aims to contextualise the field site, Jinshan District, within greater Shanghai and, more specifically, the two fieldwork middle schools within the educational landscape of Shanghai. Moreover, it also aims to contextualise the set of cases of young migrants (and their parents) in the broader migrant population in Shanghai. The structure adopted for this section is thus one of zooming into the set of cases by taking more and more fine-grained units of analysis (district, schools, families and individuals) for this process of contextualisation.

How Jinshan District is situated in the context of Shanghai

How does Jinshan District fit into Shanghai in terms of economic, demographic and educational aspects? Jinshan is one of 16 county-level districts of Shanghai and located 50 kilometres outside the city centre of Shanghai, bordering Hangzhou Bay to the south and Zhejiang Province to the west (see map below). With an area of 586 square kilometres, it is one of the larger districts of Shanghai. In 2015, 805,100 people lived in Jinshan, including 275,500 internal migrants⁹, representing 34.2 per cent of the population of the district (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Jinshan's percentage of migrants is close to the average migrant share of 40.6 per cent for all of Shanghai. In terms of annual GDP per capita, Jinshan District is located in the middle range of Shanghai with 16,959 USD, ranked 8th among all 16 districts and was very close to the overall city average of 17,084 USD (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Table 1 below shows Jinshan District in comparison with all other districts in Shanghai.

⁹ As discussed in the introduction of the thesis, the term “internal migrants” refers to those individuals who reside in Shanghai but hold a non-Shanghai hukou.

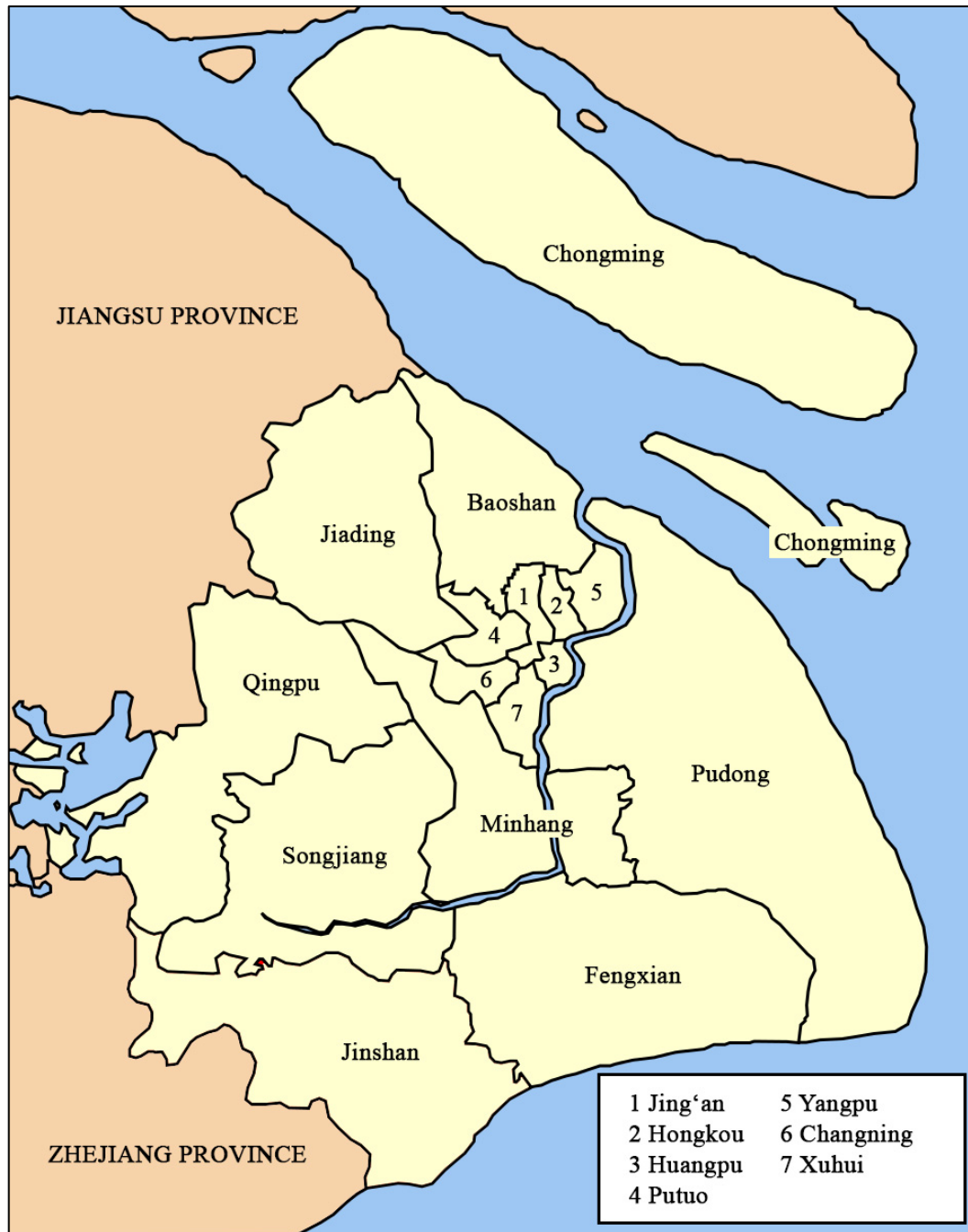


Figure 5: Map of districts of Shanghai (See appendix J; adapted by author)

For this study, the question of how Jinshan District is located in terms of educational advantage is of particular relevance. Data on the educational advantage of districts are challenging to obtain. It might be possible to judge educational advantage by proxy. I took the makeup of students who gain access to the top 12 high schools in Shanghai as an indicator (see table 1 below). I checked their previous middle schools and the district in which these schools are located. The data on educational advantage can be grouped into

three geographical clusters. The first cluster comprises all seven downtown districts. Students from middle schools in these districts make up the largest share in top high schools (see table 1 below). Three less advantaged outskirt districts form the second cluster. Lastly, Jinshan District is located in the least advantaged third cluster of five outskirt districts. Students who attended middle schools in these five districts are highly underrepresented in top high schools. While Jinshan District is not well-positioned in terms of educational advantage, it is nonetheless similar in this respect to a range of other outskirt districts, such as Baoshan, Songjiang, Qingpu, or Fengxian. I recognise that my choice of the district may have limited variability in outcomes. If I had sampled a downtown district with relatively more students with educational advantage, I could have presumably had more variation in outcomes. By contrast, sampling in an outskirt district had the advantage of examining a context that is very typical for migrants in Shanghai (Ling, 2020).

District	Population	Migrant population	% migrants	GDP (million USD)	GDP per capita (USD)	% students in top 12 high schools ¹⁰
Downtown (cluster 1)						
Huangpu	654,800	166,600	25.44%	29,371	44,854	5.0%
Yangpu	1,313,400	259,200	19.74%	23,771	18,099	8.9%
Xuhui	1,088,300	267,500	24.58%	21,967	20,184	6.3%
Changning	693,700	167,500	24.15%	18,388	26,507	4.9%
Jing'an	1,066,200	260,800	24.46%	23,777	22,301	3.1%
Hongkou	744,200	155,200	20.85%	10,893	14,637	4.9%
Putuo	1,284,700	334,100	26.01%	13,028	10,141	3.0%
Outskirts (cluster 2)						
Pudong	5,528,400	2,341,900	42.36%	134,700	24,365	2.0%
Minhang	2,534,300	1,270,400	50.13%	31,225	12,321	2.8%
Jiading	1,581,800	906,800	57.33%	30,030	18,985	3.5%
Outskirts (cluster 3)						
Baoshan	2,030,800	844,600	41.59%	16,013	7,885	0.3%
Jinshan	805,100	275,500	34.22%	13,654	16,959	0.3%
Songjiang	1,758,000	1,081,100	61.50%	15,645	8,899	0.3%
Qingpu	1,205,300	722,200	59.92%	14,085	11,686	0.5%
Fengxian	1,155,300	600,900	52.01%	10,876	9,414	0%
Chongming	676,000	147,700	21.85%	4,645	6,871	0%
All of Shanghai	24,120,300	9,802,000	40.64%	412,066	17,084	

Table 1: Population, GDP and indicator of educational advantage of 16 districts of Shanghai (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Ye, 2019)

In sum, this section has contextualised Jinshan District demographically, economically and educationally. In terms of demographics and economics, Jinshan District is located in

¹⁰ Data on this aspect of educational advantage by district is difficult to obtain. The data indicates what percentage of students at the 12 top-ranked public high schools in Shanghai come from middle schools in which district. The data is derived from a research report by China Securities, see Ye (2019).

the middle range of districts in Shanghai. However, in terms of access to top educational institutions, Jinshan (just as other outskirt districts) is not well-positioned.

How the two fieldwork middle schools are situated in the context of the district and city

This section compares the two middle schools, Shield and Javelin Middle School, that served as the starting and focal point of my fieldwork and contextualises them within the broader educational landscape of Shanghai. The table below contains descriptive statistics that illustrate the situation of the two schools during my fieldwork from 2017-2018. 34 out of 35 participants studied at one of these schools for at least part of their middle school years.¹¹

¹¹ I sampled the 35th individual based on a conversation with one of the middle school principals and the principal of Green Middle School. The latter mentioned the case of a girl in his school who had recently been excluded from the *zhongkao* due to struggles with the 120-point system.

	Shield Middle School	Javelin Middle School
Total student number	609	847
Locals	210	367
Migrants	399	480
Percentage of migrants	65.5%	56.7%
Number of classes (total)	23	26
thereof migrant classes	14	13
thereof local classes	9	13
Average class size in local classes	29.7	32.7
Average class size in migrant classes	25.0	32.5
Migrant students in grade nine	71	36
Local students in grade nine	68	88
Total students in grade nine	139	124

Table 2: Comparison of different aspects of two fieldwork schools

Both schools were comparable in many respects. They were both public middle schools with significant migrant populations. Migrant students made up 65.5 per cent of the student body at Shield School and 56.7 per cent at Javelin School. Both schools thus far exceeded the average share of 35 per cent of migrant children in compulsory school age (6-14 years) in Shanghai and the share of the migrant population in Jinshan of 34.4 per cent (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

Furthermore, both schools were located on the periphery of the urbanised area of Jinshan District, a 20-minute bicycle ride from the district's urban centre. Moreover, the statistics show that both schools were of comparable size. Javelin Middle School with 847 students was slightly larger than the average middle school size in Shanghai of 758 students, and Shield Middle School was slightly smaller with 609 students (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Lastly, both schools implemented a system of segregating migrant students from local students by assigning them to separate classes, a practice common among schools in Shanghai (Ling, 2020). However, some migrants were nonetheless admitted to local classes, 13.5 per cent in Shield School and 12.1 per cent in Javelin School.¹² The rigidity with which the segregation system was implemented at both schools was thus also comparable.

How were these two schools positioned in the context of other middle schools in Jinshan District and Shanghai more broadly? Both schools offered classes in four grades from grade six to grade nine. While most provinces in China organise school in a 6-3-3 system, meaning students spend six years in elementary school, three years in middle school and three years in high school, Shanghai runs a 5-4-3 system. In this way, both Shield and Javelin School were typical public middle schools.

In terms of academic quality, both schools have an average reputation. In an online ranking of all 22 middle schools in Jinshan District, Shield and Javelin School rank in the middle (Qianzhan, 2018). By contrast, Green School, a private middle school in Jinshan where one of my participants had studied, ranks in the top five. While the reliability of this ranking should be assessed critically, as it did not explicitly show the criteria taken into account, conversations with local residents, who did not have ties to any of the three schools, confirmed the relative ranking. Moreover, the ranking is confirmed by another common way of evaluating the comparative quality of middle schools in Shanghai. Many parents regard the quality of the students attending the schools as a proxy for school

¹² Reasons for admission into local classes varied. Schools sometimes admitted either those young migrants whose parents were expected to eventually qualify for 120 points to gain access to public high schools (see chapter 4), or those migrants who had particularly good grades. On other occasions, previously attended elementary schools seemed to matter or how well connected the migrant parents were in the middle school.

quality. They examine the percentage of graduates who proceed into one of the 60 top high schools in Shanghai, now often referred to as “Experimental and Exemplary High Schools” (*shiyanxing shifanxing gaozhong*), since the previously common denotation as “key schools” (*zhongdian xuexiao*) is officially discouraged since 2006 (Tan, 2012). These 60 high schools represent the top 23.4 per cent of a total of 256 high schools in Shanghai (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The table below compares graduates of Shield and Javelin School with Green School based on data about the institutional progression that I collected from schools during my fieldwork.

	Shield Middle School	Javelin Middle School	Green School
Number of graduates admitted into top 60 high schools in Shanghai	15	14	63
Percentage of graduating students	15.79%	12.17%	42%

Table 3: Comparison of educational advantage of fieldwork schools

In comparison with top private schools in Jinshan, such as Green School, both Shield and Javelin School are far behind in terms of sending students to top high schools. This contrast is even starker when compared to the city’s top middle school. According to another ranking published on online forums, some of Shanghai’s top middle schools achieve admission percentages of 100 per cent, such as Yangpu Experimental High School (Sohu, 2018). However, it should be noted that this percentage might not always be a good indicator of school quality since it is possible to have an academically exceptional school that helps to pull up the test scores of underperforming students, but it may still be ranked poorly on test scores because the students are so disadvantaged. Regardless of whether the indicator measures student quality or school quality, the percentages of Javelin and Shield School indicate that both institutions are comparable in terms of their positioning.

In sum, this section has compared and contextualised the two fieldwork schools in the educational landscape in Jinshan District and Shanghai more generally. Both schools are similar in a number of respects and situated at a comparable position in the educational hierarchy.

How the set of cases of young migrants (and their families) is situated in the context of the broader migrant population of Shanghai

This section examines and contextualises the set of 35 cases of young migrants on which this study draws. The set of cases is first examined with respect to gender, age, middle school attended and graduation cohort. After that, the set of cases is contextualised in terms of socioeconomic background, parental professions, and migration history. Finally, the key aspects of the initially pursued pathway beyond middle school and a broad categorisation of transition experiences are discussed.

The set of cases contains 35 migrant students who were sampled in the two phases described above. The set can be summed up using descriptive statistics. As the tables show, genders are balanced, and ages range between 15 and 21 years (all measured at the time of the first interview).

Gender	#	%
Male	17	48.6%
Female	18	51.4%

Table 4: Comparison of gender of young people in set of cases

Age	
Average	17.91 years
Median	17 years
Range	15-21 years

Table 5: Comparison of age of young people in set of cases

All participants had attended middle schools in Jinshan District at some point in their school career. Moreover, the two main fieldwork schools, Javelin and Shield School, made up the largest share of participants as the next table indicates. One particular case was a girl who attended a private middle school in Jinshan District, Green Middle School. Furthermore, the graduation cohorts represented in the set stretch from 2012 to 2018. The rationale for including cases from different cohorts was that, in this way, I could examine different stages of the respective transition processes.

Middle school attended	#	%
Javelin Middle School (public)	21	60.0%
Shield Middle School (public)	13	37.1%
Green Middle School (private)	1	2.9%

Table 6: Comparison of middle schools attended by young people in set of cases

Cohorts (based on middle school graduation year)	#	%
2018	9	25.7%
2017	6	17.1%
2016	7	20.0%
2015	1	2.9%
2014	5	14.3%
2013	1	2.9%
2012	6	17.1%

Table 7: Cohorts of young people based on middle school graduation year

The families of the 35 young migrants came from 11 different provinces in China. 25.7 per cent were originally from Sichuan Province, 22.7 per cent from Anhui Province, followed by Shandong and Henan Province. The diversity of regions of origin in the set of cases maps onto the makeup of migrants in Shanghai more generally, as data from a 2011 report by the Shanghai Bureau of Statistics shows. All four most common provinces of origin (Anhui, Jiangsu, Henan, Sichuan) for migrants in Shanghai were also among the six most common provinces in this study, making up 61.5 per cent of migrants in Shanghai and 62.9 per cent in this set of cases.

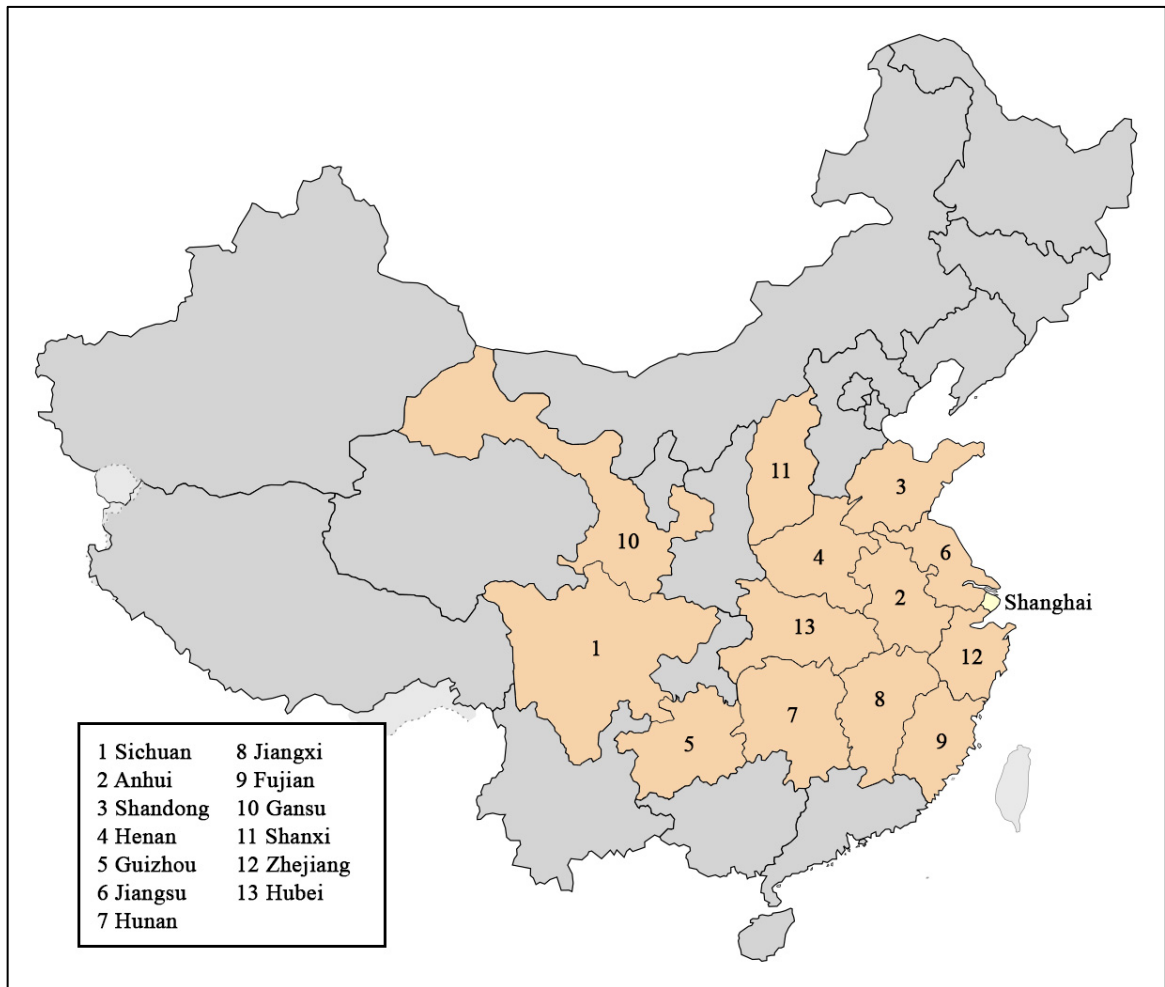


Figure 6: Map of provinces of People's Republic of China (includes disputed territories) (See appendix J; adapted by author)

Province of origin of migrants in set of cases			Province of origin of migrants in Shanghai (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2011)
	#	%	%
Sichuan	9	25.7%	7.0%
Anhui	8	22.9%	29.0%
Shandong	4	11.4%	4.2%
Henan	3	8.6%	8.7%
Guizhou	3	8.6%	*
Jiangsu	2	5.7%	16.8%
Hunan	2	5.7%	2.5%
Jiangxi	1	2.9%	5.4%
Fujian	1	2.9%	2.9%
Gansu	1	2.9%	*
Shanxi	1	2.9%	*
Zhejiang	0	0.0%	5.0%
Hubei	0	0.0%	4.5%
Others (incl. entries marked with *)	0	0.0%	14.0%

Table 8: Comparison of province of origin of families in set of cases with population of migrants in Shanghai

In order to contextualise the set of cases in my study in socioeconomic terms, I draw on a three-fold distinction grounded in the lived experience of migrant families in the social context that I examined. This approach contrasts with the fine-grained gradational approaches to social class that distinguish between numerous categories (see, for instance the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero schema, Erikson et al., 1979). The finely delineated occupational designations of gradational approaches do not correspond to the Chinese context, the lived experience of class, or the individuals' subjectivity and social action.

The migrants selected for participation in this study can be categorised in three main groups based on the autonomy afforded in the workplace, the degree of managerial

authority and required the skill level for accessing the occupation (i.e. whether college-level qualifications were needed; see also Lareau, 2011). 53.4 per cent could be categorised as having working-class parents, which included parents employed in routine and manual occupations with little autonomy and no managerial authority. Moreover, the required skill level for this group was relatively low since the professions involved work as factory workers, construction workers, truck drivers or cleaning personnel. The next largest group, at 28.6 per cent, were small-scale entrepreneurs who ran restaurants, embroidery shops, tearooms, machinery sales shops, and meat market stalls. These professions afforded a greater degree of autonomy, slightly higher authority, but did not require college-level qualifications. Lastly, 17.1 per cent were engaged in middle-class jobs which often involved higher managerial authority and often required college-level qualifications. Professions included IT supervisors, trading company owners or owners of multiple businesses.

Parental occupation of families in set of cases	#	%
Working-class	19	54.3%
Small-scale entrepreneurs	10	28.6%
Middle class	6	17.1%

Table 9: Comparison of parental occupations of families in set of cases

An advantage of using the above occupation-based categorisation was that income data for the families was unavailable in many cases, as young people did not know about their parents' exact income. However, occupation-based classifications of social background are more than just proxies for situations in which income data is not available as they allow us to gain insights into social relationships and inequalities "to which income is merely epiphenomenal" (Rose & Pevalin, 2003, p. 39). Moreover, occupation-based measures of socioeconomic background are more stable than income measures and thus

are a better indicator of lifetime earning profiles (Goldthorpe & McKnight, 2006; Rose & Pevalin, 2003).

Based on the above classification, it becomes evident that only six cases had a middle-class background. It can be questioned whether I reached perfect theoretical saturation of this category of migrants based on the relatively low number of participants. However, when taking into account that this study does not aim to compare primarily between social classes but instead aims to contrast three post-middle school pathways and that class is only one of the various factors in the mix, the given number of six cases becomes acceptable for the purpose of this study. I would argue that these cases did allow for gaining an in-depth understanding of this category and that it ensured reaching at least theoretical sufficiency, if not theoretical saturation (see above discussion of both terms).

As the following empirical chapter explains in greater detail (see chapter 4), the access to educational pathways in Shanghai was restricted through a point system that divided migrant families into three groups with corresponding narrow, medium or wide access.

Institutional access level¹³	#	%
“Narrow access” (more limited options)	8	22.9%
“Medium access”	27	77.1%
“Wide access” and borderline cases (more options)	See discussion below.	

Table 10: Comparison of institutional access to educational pathways for young people in set of cases

Given the large section of parents who engage in low-skill and medium-skill work in the set of cases and the heavy emphasis placed on parental qualifications in the point system governing access to public high schools for young migrants, it is unsurprising that few

¹³ See explanation in the introduction of the thesis.

qualified for wide access. The category of “wide access” was mainly relevant for migrants as a goal that they aspired to achieve. The most telling aspects about this “wide access” group were the challenges associated with attempting to qualify for it. While three participating families achieved the necessary 120 points, two of them stumbled over additional regulations (residency requirements and family planning policy compliance; see the following chapter for more details). I only encountered one case of a young person whose parents successfully qualified for “wide access”. However, this young person was unable to benefit from this access due to a mental disability and thus represented a special case that eventually had to be excluded from further consideration in this study. Nonetheless, collectively the three cases allowed me to obtain a good understanding of what the “wide access” category entails.

However, I am conscious of the fact that I might not have attained perfect theoretical saturation for this category (see discussion on theoretical sufficiency above). Building on this insight, the potential for further exploration through future research is discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis. However, my difficulty to saturate this category might also be seen an indicator of how challenging it is to obtain access to the “wide access” category in the context of schools with high percentages of migrants in outskirt districts such as Jinshan. As mentioned in the introduction, this is consistent with newly published data from the Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau which indicate that in 2017 and 2018 less than 0.5 per cent of the total number of migrants in the city were admitted via the scheme (Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, 2019).

How does the above categorisation of the social background of migrants in my set of cases compare with the wider population of migrants in Shanghai? In a survey of 1,623 migrant families and 498 local families with children in elementary schools in Shanghai,

Feng and Chen (2017) similarly categorised three types of family socioeconomic status. Instead of using professions, the scholars relied on monthly family income to distinguish the three groups, setting the limits at 3000 RMB (USD 433) and 5000 RMB (USD 723) (see table below). They set up their group distinctions around the average income of Shanghai migrants of 4000 RMB (USD 578) (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Monthly family income	Locals	Migrants in public elementary school	Migrants in migrant elementary school	Migrants overall (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics 2016)
Below 3000 RMB	26%	32%	53%	42.6%
3000-5000 RMB	35%	35%	35%	36.6%
Above 5000 RMB	39%	33%	15%	20.6%

Table 11: Comparison of monthly household income of migrant families in Shanghai (where not explicitly indicated, data is derived from Feng and Cheng (2017))

These income brackets are also represented in the statistics by the Shanghai Bureau of Statistics (2016). The average for all of Shanghai lies between the values of migrant families with children in public and migrant elementary schools in the study by Feng and Chen (2017). The percentages of the three-group categorisation based on parental professions within the set of cases are not dissimilar from those of migrant families with children in elementary schools found by Feng and Cheng (2017). Moreover, as Feng and Cheng (2017) note, migrant youths in this study also went to both migrant and public elementary schools before their public middle school attendance (see table below).

Elementary school in Shanghai	#	%
Attended migrant elementary school	23	65.7%
Attended public elementary school	9	25.7%
Attended elementary school in another province	1	2.9%
No response	2	5.7%

Table 12: Comparison of type of elementary school attended by young people in set of cases

Overall, these comparisons indicate that the socioeconomic background of migrants in my study maps onto that of migrants in Shanghai. The set of cases has thus been contextualised in terms of socioeconomic status.

Based on statistics by the China Labour Bulletin (2018) for all of China, most migrants tend to work in the sectors of manufacturing, construction and sales or trade. This tendency is also reflected in Shanghai census data from 2000 (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2002). My set of cases shows the same pattern as far as the occupations of migrant parents is concerned. Manufacturing, construction and trade or sales were the most prevalent categories, followed by hotel and catering as well as skilled work (see table below; starred entries indicate that this category did not exist in the statistics).

Parental professions by sector	China (China Labour Bulletin, 2018)	Shanghai (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2002)	Set of cases of this study
Manufacturing	28%	25.8%	19.1%
Construction	18%	19.6%	17.6%
Trade/Sales	12%	13.9%	16.2%
Hotel and catering	7%	6.6%	11.8%
Skilled work	*	3.8%	10.3%
Transport	7%	2.9%	7.4%
Household services	12%	*	1.5%
Agriculture/Fishery	*	7.3%	2.9%
Others (security services, hairdresser, health services etc.)	16%	20.1%	13.2%

Table 13: Comparison of parental professions by sector between migrants in China, migrants in Shanghai, and migrants in my set of cases

In terms of migration history, the set of cases in this study differs from the average migrant population in Shanghai. While, according to a survey conducted by the Shanghai Bureau of Statistics (2016), only 52.8 per cent of migrants in Shanghai had lived in the city for longer than six years, the set of cases shows a stronger emphasis on long-term stays, with 94.3 per cent who have stayed for longer than six years.

Length of stay in Shanghai at time of survey (years)	Shanghai (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics 2016)	Set of cases of this study
0.5-1	6.2%	0%
1-3	19.0%	0%
4-6	22.0%	5.7%
7-10	25.3%	42.9%
11-15	14.6%	28.6%
15+	12.9%	22.9%

Table 14: Comparison of length of stay in Shanghai between migrants in Shanghai and migrants in set of cases

This divergence can be explained by the composition of my set of cases. Since I only selected families of young people who were enrolled or had been enrolled in middle school for participation, their families had to have been in Shanghai for a more extended period. The purposeful selection of families explains the higher prevalence of longer-term stays in the set of cases in comparison with the broader migrant population in Shanghai.

This point on how long families as a whole had been in the city is related to the question of when young people themselves arrived in Shanghai. Most young people in the set of cases spent most of their lives in the city (see table below).

Migration to Shanghai at age (years)	#	%
As infants (0-1 years)	6	17.1%
As pre-schoolers (2-6 years)	9	25.7%
During elementary school (7-10 years)	18	51.4%
During middle school (11+ years)	2	5.7%
Average	6.1 years	

Table 15: Comparison of timing of moving to Shanghai relative to age of children in set of cases

The set of cases also represents divergent pathway decisions beyond middle school. As explained in the section above, a goal of sampling was variation in terms of chosen pathways. For vocational education, the pathway includes attending a vocational school in Shanghai or the home province, with the former option being more commonly observed. For high school, the pathway includes both returning to the home province to prepare for high school access and switching into private high schools (or semi-vocational high schools) in Shanghai, with the former again being more common. Lastly, for work, the pathway includes working directly and starting an on-the-job apprenticeship. Each of these pathways is discussed in more detail in chapter 5 to chapter 7, respectively.

Initial pathways beyond middle school pursued by young migrant in set of cases	#	%
Vocational education	20	57.1%
High school	11	31.4%
Work	4	11.4%

Table 16: Comparison of initial pathways beyond middle school pursued by young migrants in set of cases

This initial decision can be reached through a turbulent decision-making period or a smooth one (see next chapter). Moreover, the implementation stage of what to do after middle school can also be characterised by smoothness or turbulence. The classification of smooth and turbulent transitions follows the definitions outlined in the introduction chapter. The resulting patterns are summarised in the table below. They serve as an indicator of the variation in the collected data. TSS, for instance, stands for a turbulent decision-making period and a smooth implementation period, while STS stands for a smooth decision-making period, but a turbulent implementation stage followed once again by smoothness. These patterns are presented in more detail with the development of the grounded theory in chapter 8.

Transition patterns	#	%
Smooth-smooth-smooth (SSS)	13	37.1%
Turbulent-smooth-smooth (TSS)	11	31.4%
Smooth-turbulent-smooth (STS)	5	14.3%
Turbulent-turbulent-smooth (TTS)	2	5.7%
Turbulent-turbulent-turbulent (TTT)	4	11.4%

Table 17: Comparison of transition patterns in set of cases

In sum, these three sections have contextualised the fieldwork district within the rest of Shanghai, the schools within the broader educational landscape, and the set of cases within the migrant population in Shanghai. The sections have shown that in many

important respects the set of cases is typical for a group of migrants in Shanghai. While explicitly not a representative sample, the set of cases might still reveal insights about dynamics that might also affect other migrant groups in Shanghai or beyond (see discussion in concluding chapter).

Role of research assistant in data collection

My affiliation with Fudan University provided an opportunity to recruit a research assistant through my local Chinese supervisor, Professor Ren Yuan. He advertised the position in his undergraduate sociology class, and we soon recruited a qualified candidate. Before she started her new assignment, I ensured that she signed a confidentiality agreement (see appendix G) and had a good understanding of research ethics.

As a research assistant, she became involved in data collection. Conscious of my identity as a male researcher, I asked her to assist in interviews with female participants, some of whom would have otherwise not agreed to be interviewed. Over time, I grew increasingly confident in her interviewing skills. On one occasion, when one migrant student, whom I had already known for several months, and his mother were both available for interview at the same time, I asked her to interview the participant by herself while I interviewed the mother at a different table in the same café.

Ethical considerations and procedures

Following the ethics guidelines provided by the University of Oxford, I obtained written consent from both middle school principals before starting the first school term.

Moreover, I received written consent from participants who had reached the age of

majority, 18 years of age, or from parents/guardians for those who had not yet reached that age. In the case of minors, I also obtained their written assent. In cases when it was more appropriate, as previously outlined in the ethics documentation (CUREC Ref No: R51459/RE002 and R51459/RE003), I opted for oral consent and assent instead of written consent. All ethics documents used in the research project, including information sheets, consent forms, and assent forms in both English and Mandarin Chinese, can be found in the appendices of this thesis (see appendix A, B, C, D).

As briefly mentioned in the sampling section above, I decided to widen the sampling group during the fieldwork by including recent middle school graduates. This change required a renewed application for ethics approval from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford. Since approval was swiftly granted, the data collection could proceed smoothly, in line with the adapted research plan.

In sum, the section on data collection has shown that I followed systematic, appropriate and scientific procedures to collect the data required for this thesis.

3.3.2 Data analysis

This section reviews the steps in the data analysis process involved in constructivist grounded theory studies and how they were implemented in this thesis. The process involved initial and focussed coding, continuous memo-writing and adherence to the constant comparative method. Over time, the analysis moved into more conceptual and theoretical realms through diagramming, conceptualising and theorising. Although in this section, I present the data analysis procedures as a seemingly linear process, it is

important to note that, in line with grounded theory methodology, data analysis took place concurrently with data collection and often followed a circular pattern. The chart below outlines the analytical process, and the following sections refer back to it when describing the different stages.

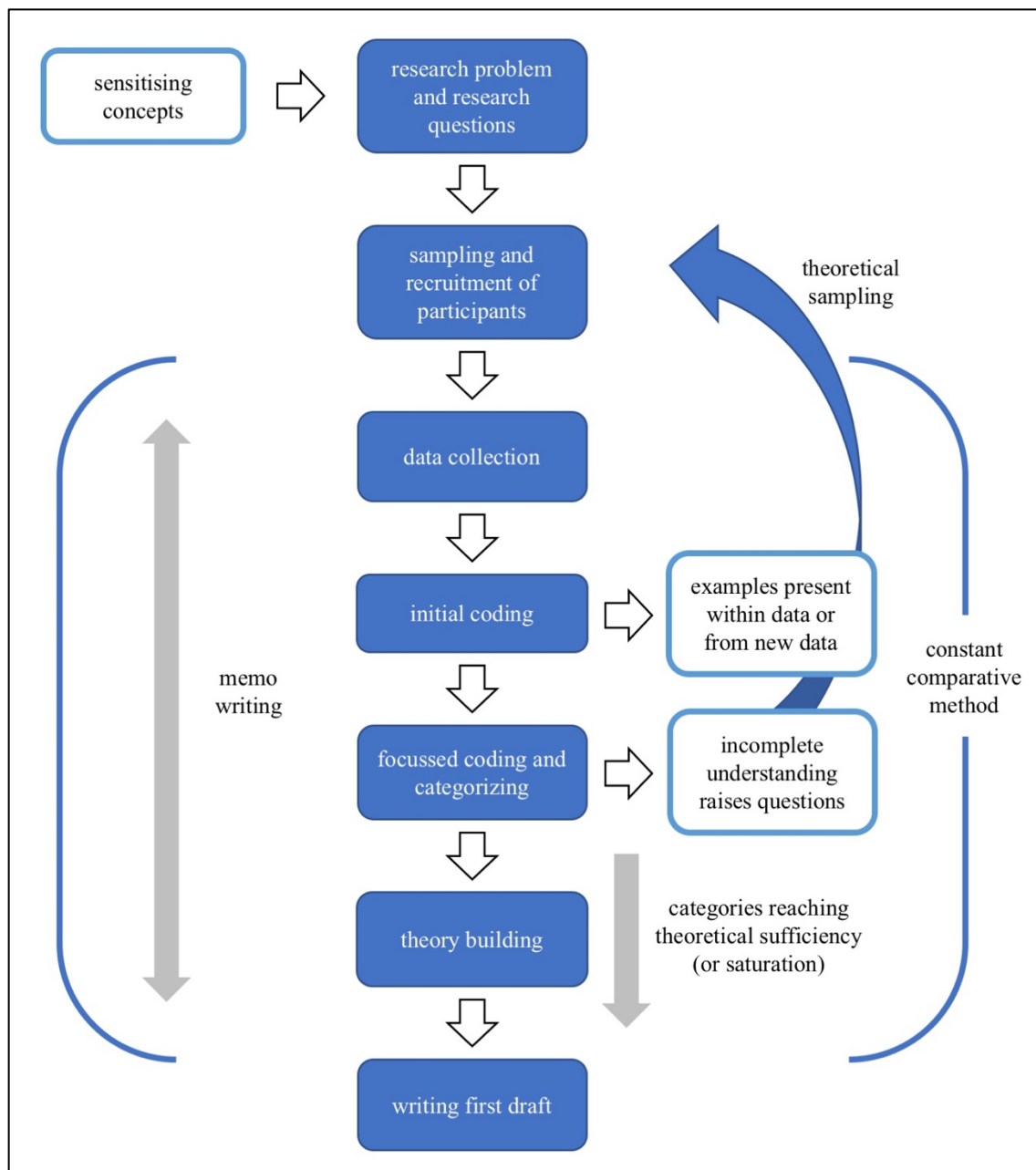


Figure 7: Research procedures of grounded theory (adapted from Tweed & Charmaz, 2012)

Transcribing

One stage of data analysis took place during the process of transcription. All interviews were transcribed into written Mandarin Chinese, using simplified characters. This approach was chosen in order to stay as close to the original data as possible and to be economical with time. Translating the over 1,000 pages of interview material into English would have unnecessarily increased the workload without analytical gains because I was capable of interpreting and analysing the original transcripts in Mandarin Chinese. During the transcription process, I took notes on interesting passages of interview transcripts and initiated discussions with my research assistant and, on occasion, my supervisors.

While I completed the majority of transcriptions by myself, my research assistant also helped with transcribing a number of interviews. Whenever I had doubts about a specific passage or turn of phrase, I marked it in the transcript, and we talked through it together at a later stage, which often deepened my understanding of my participants' point of view.

Interview transcripts were immediately anonymised, and real names of people and institutions replaced with code names. All data, including transcripts and audio recordings, were then stored in the secure Nexus SharePoint system provided by the IT Services at the University of Oxford. Files identifying participants and locations were encrypted using industry-standard password protection. Transcripts were then imported into ATLAS.ti, an established software package for qualitative data analysis. Similarly, field notes from ethnographic participant observation and memos based on reflections on the observations were added to the same package.

Initial coding

The next stage of analysis consisted of what grounded theory researchers refer to as ‘coding’ (Charmaz, 2006). Both interview transcripts and field notes were subjected to initial coding, that is, “categorising segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarises and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). I immediately began coding the data once I had collected it. The practice of categorising the data thus started early in the research process. Examples of an original transcript, associated codes, and a coding report for a single initial code are all included in the appendices of this thesis (see appendix K and L).

During the *initial coding* phase, the goal was to stick closely to the data and critically examine it by asking questions of it (for a list of analytical questions, see appendix I). The initial coding and first layer of analysis can be conducted on different unit levels: word-by-word, line-by-line or incident-by-incident (Charmaz, 2006). Interview transcripts were subjected to line-by-line coding, which is useful because it liberates the researcher “from becoming so immersed in respondents’ worldviews that [the researcher] accept[s] them without question.” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 51). Indeed, line-by-line coding helped to stay focussed on drawing directly on the actions and statements of my participants. It thereby reduced the tendency to apply preconceptions on the data and prioritised the data over pre-existing knowledge as suggested by grounded theory methodology (Ramalho et al., 2015).

By contrast, when initial coding was applied to observational data, such as my field notes, an analysis of incident-by-incident was more fruitful because the field notes already consisted of my own words (see Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). Whether coding interview transcripts or observational data, this stage revealed gaps in the data that sparked new

ideas. These realisations then informed and guided the next rounds of data collection, as described in the theoretical sampling process in the data collection section (Charmaz 2006). In general, I followed a few basic rules which were likely to improve the quality of initial coding. First, going through data with speed and spontaneity was useful to engage with it actively (Charmaz, 2014). Second, using gerund forms as codes (i.e. the “ing”-form of verbs, which points to performing actions) helped to stick closely to the data and focus on actions (Glaser, 1978). Occasionally, I used participants’ own words as codes in a process known as ‘in-vivo coding’. By employing participants’ imagery, this approach allowed me to convey a sense of the meanings young people attached to specific actions and processes. Moreover, by beginning the coding process with the words and actions of young people themselves, the study pursued a way of engaging with their experiences from their perspective (see the section on young people’s perspectives above).

The meanings and actions of participants have to be taken seriously for the grounded theory to represent an insider’s view. Researchers have to withstand the tendency to import professional jargon, representing an outsider’s view, to describe the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). The codes constructed during the first stage of analysis were closely tied to data, as they emerged from the data and took into account young people’s perspectives, often by using their own language as in-vivo codes.

For example, when a young migrant described her feelings associated with choosing between a public vocational school and a private semi-vocational high school, she used the Chinese expression “feeling torn” (*jiujie*). It became a relevant code and marked an instance of both using gerunds and in-vivo coding. The code indicated both the external pressures and the internal struggles associated with the pathway choice and helped to develop the vital category ‘deciding about pathways’ (see chapter 4). The Chinese expression of “paving the way” (*yi lu dou buhao le*) was another in-vivo code that

emerged from an interview with a young migrant. It indicated the perception of help received from his older sister in navigating and planning his school-to-work transition. While coding this instance as ‘social support’ might also have been feasible, the gerund and in-vivo code helped to retain elements of action and process in perceived social support (Charmaz, 2006).

Focussed coding

The two main steps of initial and focussed coding can be illustrated through an analogy of a skeleton. While initial coding provides the bones of the analysis, theoretical coding is a process of integration that “assembles the bones into a full skeleton” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43).

Once the initial coding phase progressed sufficiently, the analysis moved in the next stage of *focussed coding*, that is, “tak[ing] the most useful initial codes and test[ing] them against extensive data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). Focussed codes are “more directed, selective, and conceptual than initial codes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57; see also Glaser, 1978). The goal during this stage is to synthesise previous codes to capture the meaning of larger sections of data. Throughout this phase, the researcher keeps comparing data with data and codes with codes. This process is often circular; it can, for instance, involve returning to previously coded data and reviewing it by applying newer codes. As I undertook focussed coding, I moved through interviews, field notes and memories of the fieldwork experience and engaged in comparisons of young people’s experiences, actions and interpretations of what happened during their school-to-work transitions. For instance, with the code ‘following one’s interests’, I looked at all instances when young migrants planned and discussed their future pathways. I compared how they talked about

their experiences. The comparisons helped me to refine the code and highlighted the degree of active involvement or disconnection of young people in the process. It also led me to explore the dimensions of the negotiations involved, which later helped to distinguish different dimensions of interests, such as academic, professional, social, and spatial interests. I moved on to develop the initial code of ‘following one’s interests’ into a category that later contributed to the concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ (see chapter 8).

Categories are themes or variables that seek to capture in more abstract terms what participants have said. Charmaz (2014) defines categorising as “the analytic step in grounded theory of selecting certain codes as having overriding significance or abstracting common themes and patterns in several codes into an analytic concept.” (p. 341). Early categories in my study were seen as provisional since the analysis remained open to further theoretical possibilities, as grounded theory methodology suggests. Continuous comparisons and conceptualisations led to integration and synthesis of the first codes. At this stage of the analysis, initial codes of ‘dropping out of high school’ and ‘dropping out of vocational school’ were, for instance, synthesised with ‘changing jobs’ into a broader category of ‘experiencing turbulence’ (see appendix L for more information on the example of ‘job-hopping’ as a code within this category). The synthesis pointed to similarities between processes that underlie the experiences of turbulence on different pathways.

Memo-writing

Whenever appropriate and opportune, I wrote memos to capture my thoughts and reflections on the data and questions that arose during the analysis. Memo-writing is an

essential stage in grounded theory as it provides an opportunity to pause and reflect without the pressure of producing any final written output. It facilitates the transition from data collection to writing drafts. As Strauss & Corbin (1990) note, this process is of crucial importance:

Memos provide a firm base for reporting on the research and its implications. If a researcher omits the memoing and moves directly from coding to writing, a great deal of conceptual detail is lost or left undeveloped. (p. 10)

Indeed, through memo-writing, I continued to explore the similarities and differences of what I constructed from the data. I established potential categories and the codes they subsumed through memo-writing. ATLAS.ti allows users to link memos to the relevant passages in the interview transcripts or field notes. Over time, this useful function allows the researcher to build a network of links between the original data and increasingly analytical memos. This process served as a basis for theorising explained in the next sections.

Constant comparative method

The constant comparative method in grounded theory is “a method of analysis that generates successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with code, code with code, code with category, category with category, and category with concept.” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342). The method encourages researchers to check their conceptualisations against each other and constantly evaluate whether they are supported by the data. As far as this thesis is concerned, the entire data analysis process was guided by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The approach required that I continually move between collected data and on-going analysis to guide the inquiry and future data collection.

For instance, the process included comparing incidents to other similar incidents (such as the turning point of dropping off pathways in the realms of work or education) to identify and determine similarities and varying conditions. Moreover, the method involved relating emerging concepts to further incidents in order to engage in “theoretical elaboration, saturation and densification of concepts” (Holton, 2007, p. 278). Memo-writing, as explained above, and diagramming, as explained below, facilitated this process.

The process of constant comparison and coding also challenged my taken-for-granted or hidden assumptions. It prompted me to think of new avenues to interpret the data.

Moreover, I was led to see seemingly familiar aspects in a new light. For instance, I had assumed for most young people to strive for access to the academic track into universities and that this would be regarded as a component of what young people saw as “successful” school-to-work transitions. During an early interview with Liu Jun (interviewee 6; see chapter 7 for more details) who had obtained a well-paid general manager position in an emerging chain of gyms without having a university degree or even a high school degree, I came to revisit my previous assumption. I realised that following the academic track into universities was not considered necessary for a high degree of satisfaction and perceived success of the transition from the perspective of young people.

Peer debriefings

A further step in the research process that helped with coding, memo-writing and the constant comparative method was peer debriefings. Schwandt (1997) describes peer debriefings as a process during which researchers engage in interactions with dependable

and informed peers who help to reflect on the research process. While debriefings can be a challenging experience for researchers, they can nonetheless be beneficial (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The utility of these sessions stems from the fact that they might bring to the fore aspects of the research process that were previously only implicit in the researcher's mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For this thesis, I engaged in peer debriefings with my research assistant. During the early stages of the fieldwork, the debriefings helped to question my pre-existing beliefs that shaped my initial interpretations. At the later stages, when the first analytical scaffoldings began to emerge, I found the debriefings with her very insightful. In many conversations, she helped me to seek meaning, probed my biases, and helped to clarify interpretations. The interactions with the research assistant helped to keep the analysis relevant to the original social and cultural context. A further context for peer debriefing was the research group on "Migration and Family" at Fudan University. I was able to present and discuss my data collection and initial analysis in this group with several graduate students working on sociological topics within the same field. These interactions similarly contributed to reflections in the research process and challenged my preconceptions.

Diagrams

During the stage of focussed coding, I made use of a software function called "networks" in ATLAS.ti in order to further probe and explore the relationships between various codes. The software allowed me to develop diagrams that visualised the various linkages between focussed codes and emerging categories. These diagrams served two purposes. First, they allowed me to obtain an overview of the numerous codes and their relationships. Second, they provided a starting point for further conceptualising by using

the “comment” function in ATLAS.ti that permits the user to clarify concepts and define them in relationship to one another.

Creating diagrams happened concurrently with the process of focussed coding and developing analytical categories. I engaged in numerous iterations of sorting codes into diagrams, exploring linkages and discovering patterns. This sorting process was rendered more complicated since I identified multiple processes and several categories. This challenge can occur when the process is not “clear-cut” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17). In the end, it proved useful to approach the process of diagramming with a mindset of Occam’s razor and reduce unnecessary complexity that did not prove to be of explanatory value (Schaffer, 2015).

Constructing a Grounded Theory

What is theory?

The eventual purpose of the analytical process in a grounded theory study is constructing a theory, or an “abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4). Often scholars distinguish two types of theory, substantive and formal theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While a substantive theory provides an understanding that accounts for phenomena in a substantive or empirical area of study, formal theory explains phenomena that can be applied in a wide range of fields (Glaser & Strauss, 1971). The results of most grounded theory studies are substantive middle-range theories, rather than “grand” formal theories (Creswell, 2013; see also Shanahan & Longest, 2009). Indeed, the constructivist turn in grounded theory questions the notion of creating general abstract theories, and instead suggests that grounded theories lead to ‘situated knowledges’ (Charmaz, 2009). While substantive grounded theories have the potential to

be developed into a formal theory through further conceptual integration and abstraction, they can also be purposeful in furthering our understanding of phenomena by themselves (Lempert, 2007).

This study constructs a substantive theory of school-to-work transitions of young Chinese migrants that incorporates their experiences of critical moments (or turning points). The theory emerged from a particular context and is chiefly concerned with the perspectives of young people (see the section on young people's perspectives above). However, insights generated through this theory might also hold across wider sections of society in China and beyond, but this requires further research as the final chapter of this thesis suggests.

It is useful to consider the important distinction between description and theory. While description “draws on ordinary vocabulary to convey ideas about things, people, and places.” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 53), theory can be understood as “a set of well-developed categories (themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some phenomenon” (Hage, 1972, p. 34). While description refers to the way participants render their experiences, theory is abstract and facilitates understanding (Charmaz, 2006).

Depending on whether the goal of a qualitative study is description or theorising, different procedures become relevant. With the explicit goal of theory generation, grounded theory studies face the risk that the analytic level and theorising are not sufficiently developed.

As Holton (2007) put it:

While the descriptive findings of a qualitative research study are most certainly valuable, they do not provide a conceptual abstraction. A grounded theory must offer a conceptually abstract explanation for a latent pattern of behaviours (an issue or concern) in the social setting under study. (p. 272)

What shape can the final result of a grounded theory study take? The presentation of a grounded theory can be a narrative statement explaining the functioning of the theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a series of hypotheses or propositions (Creswell & Brown, 1992) or even a visual picture illustrating and summarising the theory (Morrow & Smith, 1995). In this thesis, the final output is presented in a narrative and accompanied by illustrating diagrams (see chapter 8).

How to construct theory?

Theory construction involves forming abstract concepts and exploring how they are related (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b). How concepts are developed is a crucial part of theorising, especially in grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b). By moving from initial into focussed coding, grounded theory researchers add layers of abstraction (Charmaz, 2006). Further abstraction is achieved by developing central categories into concepts. Those categories that best account for the data and that convey “substantial analytic weight” thus become concepts of the theory (Charmaz, 2006, p. 186).

Locke (2007) suggests that theorising can start by reflecting on the question of “what is going on here?” because it prompts researchers to move from the individual words on the page to the situations to which they point. However, she concedes that the process can be characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty (Locke, 2007). Charmaz (2006) highlights that theorising involves “stopping, pondering and rethinking anew” (p. 135). The theorising process is not mechanical but instead characterised by “playfulness and wonder” as it involves remaining open to the unexpected (p. 136).

There are differences in the role of concepts in the process of theorising between what Charmaz (2006) calls the ‘objectivist’ and the ‘constructivist’ tradition. While objectivists

understand concepts as variables that serve to predict and explain, constructivists view concepts as interpretive frames that help to further an “abstract understanding of relationships” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 139-140). In other words, theorising in the interpretive research tradition emphasises understanding rather than explanation (Creswell, 2013). This interpretive view bodes well with the approach of symbolic interactionism in which actions are the focal point of analysis (Charmaz 2006).

How is theorising accomplished in this study?

The study culminates in my own theorising of the school-to-work transition experiences of young Chinese migrants, as seen primarily from their perspectives, which is presented as a substantive theory in the grounded theory chapter at the end of the thesis (see chapter 8). I developed theoretical concepts through the iterative process of moving back and forth between the data and increasingly abstract categorisations of it. As described above, initial coding provided the grounding to identify conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Researchers have acknowledged that there is a risk involved in settling on categories too early in the data collection (Ford, 2010). However, in this study, the identification of categories remained tentative until very late in the analytical process, when it became clear that these categories were accounting for large parts of the data and were suitably connected to other categories. The theoretical concept that was developed in this thesis was ‘interest-environment fit’ and its links to motivation. The theory presented in chapter 8 brings the theoretical concept into an abstract and coherent whole. In sum, this second part of the chapter has shown that the data analysis followed systematic, rigorous procedures established by a long sociological tradition of qualitative grounded theory research.

3.4 Engaging in reflexivity

3.4.1 What reflexivity is and why it matters

This final part of the methodology chapter addresses the issue of ‘reflexivity’ which is recognised as a critical feature of qualitative research (Morse et al., 2002). It is typically understood as critically examining the role of the researcher in the research process (Dowling, 2006; Gouldner, 1971). According to Dowling (2006), reflexivity has two interpretations; one as a *concept* and one as a *process*. When seen as a *concept*, reflexivity refers to researchers being conscious of their active involvement in the research process (Lambert et al., 2010). In other words, researchers have to recognise that they do not observe social processes from the outside, but instead form part of the social world that they investigate (Ackerly & True, 2010; Morse, 1991; Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). When regarded as a *process*, reflexivity refers to a continuous probing of researchers’ values and to acknowledging at every stage of the research process how researchers’ pre-existing knowledge, positions in society, and social background shape the investigation (Parahoo, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2007). The “stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study — the community, the organisation or the participant group” is also referred to as ‘positionality’ (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

The goal of engaging in reflexivity is to reveal the “influence that the researchers exert, either intentionally or unintentionally, on the findings” (Jootun et al., 2009, p. 42). A further aim is “to make the relationship between and the influence of the researcher and the participants explicit” (p. 45). In order to achieve these goals, reflexivity cannot be a one-off event. Instead, in line with the conception of reflexivity as a process explained above, it should feature continuously in all steps of the research process (van de Riet,

2012). Moreover, since both the positionality and the researcher-participant relationship evolve, reflexivity has to remain fluid and flexible.

Recognising the potential impact of the researcher's background and the need for reflexivity does not imply that the research process is completely predetermined by the researcher's positionality (Palaganas et al., 2017). Instead, challenging our preconceptions about the social world "enriches the research process and its outcome" (p. 427). Reflexivity invites researchers to explicitly reflect on their background and how it might have impacted on the research process. Palaganas et al. (2017) demand that it should become a "duty of every researcher to reveal and share these reflexivities, not only for learning purposes but towards enhancing theory building" (p. 428). The following section thus explores how my background and identity might have influenced the research process.

3.4.2 How reflexivity is related to this research project

In the following, I reflect on how my own social background and identity as a white, male doctoral researcher from Germany might have influenced the three stages of the research process: planning, implementation, and data analysis.

During the planning stage, the selection of the topic was shaped in important ways by my academic background with formal training in economics, philosophy, and sociology as well as my prior research experience in China. My fieldwork in China for my master's thesis on migrant labour NGOs was especially influential. During this research stint in the Yangtze Delta, I had heard from Chinese social workers that many migrant labourers with whom they interacted worried about their children's future pathways in the cities. These

personal experiences impacted the selection of the research focus for this thesis.

Moreover, my interest in the topic of school-to-work transitions might be related to my own background. I transitioned in and out of full-time work twice; once after high school, when I started to work in a kindergarten for one year as part of the German social service, and a second time after my master's program, when I was hired by a China-focussed consultancy. Based on these experiences, I was keenly aware of the uncertainty and potential turbulence associated with the transition and the value of social networks in dealing with various struggles. Moreover, my proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, acquired during a 14-months stint in Nanjing, certainly played a role in inclining me to study the phenomenon of school-to-work transitions in this linguistic context rather than elsewhere where I would have faced higher language barriers. Furthermore, the selection of the research methodology, constructivist grounded theory, was affected by my own epistemological stance, the belief that knowledge is co-constructed between researchers and participants rather than objectively discovered (see sections above).

During the implementation stage of the fieldwork, I acknowledge disparities in power and status resulting from my positionality related to my personal characteristics, such as gender, age, language use, country of origin, and social class (Howard, 1995). Scholars have discussed the critical question of how power is distributed in the research process (Grover, 2004). Especially when working with children and young people, issues of power are of particular relevance (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Panter-Brick 2002).

Esterberg (2002) stresses that “researchers need to address the power relationships that are embedded in research” (p. 48). I thus acknowledge my personal and institutional characteristics as a white, male, middle-class, foreign researcher who arrived from an advanced economy and was affiliated with two widely known academic institutions.

These aspects of my identity as a researcher had the potential to create distance between

the young migrant participants and me. Such distance was also initially increased by middle school teachers' introducing me as a new assistant English teacher in the two main fieldwork schools.

Moreover, I noticed how my identity affected the data that I collected. One example was that my identity as a foreigner changed the way that young people narrated their stories and explained their circumstances and decisions. My research assistant noticed that they would often add more detail, assuming that I did not understand cultural nuances. They would add explanations such as "in China, we typically..." or "I don't know how this is in your country, but here we...". Therefore, occasionally, my identity might have induced young people to assume my point of view and explain their circumstances to a perceived outsider. A second example was the reaction to interview requests by some female participants in the study. My identity as a male adult often resulted in initial hesitation to agree to interviews.

I sought to address and mitigate some of these issues as far as possible. First, during interviews, I attempted to address the existing power disparity by introducing my research assistant to the interview context who was female and a native Chinese. Especially with female participants, her presence bridged existing power gaps and reduced shyness of participants caused by my identity as a male adult. Moreover, as proponents of child-centred research suggest equalising power can be achieved by handing responsibility for aspects of the research process over to young people (Barron, 2000; Bemak, 1996; Grover, 2004; Thomas & O'Kane, 2000). Therefore, during interviews, I sometimes allowed young people to chair the sessions which meant that they were in charge of asking clarifying questions of their peers and probing further, which worked exceptionally well on several occasions.

Second, whenever possible, I purposefully attempted to assume the role of a learner, looking up to young people as experts or teachers. This stance is also suggested by Bemak (1996) in working with young people. The linguistic aspect of my identity as a foreigner allowed me to achieve this position. I was able to speak Mandarin Chinese fluently but still made occasional mistakes. My errors put migrant youths into a position where they could correct me and explain things to me, which created a genuine power reversal, at least concerning language proficiency.

Moreover, as the fieldwork progressed, I began to transcend the category of an assistant teacher which I had been assigned at the beginning when other teachers introduced me. Instead, I assumed a closer and more ambiguous position in the field by sitting in the classroom with the students for most classes (only rarely appearing as a teacher), participating in chemistry experiments, pottery classes, and sports exercises in the same way as migrant students. My relatively young age also created familiarity with participants, as it located me closer to migrant students than to most of their teachers. The reduced age gap allowed me to build rapport with the young participants through the shared identity as young people.

Third, I was conscious of the way my physical appearance, including the way I dressed, impacted the research setting. As Sue and Zane (1987) highlight about working with children, formal dress can create distance by demanding ascribed credibility in contrast to achieved or earned credibility through social interactions with the participants. Moreover, wearing expensive items, such as watches or jewellery, can also create “unnecessary distractions and barriers” in the field setting (Bemak, 1996, p. 150). I thus paid attention to dressing casually in unbranded T-shirts or jumpers, depending on the weather, and in inconspicuous colours. I also avoided carrying any luxury items.

Finally, it is important to stress that while these measures might have reduced the social distance between the young migrant participants and me, they did not nullify the evident difference in status and power. These differences still need to be acknowledged.

During the data analysis stage (which concurred with much of the fieldwork, as described above), I found my pre-existing beliefs in the ability of young people to overcome challenging situations by drawing on social support challenged. I realised that my motivation to tell encouraging stories about agency and overcoming constraints had to be consciously checked. This optimism with regards to young people's agency (perhaps influenced by my personality and social background) was not always warranted and had to be examined self-reflexively.

Finally, my hopes for the study are also shaped by my identity. The development of co-constructed knowledge in the form of a grounded theory which informs a deeper understanding of school-to-work transitions of young Chinese migrants is linked to my personal aspiration for the research to help a disadvantaged population in the longer run. These personal hopes are checked by the limited extent to which foreign researchers and publications can affect Chinese social policy.

In sum, in this third part, I have reflected on how my identity and social background have impacted on the different stages of the research process. While this section can only provide a snapshot summary of the reflexivity involved in this research project, it highlighted that I understand reflexivity as a process that permeates all stages of research.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the theoretical rationale for choosing qualitative grounded theory methodology in general and the strand of constructivist grounded theory in particular. Moreover, it explained the practical steps of how the methodology was applied during data collection and data analysis. Finally, it critically discussed the issue of reflexivity and presented my reflections on how my identity as a researcher impacted on the research process.

Chapter 4: The Context and Process of Decision-Making about Pathways

4.1 Introduction

The young people I met in China pursued three major pathway options beyond middle school: the academic track, vocational school paths and entering the job market.

However, underneath the surface of each of these three high-level distinctions, young migrants also differed from each other in the choices that they made as they navigated the constraints posed by the institutional context of Shanghai. These severe constraints notwithstanding, even those young people most constrained by the institutional structure still actively made choices. In this regard, my analysis differs from that of Ling (2020) who maintains that a young migrant in the constrained institutional context of Shanghai was the “antithesis of a choosing individual” (p. 113). The basis for my position is that the process leading to a pathway decision needs to be examined as a *decision-making* process. The process of making a decision to pursue a given pathway, in turn, comprises the two subprocesses of ‘gathering information’ and ‘negotiating pathways’. These two processes interact, sometimes bringing about turbulence in the form of conflict and unexpected shocks during the decision-making stage. While dynamic stress process models focussing on vulnerabilities suggest that turbulence in this early stage of deciding could be seen as explaining turbulence in the subsequent stage of the school-to-work transition (e.g. Hammen, 2006, Liu & Alloy, 2010), my data indicates that this does not seem to be the whole story. Instead, my data leads me to propose an alternative concept, that of ‘interest-environment fit’, to demonstrate how events and experiences in the

decision-making process and its outcome, the pathway decision, can explain persistence in education or work in the post–middle school graduation stage. This chapter’s exploration of sources of diversity in migrant youths’ decision-making processes sets the scene for the following three chapters. These following chapters examine how the interest-environment fit mechanism manifests itself in the lives of young migrants on the academic track, the vocational school track and the work track, respectively.

4.2 Institutional constraints for migrants due to division into three groups

In principle, young people in China have access to three broad pathways when they reach the end of middle school. They can choose between an academic track, leading to high school and potential university admission, a vocational school track, and a work track (see figure 8 below).¹⁴

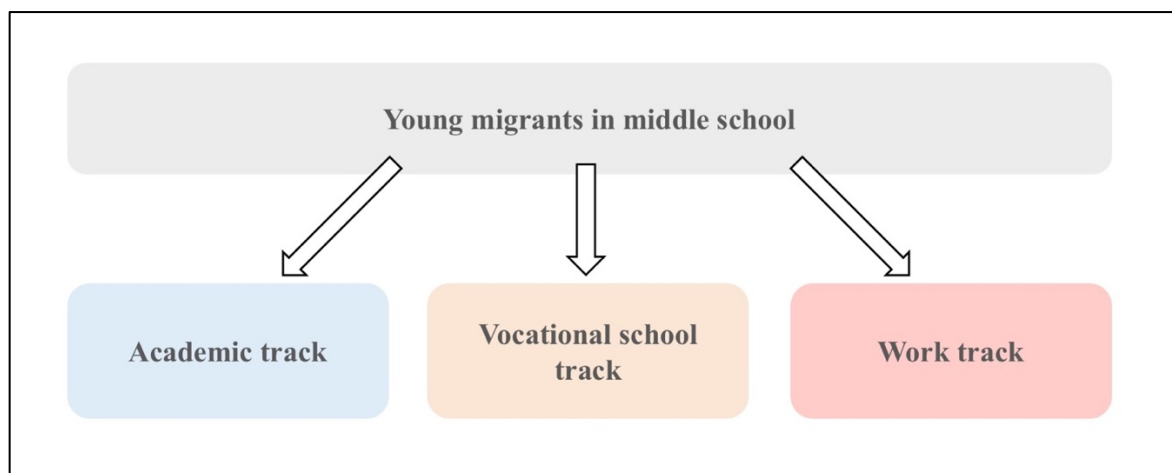


Figure 8: Major pathways potentially available to young migrants

¹⁴ As mentioned in the introduction chapter, unemployment immediately after middle school was not an empirical reality for the 35 cases examined in this thesis and therefore not explicitly discussed.

Underneath the surface of this high-level distinction between pathways, the empirical data on actual choices made by young people in this study illustrates the diversity of options available to them (see figure 9 below). First, all major pathways comprise an option of returning to the home province. Moreover, for the academic track, private schooling options are also available in Shanghai. However, private schools do not offer access to public universities in China. Graduates from these schools would have to leave China for university. Second, some young migrants enter private semi-vocational high schools, which can be understood as combining elements from both the academic and the vocational school pathway. Third, the vocational school track can be subdivided into standard four-year programmes and adult education programmes; the latter are usually considered to be of inferior quality.

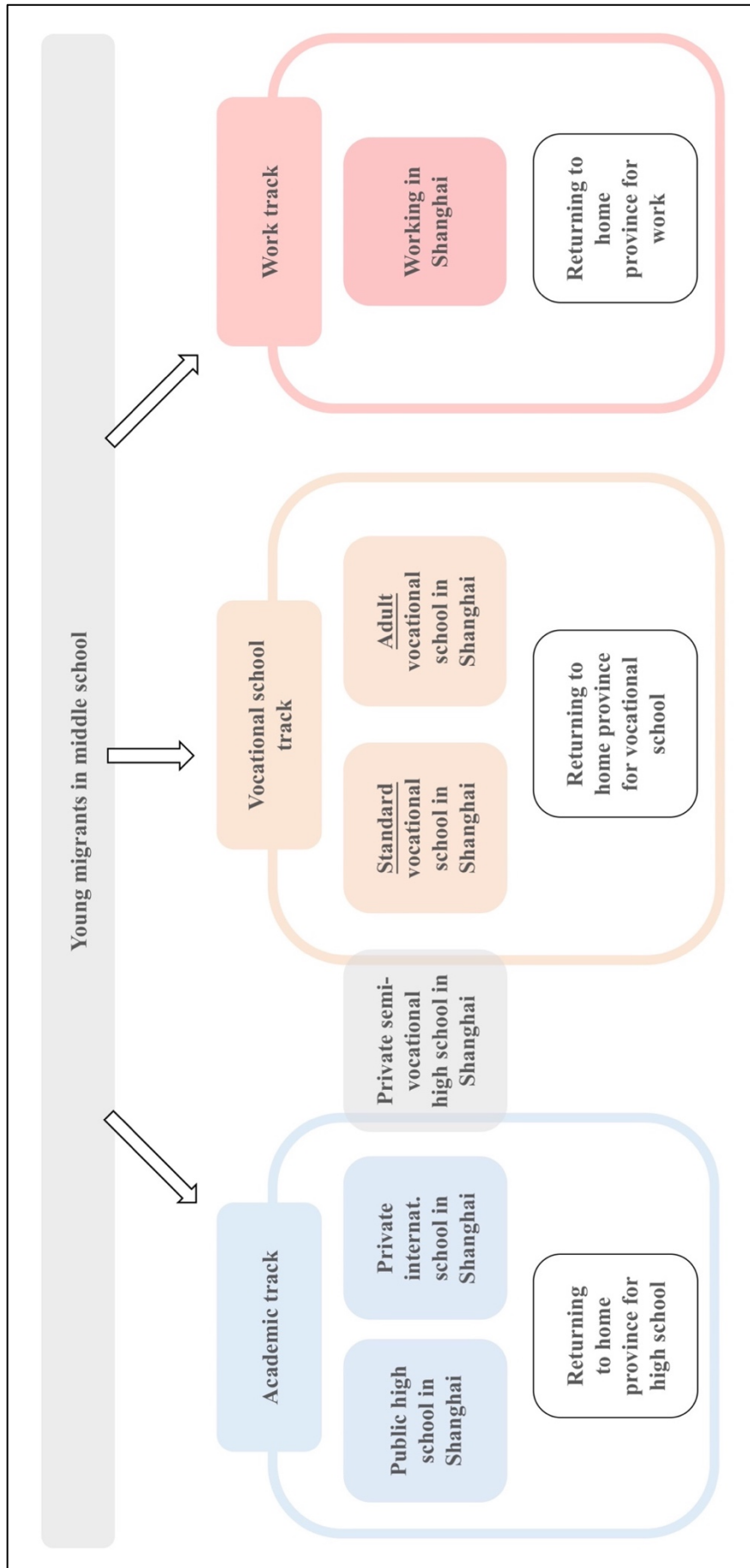


Figure 9: Sub-options associated with major pathways

However, the institutional structure in Shanghai constrains the choices of young migrants. Through a system of stratified exclusion, the municipal government divides migrants into three groups based on a range of desirability criteria, as explained in more detail below. Group membership has consequences for young people in terms of educational access. What does this system of stratified exclusion mean in practice in my set of cases? Migrants with “wide access” can choose among all three major pathway options in Shanghai.¹⁵ Their range of options is equivalent to that depicted in figure 9 above. By contrast, migrants with “medium access” are excluded from public high schools in Shanghai. Lastly, migrants in the “narrow access” group are the most constrained. These migrants are excluded from *both* public high schools in Shanghai and standard four-year vocational school programmes.

Beyond educational access, group membership also changes the graduation experience of young migrants in Shanghai. In particular, membership affects exam participation and the information provided to migrants through middle schools. First, young migrants in the “wide access” group are asked to sit a general graduation exam and the full standardised high school admission exam (*zhongkao*) along with local Shanghainese students. The standard *zhongkao* covers five subjects (Mathematics, English, Chinese, Physics, and Chemistry). While the general graduation exam is not typically considered important, participating in the *zhongkao* is crucial since it entitles young people to apply to public high schools of their choosing. The *zhongkao* is a highly competitive exam that facilitates admission to all public high schools and all vocational schools. Second, young migrants in the “medium access” group are asked to sit the same general graduation exam at the

¹⁵ In naming the three migrant groups, I choose terminology that represents the perspective of the young people involved. In other words, young people with “wide access” had access to a wider set of options and pathways, while young people with “narrow access” had a more constrained set of options.

end of middle school, which is equally not considered essential for their future academic admissions and only of marginal importance for work applications. Additionally, they are entitled to participate in the same standardised high school admission exam as locals and members of the “wide access” group. The critical difference is that their *zhongkao* only covers three subjects (Mathematics, English, and Chinese) instead of five. This exam is often referred to as the *waidi zhongkao*, which can be translated as “migrant” or “outsider” *zhongkao*. This standardised exam facilitates access to all vocational school programmes open to migrants. Third, young migrants in the “narrow access” group are only asked to sit the general graduation exam. This exam does not provide them with the credentials to enter vocational schools in Shanghai, except for adult vocational school programmes. In my set of cases, these programmes were only offered at one local vocational school, the Gastronomy School. Ties between middle schools and nearby vocational schools are typical in Shanghai, and the Gastronomy School is acknowledged as a common destination for both migrants and local students with poor grades. The table below summarises how membership to a “wide”, “medium” or “narrow access” group is decided, and what consequences membership has for young people.

Migrant Group	How group membership is decided	What consequences group membership has for educational access	How members of this group graduate from middle school	What information is made available towards middle school graduation
Narrow access (migrants with fewer options)	If parents and children do not qualify for medium access or wide access (see below), their children fall into this group.	Young migrants are excluded from public high schools and all standard four-year vocational school programmes in Shanghai. They only have access to adult education programmes offered by a very limited number of schools (e.g. the Gastronomy School).	Young migrants are asked to sit a general graduation exam at the end of middle school, which is generally not considered essential for future academic admissions. They are excluded from the more difficult and standardised high school admission exam (<i>zhongkao</i>).	Young migrants receive a short briefing targeted explicitly at their group, which includes a presentation of one vocational school (the Gastronomy School). They also receive a booklet with mostly inaccessible vocational school options.
Medium access	If at least one parent holds a valid Shanghai Residence Card, and the student attended middle school in Shanghai for two consecutive years, their children fall into this group.	Young migrants have access to vocational school programmes in Shanghai. However, they are excluded from all public high schools in Shanghai.	Young migrants are asked to sit the general graduation exam and a limited standardised exam that covers three instead of five subjects (sometimes referred to as <i>waidi zhongkao</i>). This <i>waidi zhongkao</i> only facilitates admission into vocational schools.	Young migrants receive presentations from two local vocational schools (i.e. the Gastronomy School and the Petrochemical Academy) and a booklet containing vocational school options.
Wide access (migrants with more options)	If at least one parent holds a valid Shanghai Residence Card and achieves a cumulative score of at least 120 points on a defined scale (see table 19 below), their children fall into this group.	Young migrants have access to both vocational schools and public high schools in Shanghai.	Young migrants are asked to sit the general graduation exam and the full standardised high school admission exam that covers five subjects (<i>zhongkao</i>). The <i>zhongkao</i> facilitates access to public high schools and vocational schools.	Young migrants receive the full high school and vocational school briefing in the large auditorium of their middle school and a booklet with both high school and vocational school options.

Table 18: Distinction between three migrant groups and consequences of group membership

In order to contextualise this system of stratified exclusion, it is important to note its historical development. Previously, *all* migrant children¹⁶ were categorically excluded from *all* public elementary and *all* public middle schools in Chinese cities. The “Provisional Act Regarding the Education of School-Age Children of the Floating Population,” drafted in 1996 by the Ministry of Education recognised the obligation of public schools to accept migrant children with local Residence Cards. Additionally, in 2006 the national government issued the revised Compulsory Education Law which re-emphasised that host governments in the cities were responsible for the schooling of migrant children. However, practice diverged from this legal principle, and migrant children continued to face systematic exclusion (Lan, 2014). Against the backdrop of previously even more severe discrimination, the current system in Shanghai that allows migrant students to access public middle schools and *in principle* (provided that their parents pass the 120-point mark) even public high schools can be regarded as the result of a gradual process of institutional opening for migrant families.

This process of opening is contentious, especially the introduction of the “wide access” category. Before 2013, any migrant student in Shanghai, that is, any student not holding a Shanghai *hukou*, was categorically excluded from proceeding into Shanghai’s public high schools. In other words, these students encountered an insurmountable barrier upon reaching the end of their middle school career in Shanghai. In 2012, Zhan Haite, a 15-year-old female migrant student, gained nation-wide attention by protesting through her microblog about how the *hukou* system limits migrant youths’ educational opportunities. In an unusual move, she was even allowed to write a newspaper column in the state-controlled newspaper *China Daily* and became a *cause célèbre* through her resistance

¹⁶ Migrant status of children is determined through the Chinese *hukou* system and the status of their parents within this system (see introduction chapter).

(Cohen, 2012; Zhan, 2012). A few months later in 2013, Shanghai introduced a new policy which set up a point system that would facilitate access to public high schools in Shanghai for migrant youths whose parents succeeded in accumulating the necessary number of points, described as the “wide access” category above. This new policy works like a green card system in that it grants high school access to children who have at least one parent who qualifies for 120 points on a defined scale. The point scheme represents the city government’s desirability criteria, such as an elevated educational background and high tax contributions (Shanghai Municipal People’s Government, 2015). These criteria and their associated points are listed in the following table.

How to gain points according to the Shanghai 120-point policy
Pre-requisite: applicants must hold valid Shanghai Residence Cards (<i>juzhuzheng</i>)
1) Age (max. 30 points):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant’s age is between 56-60 years: +5 points • +2 points for every year that applicant’s age is below 56 years
2a) Educational background ^(a) (max. 110 points):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced vocational degree (<i>dazhuan</i>): +50 points • Bachelor’s experience: +60 points • Bachelor’s experience and graduation certificate: +90 points • Master’s degree: +100 points • PhD degree: +110 points
2b) Professional skills ^(a) (max. 140 points); must be acquired while working in Shanghai:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary qualification: +15 points (e.g. assistant technician) • Intermediate qualification: +30 points (e.g. technician) • Advanced qualification: +60 points (e.g. assistant engineer, assistant professor) • Technician qualification: +100 points (e.g. economist, engineer, lecturer) • Senior technician qualification: +140 points (e.g. senior economist, senior engineer) • When applying for the latter two, social-insurance-paying wage must have been above average Shanghai wage for six months in the past 12 months.
3) Work history:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • +3 points for every full year of social-insurance-paying work
4) Special circumstances which can add points:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurial talent^(b): +120 points

- Innovation talent^(b): +120 points
- Urgently needed professions^(c): +30 points
- Investing and employing locals^(d) (max. 120 points):
 - +10 points for every 100,000 RMB (USD 14,450) in taxes paid each year for the last three years consecutively
 - +10 points for every ten local Shanghainese employed each year for the last three years consecutively: +10 points
- Social insurance (max. 120 points): if over the last four years social insurance was paid for at least 36 months on a wage that is related to the average wage in Shanghai in the following way:
 - 80%-100%: +25 points;
 - 100%-200%: +50 points;
 - 200%-300%: +100 points;
 - 300%+: +120 points
- Special service for the public: +4 points for every year; starts counting after five years
- Resident in specific suburbs (max. 20 points): residence and work in designated suburbs, +2 points for every year; counting starts after five years
- Current university graduates: bonus of +10 points for current university graduates in their graduation year
- Awards by authorities (municipal, provincial, ministerial):
 - Special commendation: +30 points
 - Comprehensive commendation: +60 points
 - Commendation by provincial or ministerial level: +110 points
- Spouse of local Shanghainese (max. 40 points): +4 points for every full year of marriage

How to lose points according to the Shanghai 120-point rule

Losing points:

- Supplying false material in the application in the last three years: -150 points,
- Detained by authorities in the last five years: -50 points for every time
- Criminal record in the last five years: -150 points

Veto criterion:

- Violation of family planning policy or serious criminal record

- (a) Out of 2a) or 2b) only one can be a source of points that is counted
- (b) Decided by Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau
- (c) Decided by Shanghai Science and Technology Committee
- (d) Only one out of the two options of tax-paying or employing locals can be a source of points that counts

Table 19: Gaining and losing points according to Shanghai's 120-point policy (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2015)

It is noteworthy that this point scheme includes the ethically questionable practice of formally marginalising migrant children because of the criminal record and birth planning behaviour of their parents. While children of ex-offenders in other countries may be informally stigmatised, the kind of stigmatisation inherent in the above system is unique in that it is a formal mechanism to punish children by undermining their educational opportunities because of the behaviour of their parents. To the best of my knowledge, in my study there were no cases of young people who were directly affected by the regulation regarding ex-offenders. However, families might also have withheld such sensitive information. There were, nevertheless, cases who were affected by the regulation regarding family planning.

As for the institutional options related to vocational education, the literature typically presents vocational education as the losers' choice (Ling, 2020; Smith & Chan, 2015; Woronov, 2015; Yi et al., 2018), but this characterisation overlooks the immense heterogeneity of vocational schools that migrant young people are differentially positioned to navigate (see also discussion in chapter 6). Indeed, some vocational schools have been found to provide better future earnings prospects and employment probabilities than general high schools (Wang, 2017).

In sum, this section has shown that the institutional framework that shapes the context of the decision-making process for what to do after middle school is characterised by the stratified exclusion of the three migrant groups. The constraints associated with this institutional structure are described as facilitating a system of 'segmented incorporation' (Lan, 2014) or 'segmented inclusion' (Ling, 2020) of migrants into urban society. The constraints are also often described as having a 'ceiling effect' (Xiong, 2015). As this section has shown the system restricts choice to different degrees for the three migrant groups.

4.3 Retaining a choice over pathways

Despite the aforementioned differing degrees of institutional constraints, migrants of *all* groups still had a choice, even those who were in the “narrow access” group. In other words, the process leading up to middle school graduation can be characterised as a *decision-making* process for all three migrant groups. As figure 9 above suggests, many of the options, especially those involving returning to the home provinces or attending private institutions in Shanghai, are still open in principle to *all* migrants from *all* groups. However, one needs to acknowledge that beyond institutional access, factors such as academic performance or financial background also affect the viability of pathways. For instance, students with poor grades are unlikely to consider returning to the home province for high school, while students from low-income families are unlikely to consider expensive private international schools in Shanghai. Nonetheless, this study finds that, in practice, despite institutional, financial, and performance constraints, all young people and their families actively consider several options as viable during the decision-making process and make an active choice.

For instance, a girl (interviewee 12) from Anhui Province, who was in the “medium access” group, was actively deciding between attending a private semi-vocational high school or a public vocational school. Although her family could afford the private option, her parents and teachers were in favour of her going to a public vocational school.

However, she still preferred the private option and eventually went to this school.

Another example was a boy (interviewee 27) who also came from Anhui Province. He was in the “narrow access” group and actively weighed the options of entering an adult vocational school programme against the option of entering the labour market directly.

He eventually decided to work instead of pursuing a vocational education. These cases were no exception. The process of actively weighing at least two viable options against each other could be found among all cases in the study. Therefore, this analysis shows that even for those with the most constrained options, there is still a choice and an active decision-making process.

This finding can be contrasted with other works in the field of migrant studies in China. For instance, Ling (2020) argues that young migrants do not really have a choice at the end of middle school. In her view, the combination of institutional barriers and market forces “made most options only marginally viable” (p. 113). First, private schools are too expensive for migrants. Second, entering the labour market is viewed as too early and too disadvantageous due to the increasing qualification requirements in the labour market in China. Third, returning to the home provinces for schooling is seen as too challenging due to the limited available caregiving, differences in curricula and culture as well as the potential harm associated with social isolation. Given these circumstances, Ling (2020) concludes that vocational education is “the most practical option” for the majority of young migrants (p. 113). Based on these insights, she argues that migrant youths in Shanghai are left with only one viable choice and, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, she depicts them as the “antithesis of a choosing individual” (p. 113). While my finding does not suggest that factors such as financial resources, or preferences for later job market entry are irrelevant for the perceived viability of pathways, it nonetheless leads me to disagree with Ling’s conclusion that migrants are left with only one option. In my view, the fact that they actively considered several remaining options justifies recognising them as “choosing individuals”, albeit differentially constrained by their circumstances.

Having established that the process in middle school can be understood as an active decision-making process, it becomes relevant to examine how this process unfolds, how it concludes and what consequences this has for the school-to-work transitions of young migrants.

4.4 Two subprocesses of the decision-making process: gathering information and negotiating pathways

As mentioned earlier, my data reveals that the decision-making process of young migrants can be understood to comprise two subprocesses, a process of ‘gathering information’ and one of ‘negotiating pathways’. Both of these processes interact in a dynamic way until the pathway decision is reached. This section explores these two constituting processes and shows how their interaction can bring about conflict and unexpected shocks, aspects I term ‘turbulence’ (see also definition of turbulence in the introduction chapter). Following the reasoning inherent in dynamic stress process models, it might seem plausible to assume that a turbulent decision-making process at the end of middle school is more likely to lead to turbulence in the pathway taken beyond middle school (e.g. Hammen, 2006, Liu & Alloy, 2010). However, I argue that my data suggests that this is not the whole story.

4.4.1 Gathering information

Gathering information is a crucial part of the decision-making process. Primary sources of information for the young migrants in this study include institutional ones, such as schools or the Bureau of Education. Other sources comprise social contacts within and

outside of the family, such as parents, siblings, teachers and peers. Online research also figured prominently as a source of information for young people who take the initiative in shaping their own future pathways.

Institutional access to information is also shaped by the division of migrants into three groups, as shown in the first section of this chapter. A few weeks before graduation from middle school, students and their parents are invited to information sessions at the two public middle schools where I conducted a large share of my fieldwork. These sessions run in parallel but in three different rooms strictly following the division between “narrow access”, “medium access” and “wide access” group members. For instance, Javelin Middle School’s large auditorium is used for local students and “wide access” migrants. In this auditorium, the school principal presents recommendations about which high schools and vocational schools students should consider. In a second and much smaller room, “medium access” migrants hear presentations from recruitment teachers invited from the two closest local vocational schools, the Petrochemical Academy and the Gastronomy School. Meanwhile, in the regular classroom, “narrow access” migrants hear about their only educational option endorsed by the middle school, the Gastronomy School’s adult education programme. These information sessions are thus already tailored to fit migrant students’ available options, depending on their group membership.

Another institutional source of information were the booklets edited by the local district Education Bureau and handed out to graduating students in grade nine a few weeks before middle school graduation. It is also a telling illustration of how options for different groups of migrant students in Shanghai middle schools are curtailed. There are two different types of brochures issued by the Education Bureau. While “wide access” migrants and locals are given a thick booklet with over 100 pages covering high schools and vocational schools to choose from, “medium access” migrants receive a much thinner

brochure of fewer than 50 pages. The shorter booklet contains only vocational schools, most of which have only limited spots for migrant students. Lastly, “narrow access” migrants receive the same brochure as “medium access” migrants, but nearly all of the content is irrelevant to them as they have no institutional access to these schools (see earlier section in this chapter). These booklets are physical representations of the narrower choice of some groups of migrants as they transition out of middle school in Shanghai.

4.4.2 Negotiating pathways

The process of negotiating pathways captures the discussions that young people have with their social environment based on their currently available information. This process can bring to the fore interest incongruence between teachers and students, or parents and children. It can also be affected in various ways by newly available information. Such changes in information availability can lead to conflict or unexpected shocks which render the decision-making process turbulent. The following cases illustrate how the processes of information gathering and negotiating pathways can interact to bring about smooth or turbulent decision-making processes. Turbulence in decision-making is understood as experiencing conflict or unexpected shocks that might require changing the original preferred plan, while smoothness is understood as the absence of conflict or unexpected shocks (see definitions in the introduction chapter).

For instance, a young male migrant (interviewee 18) had a smooth process that led to his decision to return to the home province. He had a strong academic interest in obtaining the highest possible degree, partly thanks to encouragements by his homeroom teacher. Additionally, he was motivated by wanting to avoid for himself the type of hard manual

labour he had seen his father perform on construction sites. His parents were made aware of the option of returning by the homeroom teacher who helped them to contact schools in their home province. The son's academic interest thus received strong support from his parents who arranged for a return to the home province. Moreover, this boy also had good grades in middle school. He thus decided about what to do without much conflict. Just over half of the young migrants in my set of cases (18 out of 35 cases) reached their pathway decision in a similar way as this boy did. They did not encounter much turbulence, that is, conflict or unexpected shocks. It is worth reiterating that the ability to return to the home province for high school depends on good grades in middle school. The smoothness in transition thus also depends on grades, but grades by themselves are not sufficient.

By contrast, just under half of the young people (17 out of 35 cases) encountered turbulence during the decision-making period. Three cases illustrate how newly available information interacted with the process of negotiating pathways to bring about turbulence in the form of conflict or unexpected shocks.

First, for a girl (interviewee 13) from Guizhou who attended Javelin Middle School, newly available information about hitherto unknown pathways led to conflict in the negotiation process. Initially, her mother wanted her to attend a vocational school in the home province, and she seemed willing to follow suit. However, when she heard about an option to stay in Shanghai, where she could attend the adult vocational programme of the Gastronomy School, she changed her mind. She wanted to stay in Shanghai, and severe conflict with her mother resulted. Eventually, she managed to convince her mother and started her vocational degree programme with parental support.

Second, another source of turbulence during the decision-making period can be unexpected institutional exclusion. A girl from Shandong (interviewee 20) experienced such a shock. Since her family initially fell short of accumulating the 120 points required for membership in the “wide access” group, her mother became determined to obtain an advanced vocational school degree (*dazhuan*), an “economist certificate”. By earning the higher qualification, her mother hoped to open up the path into Shanghai’s public high schools for her daughter. However, she failed one of the exams required for obtaining the certificate.

I knelt on the ground crying. I embraced my husband, knelt on the ground and cried. I said, “It’s over for me. I don’t want to live anymore. I gave our child too much hope. I gave our child too much disappointment.”
— Mother of interviewee 20

She had seen it as her parental responsibility to offer educational opportunities to her daughter. Consequently, she was highly motivated to prove her parenting by passing the exam on the second attempt one year later — and she did. Sharing her high score online with her friends allowed her to recover from the humiliation of having failed her daughter. She attempted to re-establish her identity as a good mother and shared the good news with her daughter, who was residing in the home province at the time.

When I went to apply for the residence permit and handle the matter of my child’s school transfer, I called my child after I finished the exam. My friend was sitting in my car. I was crying [...]. My friend also cried with me. I got the results at noon. After I finished the call, my child knew about it, and I was thrilled.

However, after having informed her daughter of the good news, the mother soon discovered, to her dismay, that access to Shanghai’s high schools proved yet again beyond her family’s reach.

In the afternoon, I went through the formalities. When I arrived, the Education Bureau told me that my residence permit did not fulfil [the necessary] three years [requirement] and that my child could not get access. That’s when I really cried.

Having expected and anticipated entering high schools in Shanghai, the daughter was shocked about this dramatic turn of events. However, the shock was overcome eventually thanks to her parents and teachers, who helped to arrange an alternative. She was able to bring the alternative pathway of returning to the home province in line with her interest by prioritising her educational ambitions over her place affinity, related to staying in Shanghai. She thus embarked onto the return path.

The third source of turbulence during decision-making for young people can be finding out about worse-than-expected grades. For example, a boy (interviewee 1) had selected a vocational school he wanted to enter that was in line with his interest in becoming an electrician. However, his grades in the final migrant *zhongkao* fell narrowly short of providing him with access to this pathway. With the support of his parents and friends, he came to accept the second-best option of a programme in car mechanics. Seeing the potential to focus on the electrical components in cars within the programme, he was able to tie his interest in becoming an electrician to this second-best option.

4.4.3 Relationship between pre-graduation and post-graduation turbulence

The abovementioned sources of turbulence during the decision-making process could be understood as *stressors*, a concept developed in the stress process framework. Stressors are broadly defined as “external circumstances that challenge and obstruct” and “to which it is difficult to adjust” (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013, pp. 326-327). Dynamic stress process models focussing on vulnerabilities suggest that past exposure to stressors can increase individuals’ sensitivity and exposure to future stress (Hammen, 2006; Liu & Alloy, 2010; Monroe & Harkness, 2005; Morris et al. 2010; Stroud et al. 2008;). While the main focus

of the stress process framework used to be on mental health issues (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013), the model has recently been adapted to study educational attainment and dropout (Dupéré et al., 2015).

Following the line of reasoning suggested in dynamic stress models, it might be assumed that a higher degree of turbulence, understood as stress, experienced during the decision-making period about which pathway to take after middle school could explain the increased turbulence experienced in the post-graduation period. In other words, stress during the decision-making period might predict which young migrants either persisted or dropped off their pathway.

However, my data indicates that this is not the whole story. I found that, on the one hand, a sizable share of young people with smooth decision-making periods nonetheless experience turbulence in the period after middle school graduation (5 out of 18 cases). On the other hand, a majority of “turbulent deciders” achieved smooth transitions during the implementation stage beyond middle school (11 out of 17 cases). Therefore, at least as far as the impact of stressors during the decision-making period in middle school is concerned, the data collected as part of this study seems to indicate that there must be more to the story. While smoothness and turbulence during the decision-making phase are intriguing phenomena, they do not provide a direct and straightforward relationship with turbulence or smoothness during the implementation stage. This insight prompted me to look beyond smoothness or turbulence in the decision-making process to understand persistence and dropping out beyond middle school graduation. I began to review aspects of the outcome of the decision-making process, the decision itself, in order to understand persistence or dropping off a pathway in the post-middle school period.

4.5 Interest-environment fit as crucial aspect of the decision-making process

The outcome of the decision-making process, a specific pathway decision, can be understood as characterised by an ‘interest-environment fit’, ranging on a continuum from good to bad. This section explains the concept through two examples. It then argues that this concept offers part of the explanatory link between the decision-making period in middle school and the phenomena of dropping out or persisting along a given pathway in the post–middle school graduation period.

Two cases can be contrasted to illustrate the concept of interest-environment fit. The first one is that of a migrant girl (interviewee 15) in Javelin Middle School who had been interested in sweet desserts and baking since her early childhood. When approaching middle school graduation, she started looking into different vocational school programmes that would allow her to pursue this interest. She found one. The Gastronomy school offered a programme in “Western Desserts” that seemed to be suitable. Given her “medium” institutional access, she could enrol in the standard four-year programme in the Gastronomy School without constraint. She secured her mother’s support, who accepted that a long-standing interest guided her daughter's decision. The decision was seen as paving the way towards the long-term goal of opening a bakery in Shanghai after graduation. She embarked on her studies in the Gastronomy School programme with her interests fitting in well with her social and institutional environment.

Another girl (interviewee 25) also had an interest in making sweet desserts. However, when she went to visit the Gastronomy School with her classmates, she did not get a positive impression of the institution as she was put off by an unfriendly teacher. Hence, she decided not to go to this school. Instead of following her interest, she enrolled in a

programme in “Environmental Measurement” in the local Petrochemical Academy, the same course that some of her classmates had picked. The decision to enrol in this programme was also not tied to any long-term goal or personal interest. Not knowing much about what the programme in “Environmental Measurement” was about, she embarked on the pathway without a good match between her interests and her environment. These two cases show how features of the decision-making process during the early stage of the school-to-work transition shape the interest-environment fit of the decision.

‘Interest-environment fit’ is a multidimensional concept grounded empirically in the collected data. On the one side of the fit, different types of *interest* are conceptualised as subject-based or professional, academic, social, monetary, or other. Place affinity is also conceptualised as a spatial interest. Typically, one interest can be identified as the most important for an individual young person. However, when more than one interest is crucial, the prioritisation of interests becomes a critical process. The cases introduced in this chapter illustrate the diversity of types of interests. For instance, the boy who returned to his home province for high school (interviewee 18) was guided by a well-developed academic interest that did not yet have a clearly defined occupational dimension. By contrast, the girl who entered a vocational school for “Western Desserts” (interviewee 15) had a subject-based or professional interest in a particular vocational field.

On the other side of the fit, the *environment* is characterised by multiple factors including institutional access to different pathways, information access, interest congruence between kids, parents and teachers, the ability to overcome interest incongruence (if present), and ‘facilitating’ social support. The cases introduced in this chapter illustrate some of these aspects.

When access to pathways is constrained, finding a good fit for one's interest becomes harder, albeit rarely impossible. One example is the young girl who initially agreed to return to her home province for vocational school and then later changed her mind to stay in Shanghai (interviewee 13). She eventually found a good fit through the Gastronomy School's adult education programme, despite facing the most constrained pathway choice ("narrow access" group).

Informational factors such as knowing about institutions and requirements are also important. Knowing about what an educational programme entails, for instance, allows for evaluating whether it matches one's interests before beginning the programme. A contrast between two cases mentioned in this chapter highlights this point. The girl who pursued a degree in "Western Desserts" (interviewee 15), for instance, was well-informed about the vocational school programme, whereas the girl who entered "Environmental Measurement" (interviewee 25) started her programme without any clear understanding of what it involved.

Social factors, such as interest congruence between parents and kids, are also critical. When parents and children have similar visions of the future pathway after middle school, then an interest-environment fit becomes more likely. Moreover, in cases where interests between parents and kids are not congruent, the ability of both parents and kids to overcome the incongruence and find a viable solution is essential. The case of the boy who returned to the home province (interviewee 18) with the support of his parents illustrates the first point. The second point is underscored by the case of the girl who changed her mind about staying in Shanghai (interviewee 13). It was her ability to convince her mother that resulted in the alternative becoming viable for her and enabled her to stay in Shanghai with a good interest-environment fit.

Lastly, another social factor is the availability of ‘facilitating’ social support, defined as support aimed at establishing a good interest-environment fit for the young person. It can be contrasted with ‘inhibiting’ social support which does not aim at establishing an interest-environment fit. While many young migrants receive social support during the decision-making period, not all of the support is aimed at facilitating a good fit. Parents have their own views of what might be best for their child to do after middle school, and these ideas might not be in line with their child’s interests. It should be noted that ‘facilitating’ support does not imply that parents follow every impulsive idea of teenagers. Instead, the interest underlying such ideas can be understood with an additional layer of abstraction. Rather than taking impulses by young people at face value, ‘facilitating’ support implies exploring which underlying motivations and interests lead to these impulses. Taking these interests into account in attempting to establish an interest-environment fit can be understood as ‘facilitating’ social support. The concept is further illustrated with pertinent cases in the next three empirical chapters.

As the above discussion has shown, the concept of interest-environment fit highlights the various factors that need to align in order for the pathway decision to have a good fit. The ideal scenario occurs when a smooth decision-making process concludes in a good interest-environment fit as exemplified by the cases of the boy who returned to the home province and the girl who entered the vocational programme in “Western Desserts” (interviewees 18 and 15). However, the multidimensionality of the concept also indicates that divergence from this ideal is possible in multiple directions. In 11 out of 35 cases, turbulent decision-making processes still resulted in a good interest-environment fit because some of these divergences can be overcome before the final decision is made at

the point of middle school graduation.¹⁷ For instance, when new, unexpected information regarding access or grades becomes available, as in the cases of the boy and the girl who encountered turbulence in their decision-making process (interviewees 20 and 1), steps can be taken to ensure that interest-environment fit for an alternative pathway can be still be established.

Moreover, when interest incongruence emerges as a factor threatening a good fit, a process of negotiation between parents and children can result in re-establishing the fit, as in the case of the girl who eventually stayed in Shanghai (interviewee 13). However, some divergences cannot be addressed during the decision-making process. An example of this can be found in the case of the girl who eventually enrolled in “Environmental Measurement” (interviewee 25). Her negative impression of the interest-related institution offering the desired programme could not be resolved. She thus approached the implementation stage of her school-to-work transition with a suboptimal interest-environment fit.

This section has empirically developed the concept of interest-environment fit. However, it has not yet explicitly explained how a good interest-environment fit is linked to smoothness or persistence in the implementation stage of the decision. On the flip side, it has also not yet explained how a suboptimal interest-environment fit might lead to turbulence or dropping out in the post-middle school graduation period. The mechanism is thus only partially elucidated at this stage. The question of how the concept of interest-environment fit is tied to these phenomena is further explored throughout the next three empirical chapters. Each of these three chapters, contrasts two cases of young people in

¹⁷ For further details on the type of school-to-work transition that involved turbulence during the decision-making period and still resulted in a good fit, see chapter 8 and the transition type TSS, where T stands for turbulence and S stands for smoothness.

considerable detail, one of whom reached a good fit for the particular pathway and one of whom failed to achieve a good fit. These pairwise comparisons highlight the different factors and mechanisms that explain persistence or dropping off a chosen pathway as part of the grounded theory developed in this thesis. Finally, the grounded theory chapter takes up the concept of interest-environment fit and shows its role within the constructed grounded theory (see chapter 8). Additionally, chapter 8 also explores the link between interest-environment fit and motivation. Finally, it discusses the relationship of the concept to pre-existing constructs in the scholarly literature.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter showed how the institutional context of stratified exclusion shapes how young migrants and their families in Shanghai make decisions about what to do beyond middle school. While these structures represent serious constraints, all migrants still have circumscribed options remaining and still make active choices. The tension between structural constraint and individual agency reveals how young migrants navigate their school-to-work transitions with constrained agency (cf. ‘bounded agency’, Evans, 2002, 2007).

An examination of how the process of decision-making unfolds reveals that gathering information and negotiating pathways are subprocesses that can interact to render the decision-making process turbulent or smooth. The chapter went on to link this discussion to the research question about persisting on or dropping off a given pathway in the stage after middle school. Dynamic stress process models might suggest that turbulence in the decision-making process could explain turbulence in the post-graduation period.

However, the data collected for this study suggests that this is not the whole story.

Instead, this chapter argued that a different concept, ‘interest-environment fit’, could help to understand how the decision-making process is linked to persistence or dropping out in the stage beyond middle school. The chapter showed that the outcome of the decision-making process, the pathway decision, can be understood as being associated with an interest-environment fit.

While this chapter laid the foundation for the argument that the decision-making process in middle school is useful for explaining smoothness and turbulence beyond middle school, the mechanism is not yet fully elucidated. The next three empirical chapters build on the foundation established in this chapter and explore how a good or bad interest-environment fit associated with a pathway decision can lead to persistence or dropping out in the later stage of the school-to-work transition. This mechanism is examined on all three major pathways introduced in this chapter: the academic, vocational school, and work track.

Chapter 5: Returning for Further Schooling

5.1 Introduction

What is the societal, institutional and historical context in which some young migrants pursue an academic track in China? And what does the pursuit mean for young people and their families given the many obstacles that it entails? An extensive literature in the sociology of education in China documents a widespread belief that education leads to social mobility, which helps to explain migrant families' overriding preference for the academic track (see, for example, Fong, 2004; Kipnis, 2011). Returning to the home provinces is seen by many as the main way to stay on the academic pathway towards public universities in China, one of the three major options for young migrants in middle schools in Shanghai (see figure below), even though many barriers are associated with this alternative. In this chapter, I explore the institutional factors impacting on if and how young migrants in China pursue an academic track. Thereafter, the discussion traces the school-to-work transition of two young female migrants who left their middle schools in Shanghai to return to their home provinces for further schooling. The contrast in their experiences highlights a range of factors that affected the decision-making process in middle school and shaped the way the implementation turned out to be relatively smooth for the first girl and turbulent for the second girl. The reasons for why their transitions turned out differently are discussed and contextualised in the broader set of cases in the third section of this chapter.

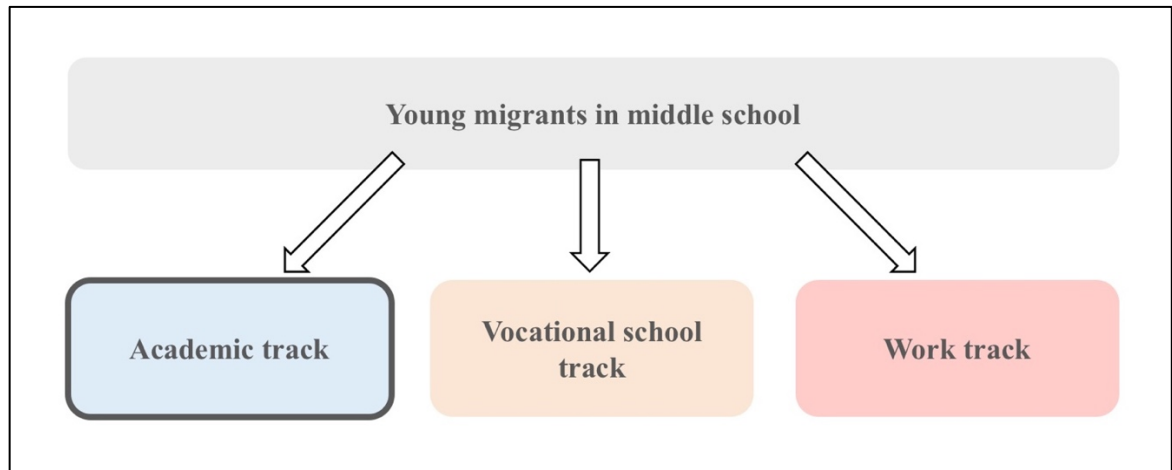


Figure 10: Highlighting academic track among pathway options for young migrants

Again, I purposefully delay detailed engagement with theoretical concepts and the pre-existing literature until the grounded theory to arise from my analysis of the empirical data is fully developed in chapter 8. This decision allows the narrative to develop full thrust before engaging with other theories (Dunne, 2011). I reiterate this point explicitly, as readers might otherwise wonder why theoretical engagement is kept to a minimum in this chapter.

5.2 What it means to pursue the academic track in China

Pursuing the academic track in contemporary China involves passing through a highly competitive examination system that regulates access to high schools and universities (Liu et al., 2009). The system includes two standardised exams, the high school admission exam at the end of middle school (*zhongkao*) and the university admission exam at the end of high school (*gaokao*). Performance in these exams determines whether young people obtain access to higher quality high schools and top-tier universities. Schools and families subject students to intense study regimes and pressure to prepare for and perform in these exams (Fong, 2004; Kuan, 2015). However, regardless of the effort students put into exam preparation, scholars of the Chinese education system have found

that about half of the students are predestined to fail in the *zhongkao* due to an official quota system (Chen, 2008; Kuczera & Field 2012; Woronov, 2015).

The academic track through the *zhongkao* and *gaokao* is regarded as the most probable way to upward mobility (Fong, 2004, 2011; Kim et al., 2016). Migrant families have been found to share these views (Ling, 2020; Ming, 2014). There are two reasons for the persistence of the belief in educational mobility. First, the current examination system has deep historical and cultural roots that reach back into the imperial era in China (Ho, 1962). The civil service examination in imperial China rewarded diligent study and performance in the exam with access to official careers and prestige within the imperial state (Elman, 2000). The historical assessment system for officials, abolished in 1905, bears striking similarities with the modern examination system that regulates access to high schools and universities (Kipnis, 2011). Indeed, the imperial system and the modern system function in similar ways. Both uphold the “ideology of meritocracy” by purporting to facilitate social mobility through the selection of high achievers (Ling, 2020, p. 132). The historical continuity between these two systems thus contributes to the persistence of widespread beliefs in social mobility.

Second, when the standardised exams were reintroduced in 1977 after the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, success stories of rural students changing their destinies through performing in the *gaokao* were widely circulated through state newspapers, school administrators and local governments (see, Kipnis, 2011). The widespread coverage of such cases renewed interest in the examination system among the population throughout the 1990s when reforms of the university system were implemented. In recent years, stories of families who use all their savings in support of their children’s education are still widely propagated (Kuan, 2015). These stories contributed to spreading the belief

in educational mobility, or what critical scholars term the “myth of educational opportunity” (Ling, 2020, p. 226).

A third factor is the rapid expansion of education provisioning since 1999. This applies to both the compulsory nine years of education and higher education sector (see, Kipnis, 2011).

The belief in educational mobility leads to a strong preference for the academic track over other educational pathways, such as the vocational school track which is regarded as less prestigious (see following chapter for more detail on the stigma associated with the vocational school track). *Kaodaxue* (the process of taking exams into university) has become the normative path in a perceived hierarchical system of pathways for Chinese students seeking to move up (Fong, 2004; Kipnis, 2011; Ling, 2020). However, due to the institutional exclusion from high schools in Shanghai (see chapter 1 and chapter 4), access to the academic track is problematic for young migrants in Shanghai. Many migrant youths view returning to the home provinces for schooling as an alternative to schooling in Shanghai, but the return option is not straightforward.

Several barriers exist for those who consider returning for schooling. The first barrier is based on the fact that China’s urban areas along the coast have benefitted disproportionately from three decades of economic growth, resulting in economic inequality between these areas and less developed regions in rural western China. The increasing economic disparity between different regions within China aggravated the skewed distribution of educational opportunities, since more affluent areas continue to invest more resources in their schools (Ding & Liang, 2012; Hannum & Park, 2007; Rong & Shi, 2001). The central government’s decision to decentralise educational spending in the 1980s also contributed to this development (Wong, 2004). Consequently, rural

schools in less prosperous areas receive much less funding than urban schools in Shanghai, creating a situation that favours those who live close to urban centres (Ling, 2020).

The second barrier arises because school curricula and textbooks differ between Shanghai and the home provinces. Most schools in China have long been exclusively focussed on drilling for exams as part of a system that has come to be called *yingshi jiaoyu* (exam-oriented education). However, recent reforms have attempted to shift the focus towards “quality education”, or *suzhi jiaoyu*, an approach that places more emphasis on creativity and practical skills in line with the national policy agenda to spur competitiveness and economic growth (Murphy, 2004; Woronov, 2008). Implementation of the *suzhi jiaoyu* reforms have been highly unequal because few rural schools have the resources to set up computer rooms or build libraries to give students access to extra-curricular material (Lu, 2012; Murphy, 2014). Since Shanghai uses its own *suzhi jiaoyu* textbooks, transfers between the systems are problematic for migrant students. In addition, transfers are difficult because of the more intense workload associated with the exam-oriented education regime in rural schools (Hansen, 2015; Wu, 2012, 2016).

The third barrier is associated with China’s skewed quota system that regulates access to universities. This system raises the threshold to enter universities in developed urban centres for students from less developed provinces (Davey et al., 2007). Since the Ministry of Education assigns admission quotas per province for most universities, returnee students have to compete not only on absolute scores but also relatively with other students in their province (Ling, 2020). In other words, the biased admissions process for out-of-province university applicants means that migrant students who transfer to their home provinces have to achieve higher test results to get a place in a prestigious university in larger cities than urban high school graduates. This barrier for

rural students might explain why there are disproportionately few rural hukou holders in China's top-tier universities (Ding & Liang 2012; Tam & Jiang 2015). The contemporary education system in China is thus characterised by increasing elite closure (Bian, 2002; Davis & Wang, 2009; Selden & Wu, 2011).

In this context, young migrants in Shanghai decide about their pathways, and a number of them pursue the academic track through returning to their home provinces. The next sections present and analyse the trajectories of two young migrants who embarked on a return for schooling.

5.3 Two cases of young migrants who returned for further schooling

In the two following subsections, we revisit in greater detail the cases of the two migrant girls we met briefly in the introduction chapter, Meiling and Jing. These sections compare and contrast these two cases, who come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds with their parents running small businesses. Both of these young migrants embarked on a return to their home provinces during their middle school years; both of them left Shanghai in grade eight. However, as the sections show, their experiences differ markedly in the degree to which they had found a good interest-environment fit by the time the decision to return was made. The comparison shows how their interest-environment fit shaped the way their school-to-work transitions unfolded in the implementation stage. The emerging grounded theory points to a link between the interest-environment fit when the initial decision about what to do after middle school is made and the smoothness or turbulence during the implementation stage of the school-to-work transition into early adulthood.

5.3.1 The case of Wang Meiling: a smooth school-to-work transition

Wang Meiling (interviewee 34), 21 years old, was a female migrant with two younger siblings, who had grown up with her maternal grandparents in Sichuan province and moved to Shanghai to join her parents at the age of eight. Trying to improve their relatively low family income, Wang Meiling's parents had shifted from factory work to running a fishing pond under a highway bridge and had also started subletting two nearby rooms for gambling and social events. Based on her parents' background, Wang Meiling found herself in the "medium access" migrant group.

The decision-making process for what to do after graduation started early in middle school for Wang Meiling and her family. It began when they learned about the institutional restrictions in Shanghai that prevented Wang Meiling from entering local public high schools (see chapter 4 for more details on the institutional discrimination of migrants in Shanghai). Her father lamented the injustice inherent in the exclusion through existing educational policies.

The education system in China is the not the same [for migrants and locals]. Why? We are all Chinese. Why? We are also building Shanghai here, right? Even though we are going out to *dagong* [blue-collar work], we are also contributing to this country, right? We are also building this city. We are giving a lot to this city. But the system is different [for migrants].

— Father of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

In this context shaped by educational exclusion, Wang Meiling developed a good relationship with her young homeroom teacher, Ms Cheng. She was an English teacher in Javelin School who taught a migrant class (officially referred to in schools as *guanguo* class, all-country class), which six of my participants attended for two years. Her mother remembers the impact the interaction with this teacher has had on Wang Meiling.

My daughter's homeroom teacher at Javelin Middle School had a real sense of responsibility. [...] Every semester, she would do home visits. She was very careful to communicate to parents the weaknesses and strengths of their child in school. She wouldn't hit the kids for any mistake, but she pointed out to parents any shortcomings and worked with parents on how to educate the kids. [...] That's why I sometimes talk to my husband and say that my daughter's grades are really inseparable from the efforts of this teacher in her middle school. [...] The teacher was teaching a *quanguo* [all-country] class, which we called the *waidi* [migrant or outsider] class, because it was all migrant students. It really took a lot of effort, 30 or so students, their class had 30 students at the time, and the teacher was like a parent to each student. She visited the parents on the weekends, home visits, communication with parents. These kids had so many teachers, but she was the most responsible. She took on this *quanguo* class, and now several of them go to university. So, I say, a lot depends on teachers.
— Mother of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

As Wang Meiling's mother stressed, one dimension of the teacher's impact was related to studying and improving academic performance. For instance, she helped Wang Meiling outside of official school hours, when she "spent a summer tutoring Meiling in English." However, Ms Cheng's influence also extended beyond schooling. She also helped Wang Meiling by developing her interest in learning and her desire to obtain the highest possible academic degree. Additionally, the teacher suggested to Wang Meiling and her parents, how they might go about pursuing this interest, that is, by returning to the home province for schooling.

The teacher had mentioned [the option of returning to the home province for schooling] to my parents. Deciding to return so early [in grade eight] — I thought about all that with my parents. At the time, I had already completed grade seven. The teacher had also already suggested [returning]. Everybody had to take the exam for high school. I had to return a bit earlier so I could adapt.
— Wang Meiling (interviewee 34), female, 21 years, Sichuan Province

Wang Meiling and her family were thus well-informed about returning to the home province partly thanks to the homeroom teacher who explained to them how they could proceed. Moreover, the homeroom teacher conveyed an appreciation of the value of education to Wang Meiling and convinced her that returning for the academic track might be better suited for her than attending a vocational school in Shanghai, such as the local Petrochemical Academy. Wang Meiling ended up interested in the prospect of returning.

At the time, because of the influence of Ms Cheng, I actually was very willing to return to study. Because if I did not return, I would stay here and study at the Petrochemical Academy and then I come out and get a job. Since, at the time, I very much wanted to study, I went back [to the home province].

Her mother also highlighted how teachers, perceived to offer more accurate information from a position of authority, might influence the decision-making process about the future after middle school.

Kids listen to their teachers more than to their parents. What teachers say is more accurate than what parents say.
— Mother of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

In sum, despite the institutional exclusion in Shanghai, Wang Meiling developed a keen academic interest, facilitated by her committed homeroom teacher in middle school. Ms Cheng helped Wang Meiling to transform fuzzy educational ambitions into concrete, realistic expectations about her future.

It is noteworthy that during the decision-making process Wang Meiling was forced to prioritise two competing interests, a place affinity to Shanghai where she could stay with her parents and an educational interest in obtaining the highest possible academic degree. Prioritising educational aspirations over place affinity was an important step that gave her clarity about what she wanted the most. However, as the final section of this narrative shows, after five years in the home province, the balance shifted back to prioritising place affinity, which led her to reject some other educational options.

A further aspect that shaped the decision-making process for Wang Meiling was that there was interest congruence with her parents. Her parents were very supportive of her plans for further education, reproducing a discourse of self-sacrifice to support children's studies (see also beginning of this chapter).

I've told my kids, "Whoever can go to school and wants to go, you try to go. Even if I don't have the money, I'll borrow it for you to go to school, and I'll do my best to get

you into the best school. Whether you can study there or not, that depends on your own development.”

— Mother of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

The decision to return to the home province was thus reached without conflict, through a smooth decision-making process (see also discussion of decision-making in chapter 4).

Wang Meiling also received social support during the decision-making period, a type of support I term ‘facilitating’ social support, as it was aimed at taking into account what children themselves want. The parents respected and supported Wang Meiling’s will to return to her home province for schooling.

She herself wanted to continue studying, so I said, “I respect your opinion.” After middle school graduation here, it is either vocational school or returning for you. If you do well in high school, you can continue studying. So, at the time we respected her will. She wanted to return to the home province.

Wang Meiling’s mother explained how she sees herself as a facilitator of the children’s interests by accepting their decisions while her father instead tends to force kids into his preferred direction. She used her son’s example to illustrate what she means.

We have a few kids in our family. I tell them: “even if you don’t get good grades, I respect your choice anyway.” Like my son, who was at home for more than a month some time ago, and then slowly, I wanted him to go out. I said “I respect that you don’t want you to go out. If you want to go out and do what you like to do, even if it means that you go out and do something else that I don’t like, as long as you like it, I let you do it.” The child’s path is up to them to go.

My husband is a bit forceful at times, thinking the kids have to follow the path that he set up for them. I tell him, “no way”. Kids nowadays are different from the way we were then. In the old days, the family told you to do whatever they wanted you to do at home, and it had to be done. It’s different now. You can’t force it. Let them walk by themselves. At least they are walking on their own road. When they think about it later, it will have been their own choice, however bitter it is, they will not regret it.

If a parent forces something on them, they will be confrontational. Children are more rebellious nowadays. If you force them to like something, for instance, if they like to fix cars and you tell them to learn computer skills or something, and they don’t like it, they will be in a confrontational mindset when they study.

Her mother thinks that children's pathways are "up to them to go" and that children have to "walk by themselves", while her father tends to want his kids to "follow the path that he set up for them". The description of the difference between her mother's and her father's social support maps closely onto my conceptions of 'facilitating' and 'inhibiting' social support. The former is aimed at facilitating an interest-environment fit for the young person while the latter does not prioritise the young person's perspective but rather the assessment by other adults.

Wang Meiling's mother further illustrated her attitude of being willing to accept the interest of her kids by bringing up the case of her second daughter who was unwilling to continue schooling in middle school, a decision her mother eventually accepted.

She didn't even want to go to middle school. What did she say? "If you beat me to death, I won't go to school, beat me to death, and I won't go either." Then I said there was nothing I could do. I asked her for her opinion. She didn't go. I had no choice. I had already reasoned with her. As for using force, I could never really beat her to death. I did my duty and told her what is right and what is not. There is nothing I can do if she doesn't listen to me. She herself doesn't want to go to school, so I said: "don't regret it in the future, and don't blame your parents for letting you leave school."

Wang Meiling's sister ended up dropping out of middle school in grade seven and started to work as a cook, with her parents' support. These statements illustrate that Wang Meiling's decision to return was taken in a supportive family context, shaped by her mother's attitudes, which facilitated taking into account her own interests.

Wang Meiling thus reached the decision to return with a good interest-environment fit thanks to the following constellation of factors. She had a keen academic interest thanks to her teacher; she received 'facilitating' support by her mother; her parents had sufficient knowledge about how to organise the return; and there was interest congruence between her parents and herself. As a result of the good fit, Wang Meiling returned to her home

province with a sense of empowerment, feeling prepared to confront the potential challenges.

As Wang Meiling embarked on her return journey, her academic interest could be tied to the pathway she was pursuing. Wang Meiling subjectively saw the point of the return. It was supposed to lead her into a higher education institution, a goal she herself considered desirable and in which she was interested. Moreover, it was also potentially in line with her long-term goal of eventually joining her family in Shanghai again. The pathway made sense to her, which supported a high level of motivation to pursue it. As the rest of this section illustrates, this high level of motivation, along with remote social support, allowed Wang Meiling to overcome considerable adversity during her five-year-long stay in the home province (see also above sections of this chapter for a review of the most important barriers associated with returning).

Her parents, like many others in my set of cases, were not in a position to accompany their child to the home province for an extended period. Her mother explained that she had to look after her two other children in Shanghai while her eldest daughter returned.

When it was time to return, I asked [my daughter]: “If you return, your parents have no way to be with you and look after you because we have to support this family, after all...” [...] “If we went back to accompany you in studying, that would not be realistic.” But she replied very well: “Mum, I will return and look after myself. I will look after myself well.” She said, “I care for myself.”
— Mother of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

My mother accompanied me to the home province and left after roughly a week.
— Wang Meiling (interviewee 34), female, 21 years, Sichuan Province

Thus, Wang Meiling had to cope with attending boarding school in her home province while her parents stayed in Shanghai. During weekends when Wang Meiling had time off from school, she had to stay with her relatives. However, this caregiving arrangement was precarious since Wang Meiling had a strained relationship with her paternal grandparents,

her *yeye* and *nainai*. She knew that her grandparents had refused to look after her when she was little because she was a girl.

Yeye and *nainai* disliked and avoided her because she was a girl, you know? They looked down on her.
— Mother of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

Therefore, Wang Meiling did not want to stay with her paternal grandparents if it could be avoided. However, during the first year of her return, she had to rely on her grandparents and suffered from the deep-seated gender bias of her grandfather.

The first year that she went back, she went to her paternal grandparents' place. [Her grandfather] has a strange character. [...] After all, we do not have a good relationship with him. We do not argue, but he looks down on us because we raised a daughter. [...] He seems to believe that a daughter is useless. When she went to high school in the hometown, her grandfather said everywhere, "Why do you send her to study at such an expensive school?" Our daughter studied in a [higher regarded] 'key' school in the county seat. Her grandfather thought that attending the [cheaper but less highly regarded] hometown high school would be good enough. "Even if your daughter studies that much, after all, she will be married off to another family," he said, "Why would you study that much?" So, there was some disagreement.

The disagreement continued, which meant that staying with the paternal grandparents became increasingly untenable. Her mother remembered this episode when her daughter "was not willing to go back to her paternal grandparents' place" because "she does not have much emotional connection with them".

During her few days off from boarding school per month, Wang Meiling had to find another place to stay. Sometimes, she even stayed at her classmates' homes to avoid her paternal grandparents. Her mother recalls how the caregiving arrangement became precarious.

When she got off from school and went back [home], sometimes she went to my mother, sometimes to her *nainai*. During holidays, two or three days, she would squat here, then squat there, living under other people's roof. After all, her parents were not at home. When you are with relatives, you have that feeling of depending on them for a living.

However, instead of dropping off her return pathway because of these challenges, Wang Meiling transformed the adversity of her grandparents' gender-discriminating attitude into an additional source of motivation to keep working hard. She remembered how she persevered through particular challenging moments by thinking of her grandparents. Her grandparents' views led to a desire to prove to them that their attitude towards girls was wrong.

I think that [my paternal grandparents'] attitude towards me to a certain degree encouraged me to work harder. [...] Whenever I felt exhausted, I would think of them and their sneering contempt. That would give me the strength to continue working hard.
— Wang Meiling (interviewee 34), female, 21 years, Sichuan Province

The adversity empowered Wang Meiling because she could rely on steadfast motivational resources; she saw the point of why she was pursuing this pathway.

Another source of adversity was the academic pressure that Wang Meiling was facing in the school system in her home province. She found that the academic routine back home was more by the book and the sole focus of studying was exam preparation (see also discussion of *yingshi* education and *suzhi* education in previous sections of this chapter).

In my home province, [...] it is more important to take exams for the sake of exams, you know? [...] Actually, I had already become numb from all the exams because in my hometown, we had weekly exams, monthly exams, and mid-terms. So, basically every week we had to take exams.

With this intense exam focus, academic pressure kept building up. At times, Wang Meiling thought of herself as being part of a video game in which taking exams helps to reach the next level.

It was all about exams, just exams. [...] Like playing a game and levelling up. At the time, I thought that it was like beating monsters and levelling up: exams, studying, exams.

Many classmates were overwhelmed. When one of them ran away from the school premises and was found dead, there were rumours that he had not been able to cope with the pressure and committed suicide. The school never disclosed any further details about what exactly happened to her classmate Wang Meiling and her schoolmates.

Whenever academic pressure intensified or other issues occurred, Wang Meiling could draw on remote emotional support from her mother, who she described as her most important anchor over the five years she spent in the home province. Speaking to her mother over the phone helped her overcome the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Actually, whenever I called my mother, I did not say much. I just listened to her voice, and I felt that I was getting a lot better. At that time, I was too lonely by myself, so sometimes I wanted to listen to my mother's voice and see her, and then I got better and could immerse myself in studying again.

In order to access this vital emotional support, she had to defy the school rules that stipulate that students have to hand in their mobile phones.

We basically had to turn in our phones, but I rarely turned mine in. I would call almost every day of the week. For example, at times before exams or when I felt not quite right, my mood about life was not quite right, I would call my mother every day. Once things were better, I would call less. Maybe once a week

In addition, Wang Meiling also had a good relationship with a high school teacher that helped her along the way.

In high school, I also met a teacher who guided us. He was a little old man who was usually very optimistic and nice to us, and then before my final *gaokao*, he would often ask me how I was doing, because he also knew about my circumstances, that my parents were not with me and I was all by myself. So, he would ask me often.

The social support by her mother and her teacher reinforced Wang Meiling's ability to "immerse herself in studying again" especially during difficult times. The support provided her with emotional stability. The combination of social support and knowing that her pathway was in line with her interest helped her along.

Wang Meiling concluded her high school years with an above-average performance in the university admissions exam (*gaokao*) which allowed her to choose between two second-tier universities, one in Chengdu and one in Shanghai. The one in Shanghai was conveniently the one closest to Jinshan District where her parents reside. This achievement is particularly impressive given the institutional context of the biased admissions process for out-of-province university applicants who must achieve higher test results for places in universities in larger cities than local high school graduates (Davey et al., 2007; Tam & Jiang, 2015; see also previous sections of this chapter). By managing to become admitted by a Shanghai university, Wang Meiling overcame this biased admissions barrier.

Having achieved entry into university — albeit only into second-tier institutions — led Wang Meiling to reprioritise her interests. Her place affinity to Shanghai, where she could be close to her family, became the most important guiding principle. Her mother remembers how Wang Meiling chose Shanghai over Chengdu.

She could have chosen to study in Chengdu at the Chengdu University of Technology, also a second-tier school. I can't remember the major now, but I felt pretty good about it. I said, "why not pick the Chengdu University of Technology?" After all, Chengdu University of Technology seems to be better in terms of the brand than the one in Shanghai, the University of Applied Technology.
— Mother of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

However, Wang Meiling's priorities were clear when she replied to her mother:

"No, I want to be closer to you. I've been living a very unsettled life these five years alone, and I don't want to be too far apart from you. That's why I chose the university in Shanghai."

Her mother let her prioritise and make the decision.

I mean, I just tried to give her a choice. But what she said was "Mom, I haven't been around you all these years, I just try to be around my parents. I just want to go to university in Shanghai." Then I'd say just try your best and see where you can get in. I said, "You want to be close to us, you can choose yourself."

Wang Meiling was convinced that she wanted to go back to Shanghai. She said, “I wanted to be together with my family, so I eventually decided to come to Shanghai to study [at university].”

Looking back, Wang Meiling, now a successful university student, talked to her mother about the experience of moving to the home province and persevering. Her mother recalls what Wang Meiling said during the conversation:

“Mum, the life I have lived these few years... how can I put it? There is a home I cannot go back to, feeling a bit like I am destitute and homeless. The only ones who care about me are my mum and dad who call me often.” She said, “In fact, living under somebody else’s roof, I really suffered.”

— Mother of Wang Meiling (interviewee 34)

When I asked Wang Meiling about her impressive achievement of overcoming the adversities associated with returning, she responded with exceptional humility.

I think my path is just plain. The road that people walk down is all very similar. There’s a Chinese saying that every household has its hardships. [...] That means every family will encounter those things, annoying things, bad things, everyone has them, but most people will just get over it.

— Wang Meiling (interviewee 34), female, 21 years, Sichuan Province

However, Wang Meiling is also proud of her achievement, not just for herself but also for her family. She expressed the desire for social mobility and social status through the concept of ‘face’ (*mianzi*), that is, the reputation of the family as others see them (Zhou & Zhang, 2017). In hindsight, she remarks:

The thing I am happy about is that — no matter how you look at it — I did get into a university that is not too bad. I did not make my parents lose face.

Her smooth transition into university, this thesis argues, was facilitated by an interest-environment fit during the decision-making stage. The good fit gave rise to a high level of motivation to pursue the pathway ahead. Combined with important ‘facilitating’ social

support along the return path, this constellation led Wang Meiling to achieve a smooth transition.

5.3.2 The case of Zhang Jing: a turbulent school-to-work transition

Wang Meiling's smooth transition can be contrasted with that of Zhang Jing (interviewee 11), a female graduate of Javelin School and originally from Anhui Province. She also came from a modest socioeconomic background. Her father ran a tearoom, and her mother had worked as a cook in a company canteen until recently retiring.

As in Wang Meiling's case, the decision-making process about what to do after graduation started early in middle school when both Zhang Jing and her father learned about the institutional limitations in Shanghai. In grade eight, Zhang Jing's middle school homeroom teacher told her father about the institutional barriers facing migrant students at a parent-teacher meeting.

The teacher also pointed her father towards the option of sending his daughter to their home province Anhui for schooling. The teacher argued that this might be beneficial for Zhang Jing as a high-achieving student. In the two fieldwork middle schools, teachers often made their advice dependent on how students performed academically. High-achieving students were more likely to be pointed to their home provinces, as teachers saw better chances for them to access high schools and pursue the academic track.

It seems that Ms Xing [the homeroom teacher] mentioned [returning]. I talked to my father, and it seems that at the parent-teacher meeting, this option was mentioned. Then, he wanted me to return to the home province.

— Zhang Jing (interviewee 11), female, 19 years, Anhui Province

Zhang Jing's father was ambitious about his daughter's education. Throughout her school years, he had regularly pushed his daughter to aim higher. For instance, when he realised that the migrant elementary school that Zhang Jing had attended for a few years was not of good quality, he spent money on extensive private tutoring for her. He also later paid for dinners with school officials to enable her to transfer into a better public elementary school, Javelin Elementary School. Both of these steps can be understood as attempts to make up for lacking foundations due to Zhang Jing's subpar migrant elementary school experience and address her feeling of being behind academically in the public elementary school.

When I transferred [elementary schools], I did pretty poorly. Most of the students [in public elementary school] were locals who had a lot of foundations, and I was in a bit of a downward spiral. Then I worked myself up to an average level.

When Zhang Jing was about to graduate from elementary school, her father wanted her to transfer into the best public middle school in Jinshan District, Mandolin School.

However, a conflict in the parent-child relationship emerged. Zhang Jing resisted her father's efforts to enrol her at Mandolin School, and he accepted it.

My father wanted to make me go to Mandolin school. [...] It is a bit better than Javelin School. But I did not go there, because I thought that I was not too good at studying. If I went there, I would definitely be the bottom [in terms of grades]. So, it is better to go to a slightly worse school where one is not the last. So, in the end, I went to Javelin School. [...] For the most part, he accepts what I say, because my parents basically have no educational qualifications.

Zhang Jing, in contrast to her father, did not have the same strong educational interest in entering high school. She explained her absent academic interest with lacking self-confidence and ill preparation during middle school. A sense of self-doubt and a wish to avoid educational failure might have also contributed to leaving her academic interest undeveloped.

Inside, I have built up opposition to high school, because I think I'm too bad at studying. Even if I study hard, I just don't get the material. It probably has something to do with middle school. I have not developed the academic foundation in middle school.

Instead, she was more concerned about staying close to her home in Shanghai, where she had grown up since she was an infant and to which she felt strongly attached. In the process of prioritisation, her place affinity to Shanghai emerged as dominant.

I absolutely did not want to return, because I am quite home-loving, I guess. I just really did not want to leave home.

A later statement from Zhang Jing ("Studying at high school — what is that all about? Right?") also illustrates how she valued receiving a high school education less than Wang Meiling or her father. This value difference, coupled with self-doubt and a willingness to avoid academic failure, shows why she might not have developed the same academic interest.

From the divergence in interests, it can be seen why a conflict emerged about returning between Zhang Jing and her father. A power struggle loomed as she was approaching middle school graduation. As the confrontation unfolded, Zhang Jing was unable to overcome the interest incongruence and found her own views ignored. The resulting conflict forms a stark contrast to the relatively smooth decision-making process that Wang Meiling experienced. While in many other cases in this study an interest incongruence between parents and children could be overcome and resolved in productive ways before the pathway decision was made (see, for instance, interviewee 6 in chapter 7), Zhang Jing could not achieve such a resolution before she returned.

Obtaining accurate information became another problematic issue. When Zhang Jing's father started making arrangements for the return by looking for schools in the home province and contacting several teachers, he did not obtain reliable information about the

school's admission criteria. The preferred school in which he wanted to enrol Zhang Jing was a new boarding school and, as it turned out, it did not admit students transferring into grade nine. It was only open for transfer students in grade seven or below. This information deficit later proved problematic for the caregiving arrangements framing the return.

While both Zhang Jing and Wang Meiling received social support during the decision-making period, Zhang Jing's support could be described as more 'inhibiting' relative to the goal of achieving a good interest-environment fit. It is crucial to note that this interpretation does not suggest that it was her father's *intention* to restrict his daughter's opportunities. Instead, his behaviour could be seen as aiming to improve her long-term well-being by encouraging her to make a decision now that might produce more opportunities in the future. It could be argued that Zhang Jing's father tried to support her because he had a better understanding — that is, the wisdom from being older — of the fact that decisions or indecisions made in the present can lead to major regret later. However, despite the father's well-meaning intentions, his behaviour still did not help his daughter to achieve a good interest-environment fit, and the social support can thus be interpreted as 'inhibiting' in this respect. In the end, the father pushed Zhang Jing to attempt the return, and she felt powerless. "Regarding this thing, I could not at first convince him. [...] It was my father's decision."

Realising that she did not have much of a say in deciding about her pathway beyond middle school at that time, she grudgingly went along with her father's plan. Her sense of disempowerment contrasts markedly with Wang Meiling's empowered attitude towards her move to the home province.

In sum, the decision to return did not represent a good interest-environment fit for Zhang Jing. In contrast to Wang Meiling, she did not have a strong academic interest, did not value education as highly and prioritised her place affinity for Shanghai. Moreover, there was no interest congruence between her father and her. She found herself unable to overcome the incongruence by talking to him. Furthermore, while Zhang Jing also received social support, it was of a different type, rather aimed at bringing her pathway in line with her father's ambitions for her than with her own interests. There were thus multiple dimensions in which Zhang Jing fell short of achieving the good interest-environment fit that Wang Meiling had reached. As the next part shows, this constellation — conceptualised as a bad interest-environment fit — prevented Zhang Jing from tying the pathway to her interests and led to turbulent consequences.

After the initial decision to return, the implementation stage of the school-to-work transition started with Zhang Jing's father taking her to their home province for schooling. "My father just accompanied me there. Once he had made arrangements, he left. He dumped (*diu*) me there all by myself." Narrative analysis suggests that Zhang Jing's choice of words — feeling "dumped" (*diu*) — can be seen as both an indication of her opposition to the plan and as an expression of her experience of having limited agency in the decision-making process (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

In the home province, Zhang Jing and her father soon encountered problems. The first issue was related to having inaccurate information about the admission criteria of the intended boarding school that her father had selected for Zhang Jing.

The [first] school I was supposed to go to was a boarding school, which was a new school, but it only admitted [transfer] students from grade seven. The grade I was in, already in grade nine, that grade was not possible. So, I changed schools. The [second] school was closer to my aunt's place, so I had to stay at her house.

Since it was not possible to board at the other school, Zhang Jing's father arranged for her to stay with her aunt. The caregiving arrangement was thus different from the original plan her father had made. Living with her aunt, whom she did not know well, brought about another set of problems.

Their family had a daughter and a son. The daughter was away for university. I was sent there to live. As for their family, my aunt runs a mah-jong [gambling] parlour. She spent the entire day in there. Her son also did not come back home for lunch and in the evenings, he had private tutoring. He would only come back very, very late. So, there basically wasn't anybody at home. Every time I had to eat, I had to go out to get something. At that time, my father had already left. My father had taken me there and then left. There was this indescribable sense of unease, to say it with a bad word, it felt like living off somebody's back. Although they were relatives, it did not feel like home.

Being left alone at home and having to eat by herself led to feelings of loneliness, alienation and unease. These feelings compounded the emotional stress of her father's departure.

These emotional challenges could have perhaps been overcome if Zhang Jing had been interested in going to high school and obtaining a higher degree, but for reasons related to self-doubt and lack of confidence, her academic interest was not as developed as that of, for instance, Wang Meiling. Without a good interest-environment fit of the pathway decision, it proved very difficult for Zhang Jing to see the point of all this emotional hardship. She was unable to tie the pursuit of the pathway to her interests. On a trajectory that she did not feel she had self-selected, the emotional costs kept rising. After about two weeks, the emotional burden became overwhelming. Zhang Jing experienced a turning point.

My dad called me, I remember it quite well, I was lying in bed, then the room phone rang, and I ran over, I listened to my dad, and I cried. I told him that I wanted to go home. He didn't want me to come home at first, and then maybe my dad was more affectionate about me, because when I was little, my dad... anyway... my dad was the one who pampered me the most, [...]. Then my dad went along with everything, and he said that I could come back if I wanted to, and hopefully, I wouldn't regret it or hate him later. Then I was on my own, and the next day I took the train, and I was back.

Dropping off the pathway due to rising emotional costs, subjectively seemed like the right thing to do for Zhang Jing. She overcame the initial resistance of her father, who let her return to Shanghai. A combination of factors thus led to a short-lived return experience. These factors include inaccurate information about institutional access in the home province, the incongruence of interests between father and daughter brought about by a clash of parental educational ambitions and Zhang Jing's place attachment that shaped her spatial preferences, and the inability to tie the pathway to any interest.

How did Zhang Jing fare after returning to Shanghai? Upon returning to Shanghai, Zhang Jing quickly adapted to the new circumstances. With the help of her classmates, she caught up on work she had missed. She found that she had access to a wide range of vocational schools in Shanghai thanks to her mother's Shanghai Residence Card for which the mother had successfully applied based on her work in a canteen (see the discussion of "medium access" group in chapter 4).

When her middle school distributed the information booklets about vocational schools, she began thinking about what she could do in Shanghai after her middle school graduation. At first, she felt uncertain and did not have a clear sense of direction, but then she discovered an inclination towards medicine.

I still remember how they distributed the booklets for signing up for vocational schools. I had not yet thought about it. Not even one bit. I had absolutely no idea. I also do not know why, but I suddenly wanted to study something medicine-related. [...] I really don't know why but I really like medicine. I really enjoy these things.

As she was approaching graduation, Zhang Jing noted that many of her classmates were opting for a local vocational school, the Petrochemical Academy, conveniently located close to their middle school in Jinshan. "Most other students went to the Petrochemical Academy. [...] Very few people went out [and left the district]. Most stayed in Jinshan."

However, Zhang Jing actively excluded the Petrochemical Academy from her considerations because she had a subject-based interest in medicine and nursing. Moreover, she had a negative image of the Petrochemical Academy based on her brother's experience of graduating from there.

Interviewer: Why did you not choose the Petrochemical Academy?

Because they did not have the specialisation that I wanted. Also, this school... is not that good. My brother graduated from there.

Drawing on the available information in the booklet, Zhang Jing did her own research. Through these efforts, she eventually found a nursing school in Xuhui District that she liked. "From the booklet, I looked at a lot of schools that offer this specialisation, a lot of nursing schools."

However, her parents had different professional plans for her. They preferred her to become a kindergarten teacher because of the perceived higher esteem in society and the potentially higher salary.

My mother wanted me to become a kindergarten teacher. They thought that between nursing and kindergarten teaching, teachers would certainly end up being more respected by people. Earnings are also better. But I think that I could not manage kids [laughs]. I do not like kids. I find them too loud. Also, kids are too precious nowadays. If ever anything happens, parents will become very annoying.

With her budding interest in medicine, she managed to overcome her parents' preferences.

[I filled out the application form] after discussing it with my parents. Actually, I had already made up my mind before. I wanted to study nursing. When I filled the form, my parents did not come to ask me anything. So, I just filled it by myself.

The response of her parents, accepting their daughter's interests this time, can be seen in the context of her previous turning point. They ended up supporting her choice of applying for nursing. In contrast to the support her father offered during the return, the

type of social support was now more ‘facilitating’ than ‘inhibiting’. Her parents seemed to have understood the importance of ensuring the pathway matches their daughter’s interests. When looking back, Zhang Jing herself considered her father’s support as very important for her transition, highlighting how he often respected her priorities.

The biggest help was definitely my dad. Because, in fact, I feel like he dotes on me too much, loves me too much, and then for most things, he will let me have them my way.

The application form for vocational school admission allows for entering three combinations of preferred schools and specialisations. However, Zhang Jing was so focussed on her preferred nursing school in Xuhui that she just entered this option twice and left the other one blank. This approach risked not having a backup option in case she did not get into the programme. It shows that Zhang Jing was unwilling to make compromises and that she was determined to follow her own interests after the turning point in the home province.

Fortunately, she ended up getting into the school. She was the only student from her middle school class who entered this nursing school. However, she also discovered two aspects that were not ideal from her perspective. First, the school had officially stopped accepting boys and thus gradually turned into an all-girls school, which was different from her expectation. Second, she was transferred into the sister school in Hongkou District rather than the main school in Xuhui District, which would have been closer to her parents’ place. Still, even the sister school was not too far away from home so that she could commute during the weekends.

Admitted to the nursing school, Zhang Jing found that she could follow her own developing interest in medicine by pursuing the programme. She found that this aspect set her apart from many of her classmates in the vocational school.

It was my own decision. I really like these [medical] things. I have a lot of classmates in vocational school who got there because they did not do well in the *zhongkao*. Then their parents chose this specialisation for them. But I chose it only because I liked it myself. Otherwise, these last years would have been too much to suffer for me.

While Zhang Jing did not have many dreams or long-term goals when she was still in middle school, she began planning with more long-term vision when in vocational school, as the remainder of this section illustrates.

I did not have any expectations [about my future]. I didn't. I was going one step at the time. At the time, I thought that I was perhaps still very young. How can you have dreams or something?

In vocational school, she was among the best three in her class of over 30 students which earned her several municipal scholarships to support her studies (see also beginning sections in chapter 6). Moreover, she plans on moving into an advanced vocational programme (*dazhuan*) after graduation.

I definitely want to go to *dazhuan* [community college]. How to say it? Nowadays, in the profession of nursing, diplomas are very important for the professional title and for your wage. Welfare entitlements also depend on your degree. So, I definitely want to go to *dazhuan*. I will first do my internship, then attend the cram class and then take the exam for *dazhuan*.

She has professional ambitions to eventually become a head nurse in a local hospital in Jinshan.

I want to become a head nurse. I've already figured out where I'm going to intern, and I'm at this hospital in Jinshan, and it just so happens that our school has this internship spot, and then I want to intern there. It's close to home. When I do an internship there, they could take me on, I think.

In sum, several factors improved for Zhang Jing, when she returned to Shanghai. She obtained reliable information about institutional access through the booklet which she received at school, her parents shifted towards offering 'facilitating' support, and she developed a subject-based interest in nursing. These changes collectively led to a better interest-environment fit for her. Once she obtained access to the desired nursing school,

she was able to tie in her interest and long-term goals with her pathway and saw it through to completion, thereby shifting from a turbulent into a smooth school-to-work transition.

5.4 Contrasting analysis and discussion

What emerges from the contrast of the school-to-work transitions of Wang Meiling and Zhang Jing? Both cases were similar in that they embarked on their school-to-work transitions from comparable starting points and took analogous first steps. They were both high-achieving female migrant students from public middle school who had been segregated into migrant classes. Moreover, they both had parents who supported the idea of returning to the home provinces for high school. They also both felt a strong attachment to their home in Shanghai and their family. Even their socioeconomic background was very similar, as both had parents running small businesses. Both cases faced similar institutional access, as they were excluded from public high schools but had access to vocational schools (“medium access” migrant group). Lastly, they also both returned to their home provinces without being accompanied permanently by their parents.

However, both cases differ in terms of the degree of turbulence experienced. While Wang Meiling’s decision-making process was rather smooth, and she persisted throughout the implementation of the return, Zhang Jing experienced conflict in the decision-making stage and eventually dropped off the return pathway. However, she managed to shift into a smoother transition once she was back in Shanghai.

In order to explain this difference, several aspects can be contrasted during the *decision-making* phase. First, the two migrant girls differed in terms of their interests. Wang

Meiling, empowered by her teacher, had a strong academic interest in achieving the highest possible degree while Zhang Jing did not have such a strong academic interest. Second, Wang Meiling and her family were well-informed about the institutional setup in the home province, partly thanks to the homeroom teacher in middle school. By contrast, Zhang Jing's father relied on information that proved inaccurate upon arrival in the home province. Third, while interest congruence between parents and kids characterised Wang Meiling's decision to return, Zhang Jing did not have a congruent setup. Her father's interest in higher academic achievement diverged from her own interest in staying in Shanghai. She prioritised spatial over educational interests, while Wang Meiling prioritised educational interests over her place affinity to Shanghai. Fourth, while several cases of young people in this study were able to overcome interest incongruence and conflicts with their parents to reach a good interest-environment fit at the end of the initial decision-making phase (chapter 4; see also chapter 7), Zhang Jing was unable to achieve a good fit through discussions. In contrast to these cases, Zhang Jing's experience highlights that a conflict between parents and children during the decision-making process becomes problematic if it is not resolved through a compromise which leads to a good interest-environment fit for the young person. For Wang Meiling, there was no need for these discussions. Fifth, Wang Meiling reached the decision in an environment characterised by social support aimed at respecting her interest, while this was not the case for Zhang Jing, at least as far as the initial return decision is concerned. In sum, these differences show that Wang Meiling reached the return decision with a good interest-environment fit while Zhang Jing did not have a good fit. Wang Meiling's case almost represents an ideal-type of the decision-making process leading to a good fit, while Zhang Jing's example illustrates in which ways young people's experiences can diverge from the ideal-type.

When contrasting the *implementation* of the decision, three aspects stand out. First, having an academic interest led Wang Meiling to see the point of pursuing the return pathway. The pathway made sense subjectively which fuelled her motivation. Without a fitting interest, Zhang Jing could not muster the same level of motivation to pursue the pathway of returning. Second, the pathway was not entirely in line with expectations for either of the two. For Wang Meiling, adversity encountered in terms of academic pressure and challenges related to the grandparents might have been expected, but the exact nature of these troublesome experiences was still surprising. For Zhang Jing, the challenges of having to deal with loneliness while living with her aunt were unexpected. However, the way that the two girls were able to cope with these challenges differed. They made sense of their experiences in different ways. From the way that Wang Meiling dealt with her adverse experiences, a strong sense of purpose emerges. A sense of purpose that, this thesis argues, is at least partly driven by her good interest-environment fit. By contrast, suffering from alienation in the home province felt devoid of meaning for Zhang Jing. She did not see the point. Third, both cases received social support during their implementation. The emotional support through her mother was helpful for Wang Meiling since it reinforced a good fit and kept her on track. For Zhang Jing, without a good interest-environment fit, the support she received seemed to reinforce an unwanted direction. In the end, she rather appreciated her father's support when he allowed her to drop out and return to Shanghai.

Back in Shanghai, a few aspects changed that allowed Zhang Jing to adjust and reach a good interest-environment fit. She developed a new subject-related interest in medicine and had access to vocational schools about which she was well-informed. She was able to overcome an interest incongruence with her mother and eventually enjoyed 'facilitating' rather than 'inhibiting' social support. Out of the good interest-environment fit emerged a

high level of motivation to pursue the alternative pathway of vocational education (see chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of vocational education). The good fit allowed Zhang Jing to shift into a smooth school-to-work transition.

Beyond the direct comparison of the two cases, a conceptual point can be made. It should be noted that the environment can have an influence on interests. For instance, Wang Meiling's case illustrates the important role of teachers in developing the academic interests of students through care, effort, and establishing an emotional connection. This point is taken up and further developed in the grounded theory chapter (chapter 8), which follows the four empirical chapters.

How do these two cases fit in my study's broader set of cases? First, Wang Meiling's case is similar to that of two boys and one girl who also returned to their home provinces and achieved a smooth school-to-work transition into high school and beyond (interviewees 7, 17, 18). All three also reached a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making phase and could then tie their interest to their pathways. It is noteworthy that both boys were taught by the same homeroom teacher, Ms Cheng, who guided them in the development of their academic interests. Second, Zhang Jing's case is comparable to three other cases. The first two are other girls (interviewees 3, 21) who also returned grudgingly without a good interest-environment fit and eventually dropped out to move back in with their parents. However, the case of the first girl is different in that the return happened not for high school but for vocational school. Moreover, it differed in that her dropping out resulted in further turbulence rather than in finding a good interest-environment fit and a smooth transition with a high level of motivation. The case of the second girl is different in that after her dropout, she was forced back onto the original return track by her parents and did not achieve a good interest-environment fit. In general, Zhang Jing's successful adjustment to a smooth pathway with a high level of motivation

after having dropped out was rare. All other cases at best achieved a ‘fragile smoothness’, unsupported by a high level of motivation (see chapter 8 for a more detailed discussion). Lastly, the third case is that of a boy (interviewee 24) who also returned to the home province against his will — albeit for work — and also dropped out. He experienced a gentle landing into an alternative vocational school pathway that he followed with a ‘fragile smoothness’.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored in detail two cases who embarked on a return to their home provinces in order to pursue an academic pathway. The contrast allowed us to evaluate the factors that marked differences and similarities between the cases. The analysis pointed to the importance of considering the multidimensional concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ and its link to motivation in explaining why these young people persisted on or dropped off their pathways. Both cases also highlight the struggle of individual motivation in the face of severe structural constraints, such as institutional exclusion and economic hardship, resulting in transitions that can be characterised by constrained or ‘bounded’ agency (Evans, 2002, 2007). The next two chapters examine comparable patterns of smoothness and turbulence in school-to-work transitions on the two other major pathways of vocational education and working straight after middle school.

Chapter 6: Pursuing Vocational Education

6.1 Introduction

Which historical and societal factors explain the stigma attached to vocational schooling, the main alternative to the academic track considered by young migrants I met in China? And what does it mean to choose this stigmatised pathway for young people and their families? The literature on vocational education in China tends to lump vocational schools together, arguing that they collectively “channel migrant youth into the lower rungs of the labour market” (Ling, 2020, p. 107; see also Lan, 2014). In this chapter, I problematise this notion because it does not give full credit to the diversity among institutions in terms of quality and resulting job prospects. Moreover, through the detailed exploration of the cases of two migrant boys who entered vocational schools after the end of their compulsory middle school education, I highlight the mechanism that explains persistence on the vocational school track. One of the boys persisted in vocational school after achieving a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making process. The other, by contrast, did not reach a good fit and eventually dropped out. Thereafter, I contrast the types of interests that lead to a good fit for the vocational school track with those required for the academic track.

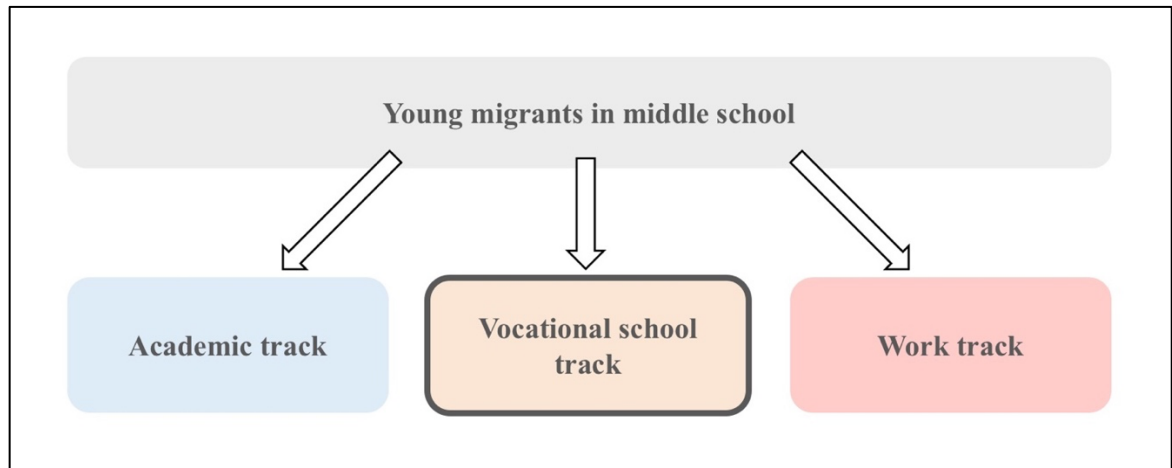


Figure 11: Highlighting vocational school track among pathway options for young migrants

As mentioned in the introduction of the previous chapter, I purposefully delay detailed engagement with theoretical concepts and the pre-existing literature until the grounded theory is fully developed in chapter eight. This move allows the narrative to develop full thrust before engaging with other theories (Dunne, 2011). I reiterate this point, as readers might otherwise wonder why the theoretical engagement is kept to a minimum in this chapter.

6.2 What it means to pursue the vocational school track in China

In practice, as a matter of policy, about half of all middle school students in China — this also includes *local* students in Shanghai — fail in the high school admission exam (*zhongkao*) and have to consider alternative pathways to the academic track (Chen, 2008; Kuczera & Field, 2012; Woronov, 2015). Vocational school is a commonly considered alternative. However, in contemporary Chinese society, there is a stigma attached to vocational schooling. These institutions are perceived as an inferior and less prestigious alternative to the academic track described in the previous chapter. This perception is the result of historical evolution. When the institution of state-sponsored vocational training

was first developed under Mao, its main purpose was educating workers for the *danwei* (work units) in the cities. At a time when university education was still uncommon, and graduates of vocational schools were seen as highly educated, the system was respected and regarded as prestigious among working-class youths (Thøgersen, 1990). It offered a way to acquire relevant skills that would lead to stable jobs in the “iron rice bowl” cradle-to-grave social security system during the Mao era (Unger, 1982). However, the reputation of vocational schools declined with the beginning of the reform era in the 1980s. With university education becoming more widely accessible for young people in the 1990s, the relative value and prestige of vocational education dropped (Wu & Ye, 2018). Beyond the historical development of expanding tertiary education, there are several reasons why vocational education is stigmatised in contemporary China.

The first one is related to relatively low entry grades required for vocational schooling, which have signalling effects on outsiders. The high degree of competition for students among vocational schools leads many schools to lower their admission grades. The lower performance threshold contrasts sharply with the paramount value placed on educational achievement on the academic track (see the previous chapter). Some scholars of Chinese education argue that in China’s moral economy test scores represent a particular form of fetishised “numeric capital” (Woronov, 2015, p. 14). In this view, test scores capture more than academic performance, but instead become a moral judgement of the social worth of young people (Woronov, 2011, p. 83). Following this line of reasoning, those students who attend academically less rigorous vocational schools may be seen as lacking social value. This view contributes to the stigma of vocational education.

The second reason is related to the perceived low socioeconomic status (SES) of vocational students. Many local Shanghainese families towards the lower end of the income spectrum view vocational institutions as a way to ensure that their children

receive at least a basic preparation for future jobs (Ling, 2015, 2020). The relative concentration of low SES students in vocational schools further contributes to the stigma associated with them.

The third reason is related to the perceived low “quality” of vocational students, expressed through a discourse on *suzhi* (“population quality”). The term *suzhi* has long been employed by government administrators and urban inhabitants to portray rural residents and migrants as being deficient in manners and education (Anagnost, 2004; Kipnis, 2007; Murphy, 2004). When referring to vocational school students, however, the expression has acquired new significance, since they were formerly mostly urban residents. Ling (2020) finds that some young Chinese migrants regard vocational school students in Shanghai as having low *suzhi* because some of these students do not conform to the perceived appropriate behaviour associated with the academic track, such as refraining from smoking and from publicly displaying affection on campus.

Fourth, there is a perception that vocational schools offer a lower teaching quality (Loyalka et al., 2015). While academic high schools are typically subject to regular checks and inspections by officials from education bureaus (Kipnis, 2011), vocational schools have fewer such checks in the form of district-wide standardised examinations, known as *tongkao* (Ling, 2020). Some vocational schools respond to the reduced supervision by hiring retired teaching staff to reduce operating costs, which underpins the perception of subpar vocational school teaching.

Fifth, vocational students are often portrayed as showing little engagement in the classroom, “passing the time and getting by with minimum effort in class and schoolwork”, with many playing with their phones or some even sleeping (Ling, 2020, p. 122; see also Woronov, 2015). This classroom behaviour, sometimes summarised as a

culture of *hun* (muddling along), is seen as a response to the above stigma and inferior teaching quality experienced in vocational schools (Ling, 2015). Both teachers and parents are depicted as being complicit in the culture of *hun* by endorsing a permissive approach and regarding vocational schooling merely as a way to keep their children off the streets until they are old enough to take up a job (Ling, 2020). The perceived classroom behaviour of vocational school students can be seen as further reinforcing the stigma associated with vocational schools.

The stigmatisation leads to a perceived hierarchy of pathways among young migrants and their families when choosing a suitable direction beyond middle school. The literature on Chinese education pictures attending vocational schools as a troubled and low-prestige route into the labour market since vocational school graduates are in competition with university graduates within their discipline (Hansen and Woronov, 2013). Ling (2020), echoing Lan (2014), goes on to argue that vocational schools thereby “channel migrant youth into the lower rungs of the labour market” (p. 107).

However, the literature on vocational education in China often does not give full credit to the diversity in vocational school offerings and the wide range of quality between different institutions. While some vocational schools fit the stereotype of having very low entry grades, less qualified teaching staff and sleeping students in class, there are also more competitive institutions with higher entry grades and higher standards. These institutions require students to work hard and obtain relevant vocational skills for the taught professions, such as, among others, kindergarten teaching, nursing or chemical engineering. This wide range of quality was evident in my study. Quality gaps existed between many of the seven different vocational institutions that young migrants attended and also between specialisations chosen within these institutions. The varying quality of vocational schools and specialisations shifts our attention to the active pathway choice of

young people, which depends on available information and knowing one's interests. If vocational schools vary sharply in their teaching quality and job prospects, the claim that vocational schools collectively "channel young migrants into the lower rungs of the labour market" (Ling, 2020, p. 107) might have to be qualified and given more nuance. I do not intend to argue that there is no stigma attached to vocational schooling in Shanghai or that all vocational schools and all specialisations offer great job prospects or excellent teaching. However, I am suggesting that the pessimistic picture of vocational education as it is painted in the China literature might require qualification, at least as far as institutions in Shanghai are concerned. I do not suggest that I can generalise about all vocational schools in Shanghai or even China based on the small number of seven institutions examined through the eyes of young people attending them in this study. However, the data does allow me to argue that schools and disciplines differ in important ways from each other, with some offering good and others mediocre prospects. Therefore, I am in a position that allows me to argue against the claim that vocational schools uniformly channel migrants into the lower rungs of the labour market.

My claims that pursuing a pathway of vocational education is not necessarily a sub-optimal choice for all young migrants, depending on their circumstances, are consistent with empirical data pointing to considerable heterogeneity within the realm of vocational education. One indicator for wide differences in quality between provinces is the different student-teacher ratio in vocational schools in large urban centres, such as Shanghai (18 students/teacher), and central provinces, such as Anhui (38 students/teacher). Many scholars point to the subpar quality of vocational education institutions in China, especially in central provinces (Smith & Chan, 2015; Woronov, 2015; Yi et al., 2018).

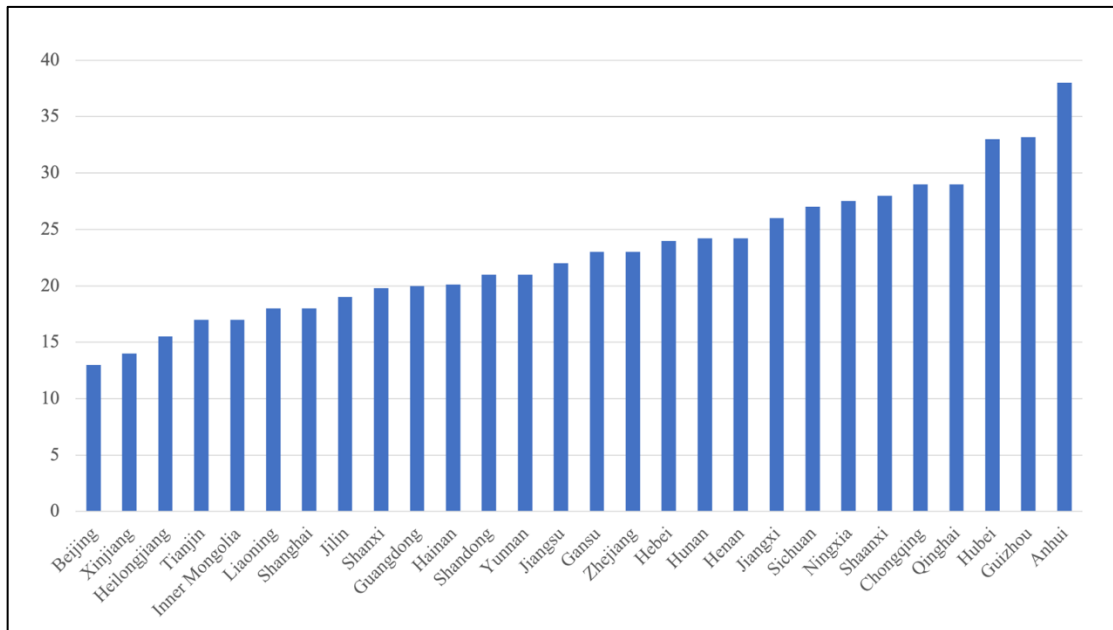


Figure 12: Student-teacher ratio in vocational senior secondary school, by region, 2007; China Statistical Yearbook (2008)

Based on 2008 data from the nation-wide cross-sectional survey China Family Panel Studies, one study found that there are significant differences between groups of vocational schools (Wang, 2017). It found that graduates from specialised vocational schools (*zhongzhuan*) earn 10% more than graduates from other types of vocational schools, such as vocational high schools or skilled workers' school (*jixiao*). Moreover, *zhongzhuan* graduates are 6% more likely to obtain employment. This further points to heterogeneity in outcomes between different types of vocational schools. The two local vocational schools that feature most prominently in this study — the Petrochemical Academy and the Gastronomy School — belong to two different types; the former is a specialised vocational school (*zhongzhuan*) while the latter is a skilled workers' school (*jixiao*). Moreover, the vocational schools that participants in this study chose in the city centre of Shanghai are mostly specialised vocational school (*zhongzhuan*).

Wang (2017) also found that *zhongzhuan* graduates earn 10% more than graduates from general high schools and are 8% more likely to be in employment than graduates from general high schools. These statistics suggest that at least some vocational schooling can

be a more “optimal” choice in terms of employment and earnings than remaining in the academic track, if it ends at high school. However, it is important to note that earnings and career success are not the only ways of judging what makes an “optimal” pathway choice, since subjective well-being and life satisfaction, for instance, may be higher in some vocational school tracks even if it leads to worse financial outcomes.

How is access to vocational education regulated for migrant students in Shanghai?

Vocational education in Shanghai has gradually become accessible for migrant youths. In 2008, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission launched a pilot project for opening up vocational schools to migrant students (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2008). Over the following years, both the number of schools and subject areas available to migrant students have increased. However, despite some progress in terms of widening access, places in some specialisations (*zhuan ye*) remain limited or even unavailable to migrant students. Moreover, migrant students still have to qualify for access as part of (at least) the “medium access” group to be eligible for enrolment (see chapter 4). Those who do not qualify, have limited access to only a few vocational schools, such as the adult education programme of the Gastronomy School in my study.

Enrolment of migrants in vocational schools has been subsidised by the Shanghai city government, not dissimilar from affirmative action policies in other countries. While migrant students are charged the same tuition fees as locals, 2,400 to 4,000 RMB (USD 345-575¹⁸) per year, they are also eligible for a range of scholarships, depending on their circumstances (Ling, 2020). First, since 2008, low-income families can receive an annual national fellowship of 1,000 RMB (USD 145). Second, migrants whose parents hold a rural agricultural *hukou* are eligible for between 3,000 and 4,000 RMB (USD 430-575) in

¹⁸ The values in USD were adjusted in line with the exchange rate in August 2020.

yearly financial support. Third, there are merit-based fellowships of 500 to 1,500 RMB (USD 73-220) available via the Shanghai municipality. Fourth, the city offers extra annual support in the amount of 1,600 to 3,000 RMB (USD 230-430) for migrant students who decide to enrol in specialisations in the manufacturing and service industry. These vocations, some of which are unpopular among local residents, are prioritised by the city government and include cooking, hotel services and lathe operations (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2008). In sum, depending on their *hukou* status, migrant students can add up different scholarships to study in Shanghai-based vocational schools for three years. Not least because of the available financial support, vocational education is rendered into a viable pathway for many migrant students, notwithstanding the stigma discussed above. Two cases of young migrants who entered vocational schools after middle school graduation are presented and analysed in the next sections.

6.3 Two cases of young migrants who pursued vocational education

The following two sections contrast the cases of Li Wei and Liang Hong, both male migrants from Shield Middle School. Both boys have comparable socioeconomic backgrounds, and both were in the “medium access” group of migrants (chapter 4). While both of them started a vocational education programme as their first step beyond middle school, they differed markedly in the way that they experienced the later stage of their school-to-work transition. While Li Wei achieved a smooth transition with his vocational programme, Liang Hong dropped out and encountered cycles of turbulence.

These two sections further support the argument that when young migrants reach a good interest-environment fit with their pathway decision beyond compulsory education, they

achieve smooth transitions beyond middle school graduation. This process works through the mechanism of subjectively linking interest and pathway in the implementation stage, which gives rise to higher levels of motivation. By contrast, without a good interest-environment fit, high levels of motivation are less likely to be established, and young people encounter turbulence, for instance, by dropping out. Moreover, collectively with the preceding and the following chapter, this chapter makes the case that this mechanism operates on all major pathways that young migrants consider after middle school.

6.3.1 The case of Li Wei: a smooth school-to-work transition

Li Wei (interviewee 4) is a young male migrant from Anhui Province who arrived in Shanghai to join his parents at the age of nine after growing up with his maternal grandparents. He has two brothers; one is six years older, and one is nine years younger. His parents used to run a gym close to the public beach in Jinshan. However, the venture failed after a few years, and his parents now work in online sales and the custom-made furniture industry. He attended one of the two main fieldwork schools, Shield Middle School.

Li Wei approached the decision about which direction he would take beyond middle school with decent grades. However, he knew relatively early on that he did not want to go to high school. “I thought going to high school was too exhausting and I didn’t want to go.” To find an alternative pathway, he felt that a subject-based interest in cooking Western-style dishes guided his selection of vocational schools and specialisations.

I don’t know why but I had this idea about wanting to choose Western Cuisine as a major. [...] Because food, I really like food, so I picked this major.

Li Wei's parents held Shanghai Residence Cards, and he thus had institutional access to vocational schools in Shanghai ("medium access"). Moreover, Li Wei performed well enough in the migrant *zhongkao* (see chapter 4) to have a choice among some of the more competitive vocational schools. Some of these schools were in the city centre and thus located outside of the outskirt district of Jinshan. As noted in the previous section, it is imperative to highlight the differences between various vocational schools. It would be too simplistic to lump these diverse types of vocational institutions together. For his preferred vocational school in the city centre, his score was sufficient.

[For my vocational school] my points were enough, because our major of Western Cuisine does not have too high demands in terms of grades. The [vocational] school prioritises personal behaviour.

Vocational schools evaluate the personal behaviour of candidates by reviewing students' personal files which are kept by middle schools.

In middle school, they have our student files. The file says something about how the teachers evaluate you. The middle school then submits it to the Education Bureau and then the [vocational] school will take a look at the file at the Education Bureau.

In sum, Li Wei had access to a range of vocational schools thanks to his parents' status of holding Shanghai Residence Cards and thanks to his performance in the migrant *zhongkao*.

During the decision-making process, Li Wei took an active role in gathering information, motivated by his interest in a particular subject, Western Cuisine. He grew increasingly well-informed about his options because he drew on a range of different sources of information. He used the migrant copy of the booklet that the school offered all graduates, finding that "in the booklet there were a lot of schools" (see chapter 4 for more details), but he also conducted his own research online and visited a range of different vocational schools during his final year in middle school.

In fact, I read a lot about vocational schools, because when I didn't have anything to do on weekends, I would research the schools, and then look at the official websites of the schools. If a school interested me, I would continue to read. I read about a lot of schools, and then [clicks tongue] I felt that it was alright. I don't know why, but at the time I had this idea to study Western Cuisine. I became obsessed to the point where it was impossible not to sign up for this programme. So, I applied for this.

The selection of schools to visit was also informed by advice from an older schoolmate with whom Li Wei was in contact. She recommended the school that he eventually selected. However, he did not blindly follow her advice but instead took it as a starting point to compare schools by himself.

During the last two months before I was about to graduate, I went to visit schools. So, I went everywhere all over Shanghai. And then I visited my current school, because I had an older schoolmate who was in this school before, and she thought it was very good and recommended me to look into it. Half of our [middle school] class went, and I went with them. We went to look into this school, and it was quite good. The major is the flagship of the school. I also visited a lot of other schools, and I felt that I should compare. I didn't think they were as good as this school. Then I filled out the application form, and I entered this school and studied this major.

His prioritisation of his preferred major over the particular vocational school is further testimony to the strength of his interest in the subject of Western Cuisine.

I was actually less concerned about the school. It just had to be this major. But at this school, I also looked at the other programmes. This programme [in Western Cuisine] is currently the best in the school.

He also became increasingly knowledgeable about the enrolment process for vocational schools and about what he could expect from vocational education. His account shows his awareness of the difference between academic high schools and vocational schools in terms of admission grades and the skills they teach students.

They will ask you to fill in a form if you are interested in this major, and then they will send a letter to your home stating that you have come to this school and that now the time has come to fill in the application form. They hope that you enter their school and major. And when you go to visit the school, the teachers will tell you about this major. If you are interested, you can leave your contact details with them. When you fill the form (*tian zhiyuan*) and enter their school, you can be admitted. When you get your final grade, you will be admitted. Vocational schools will not have much of an admission grade. You just need to be so-so and you can get in. After all, they are not academically

rigorous schools. They will make you learn a technical skill, acquire professional abilities.

Thanks to his extensive research, he was also well-aware of the future educational potential at the vocational school. He knew that he could proceed into an advanced vocational school (three-year college, *dazhuan*) after graduating from his first vocational school (*zhongzhuan*).

The decision to attend a vocational school was part of a longer-term plan which Li Wei had formed based on information provided by his parents and the experiences of his older brother, whom Li Wei regarded as a role model in some respects. According to his father, an advanced vocational education, when combined with two years of military service, could lead to obtaining a Shanghai *hukou*. Moreover, Li Wei himself also saw positive aspects of a potential future stint as a soldier. He was looking forward to the “physical exercise and the discipline”.

My father arranged my path very well. After three years of study, I have to take the *dazhuan* entrance exam. After the first year of *dazhuan*, my dad wants me to become a soldier. After two years in the army, I can then get a Shanghai *hukou*.

However, given the current institutional regulations in Shanghai, obtaining a local *hukou* as a returning soldier is only possible for those migrant students who attended public universities in Shanghai as an undergraduate or postgraduate (Ministry of National Defence, 2011). As Li Wei claimed, his father’s social ties rendered this path viable for him although he would only obtain an advanced vocational school degree.

Then my father said that he had a close friend, who had some connections, and that the road to becoming a soldier could be taken. [...] A close friend of my father who he has known for ten years knows people in the army and has connections to get in. As long as you are in your first year of *dazhuan*, you can get a Shanghai *hukou*. And you then get the money from the military service.

Since his father was not available for an interview, I was unable to determine the exact nature of his seemingly secretive arrangements with the military. However, since Li Wei's older brother had already taken the vocational school and military service pathway to obtain a Shanghai *hukou*, the father's connections appeared to be consequential.

However, in case his father's ties did not work out exactly as planned, Li Wei had some ideas about alternative options, once again informed by his family.

When you come back [from military service] after two years, you can choose to go to military school, but you can also come back and leave the army after those two years. [...] My mother said if there is anything that does not work, I can always come back to Shanghai and open my own Western Cuisine restaurant. That's the way my mum thinks about it, but I will have to see how to do this exactly.

In sum, Li Wei was well-informed during his decision-making process by drawing on official documentation provided by his school, the migrant booklet, as well as on peers and family. His parents took an active guiding role in the decision-making process. Combining these sources of information with his own initiative to research online and actively compare different options made Li Wei well-aware of the differences between vocational institutions.

Although there was a general agreement between Li Wei and his parents about the longer-term plan, their interests regarding his choice of major were not at first entirely aligned. However, he managed to convince his mother in particular of his preferred pathway, and they reached a decision without much conflict. "My mum said it would be great if I studied to be a car mechanic. But, at the time, I said that it would be good if I could choose that major [of Western Cuisine]."

Looking back, Li Wei thus perceived the decision-making process as a collaborative venture with his parents in which he had an active say.

I had a choice. Usually, with these decisions, I make some preparations by myself. I go to take a look by myself. But my mum and dad also help me by making inquiries about which schools are good and which ones are not. I told them that this school is really good.

He enjoyed active social support by his parents that can be characterised as ‘facilitating’ in that they gave him suggestions and afforded him the freedom to pick a vocational school and major in line with his interests. The mother’s response — accepting his point of view — can be regarded as a type of ‘facilitating’ social support. “My mother said that I should just go ahead and enrol because she really respects my choice. They did not force me to go to any particular school.”

While his parents’ guiding role cannot be understated, it is nonetheless with a sense of pride that Li Wei stressed how the enrolment process was largely organised by himself.

My parents actually only found out where our [vocational] school was at the last parent-teacher meeting. The interviews, school visits, enrolling, I did all that by myself.

In addition to his parents, a teacher also played an essential role for Li Wei through offering his ‘facilitating’ social support and approval of his longer-term plan. The arrival of a new homeroom teacher at the beginning of the final grade nine marked a crucial change since the relationship with his previous homeroom teacher had been characterised by distrust and confrontation, partly due to prejudiced attitudes of the teacher towards migrant students. Li Wei perceived the new homeroom teacher as genuinely caring about migrants. He remembers how he would plan his school-to-work transition with his new homeroom teacher, “because this homeroom teacher cared quite a lot about what we migrant students [*waidi sheng*] had on our minds.”

The active involvement of his homeroom teacher in the decision-making process about what to do after middle school graduation became evident through home visits and his

homeroom teacher's suggestion to use his own social network to arrange for a transfer into a particular vocational school.

When that teacher agreed to be our homeroom teacher, he made home visits to each and every one of us. My parents talked to him about the idea of me going to *dazhuan* and then after the exam becoming a soldier. My mother clearly told him about this future path, and then my homeroom teacher also knew what I was going to do.

My teacher also wanted to go through some process, because when I went to visit [vocational] schools before, he had recommended me to check out one school where one of his university acquaintances was in a middle management position. The teacher made us visit this school to see how we like it. We also went there, but when I compared it, I still thought that my current school is the best. So, I told him I would go to this school.

The way his homeroom teacher showed an interest in what Li Wei would do after middle school and offered personalised suggestions while giving Li Wei the final say can be seen as a good example of what I term 'facilitating' social support that takes into account young people's own interests.

In sum, Li Wei's decision to pursue the major of "Western Cuisine" in a city-centre vocational school can be understood as characterised by a good interest-environment fit. This fit came about through a subject-based interest in cooking, good access to accurate information through multiple sources, interest congruence with the parents and 'facilitating' support by parents and his homeroom teacher.

The decision to pursue a vocational education in which he was interested raised Li Wei's motivation and excitement to learn more about his discipline. He found that his vocational school education led him to a new appraisal of what the specialisation entails.

I thought previously that a chef is a professional in the kitchen who just does the cooking, but after entering the school, I feel that the status of a chef is not that inferior. I feel that it is something kind of noble because there is also a position called the "head chef".

However, he did not find that all of his expectations matched the reality he encountered.

Despite accounts of Chinese vocational school students sleeping in class and playing with their phones, he realised that he had to work harder than expected.

It's a little bit different from what I expected. The concept of Western Cuisine was not very clear in my mind. Now I have a new awareness. I used to think of Western food as a pan-fried steak, but now that I am in the school, I know that it is not that simple. One has to work hard.

Overall, Li Wei liked his vocational school education and found the experience enjoyable, especially when his work was practical, and he could share the fruits of his labour with his friends.

Every Wednesday afternoon, we have a pastry class. The teacher shows you how to make a new Western dessert, and then you can eat it yourself. I have already gained five pounds. I don't dare to eat them anymore. [laughs] I just take it with me to give it to my friends.

Like in middle school, Li Wei drew on interactions with his schoolteachers as a source of information. He learned about the value of professional certificates in the contemporary labour market and weighed his options for the future. He understood the relative value of the general graduation certificate and professional certificates, such as “the Western Cuisine certificate at level four” or the “beginner's level pastry certificate”.

When you graduate, you get a graduation certificate. But this graduation certificate is not very useful in the eyes of our teachers. What you need to get are professional certificates as they are more useful. You have to get various certificates to find a job.

I study in this school for three years, the first two years of study and the last year of internship, then I can go out to work, or if you want to take the *dazhuan* entrance examination, you can also take the exam. For the examination, you have to work hard. You can take it, if you want.

He saw the point of his vocational school programme. He was able to tie it in with his interest and his future goals. This thesis suggests that the constellation of factors that I characterise as a good interest-environment fit allowed Li Wei to achieve a higher level of

motivation that led him through a smooth school-to-work transition. Having kept in touch with me over the past years, Li Wei indeed achieved a smooth transition through vocational school and was on track for graduation from the vocational school.

6.3.2 The case of Liang Hong: a turbulent school-to-work transition

Liang Hong (interviewee 30) was a young male migrant from Fujian province who graduated from Shield Middle School in 2016. He knew that his average grades in middle school would probably not allow for admission into high school even if he returned to his home province. He thus considered vocational schools.

As for returning to the home province, I know that I am not that good at studying. If I returned, I would not be able to go to high school. Then it is better to learn a profession here [in Shanghai].

— Liang Hong (interviewee 30), male, 18 years, Fujian Province

However, he did not have a subject-based interest that could give him a sense of direction about his future pathway. He only had a vague interest in entrepreneurship that he linked to his regional identity as being from Fujian and to his father's profession.

We in Fujian typically rely on doing business. Like my father, he is also doing business. He's making boards, eco-boards, gypsum boards, for interior decoration.

When he was approaching graduation, he felt uncertain about what exactly he should do after middle school. Without any career counselling available to him, he turned to his classmates in middle school as a source of information. He heard that three of his female migrant classmates, whom he had known since elementary school, were planning on going to a vocational school in the city centre, outside of Jinshan District.

The thing was... I saw that a lot of girls in my class all chose this vocational school. I thought that if the girls pick this vocational school, it cannot be that bad. So, I also

just... I also just followed them. I just blindly followed the crowd. So, I picked this school.

Liang Hong considered his female classmates as relatively competent judges of the quality of institutions: “if the girls pick this vocational school, it cannot be that bad”. At the time, following them presented a reassuring option for him.

When he had to select a professional specialisation within the vocational school, Liang Hong also relied on his classmates. He followed a group of boys at a different vocational school in their choice of the professional specialisation of car mechanics.

As for the specialisation [...], I followed classmates from my class [in middle school]. They went to a different [vocational] school. They also picked car mechanics as a profession. As it turned out, I didn't know what car mechanics in this profession actually do in the end. I didn't really understand it. So, I thought: “Well, so that's just the way it is, I also study for this profession.”

At the time of initial decision-making about his vocational school pathway, Liang Hong thus neither had a good understanding of the degree programme, nor of the school itself. Instead of making an informed decision about a pathway, he, in his own words, “blindly followed the crowd”. His account of the initial decision-making stage thus shows that classmates were a key source of information and that following their decisions was his response to the perceived uncertainty about what to do.

It is noteworthy that Liang Hong's parents seemed to be mostly absent from the decision-making process and did not intervene. Liang Hong thus did not have ‘facilitating’ social support aimed at helping him to establish a good interest-environment fit.

In sum, Liang Hong reached the pathway decision without a clear subject-based interest and with little ‘facilitating’ support or any strong family involvement in the decision-making process. He was not well-informed, given that his main source of information were his classmates' choices. This constellation can be understood as falling short of a

good interest-environment fit for the vocational school pathway, as the one that Li Wei had reached.

After he had enrolled, Liang Hong's lack of more accurate knowledge about his programme and the school led to disappointment. Towards the end of his first year of studying to become a car mechanic in the vocational school, Liang Hong's experiences led him to drop out of the program. He explained that he did not see much point in continuing, citing a first reason related to the lethargy of his classmates in the programme.

After a year of studying, I didn't continue because I felt it was dull and uninteresting. Although our school was relatively strict, people were still secretly playing with their phones. They would just play in secret. Those who dared to sleep would also just sleep. This was repeated every day. There was no progress in studying, so I would rather quit [vocational school] a bit earlier.

His account of the classroom behaviour is consistent with the literature on vocational schools in China discussed above. It points to the poor student experience in *some* specialisations and *some* schools. However, it contrasts sharply with the account of how students behaved in other specialisations within the same vocational school. When I interviewed the three female classmates (interviewees 31, 32 and 33) whom he had followed into the school and who had all enrolled for kindergarten teaching, they found that they needed to work hard and did not see classmates sleep or play with their phones. These diverging accounts suggest that there are not only differences in classroom behaviour and teaching quality *between schools* but even *between specialisations within the same school*. One key difference between the programme in car mechanics and kindergarten teaching was that most classmates were male in the former and female in the latter. Gender might thus also play a role.

When pondering whether or not he should drop out, Liang Hong's thoughts also revolved around family obligations and his socioeconomic background. He knew that his family

was supporting him financially throughout his vocational education and that if he worked instead, it might help the economic situation of his family.

I have two younger sisters, and my dad is also almost 50 years old. So, I want to leave [vocational school] a bit earlier. I don't want to waste time. If I leave a bit earlier, I lighten their burden. [...] Once my sisters have grown up, my father will not be able to work anymore, so they will rely on me.

In sum, in the absence of a strong personal interest in either vocational schooling in general or the programme in car mechanics, Liang Hong was not able to subjectively tie his pursuit of the vocational school pathway to an interest that could have kept him in school as in the case of Li Wei. Moreover, Liang Hong's experience of vocational school life diverged from his expectation, partly based on inaccurate information, little initiative to do his own research and little parental involvement or guidance. He did not see much point in continuing, lost the little motivation he had had and dropped out. This turbulence can be understood as a rational response to having gathered more information through one's own experience.

Having quit the vocational programme, Liang Hong took steps that were shaped by feelings of insecurity due to the absence of a well-defined interest. As during his selection of vocational schools, he relied heavily on suggestions from friends.

Afterwards, directly after leaving [vocational school], I went to my [online] circle of friends and posted this: "I am not going to school anymore." An older female friend commented on the post saying that I should come to her [hairdresser] shop to work. At the time, I had no work, so I thought: "I cannot just sit idle, I should go and learn this."

However, after only five months, he quit his newly found work as a hairdresser for very personal reasons. He felt embarrassed about his uncontrollable blushing when attending to female customers. Although he stated that he "actually really liked this profession", this issue prevented him from continuing.

This loss of employment triggered a reaction in Liang Hong's family, and his uncle decided to intervene. Well-meaning family interventions were a typical pattern in turbulent school-to-work transitions, as the analysis below shows. Liang Hong's uncle made him a well-meaning offer that he could not refuse by suggesting that he should join him to work in his small interior renovation company. After the previous turbulence in his school-to-work transition, Liang Hong felt that he needed to accept this offer to achieve stability.

My uncle is doing interior renovation. [...] He is working, and I am learning from him. [...] I cannot say that I am very satisfied because the job is tiring. But I feel that persisting would still be best right now.

Through this offer, Liang Hong achieved only a 'fragile' smoothness. It was fragile because he did have a good interest-environment fit and only a low level of motivation to work with his uncle.

While working with his uncle, Liang Hong began to observe the professional development of a former classmate, also a young migrant from Fujian Province, with keen interest. Seeing him as a role model for becoming a successful entrepreneur, Liang Hong began to think back to his budding interest in entrepreneurship. He regarded his classmate's path as a possible example to follow.

I have a [former] classmate who is the same age as me, not yet 18 years old, but he has the same goal as me, I feel. He opened his own cabinet shop in Jinshan, fully custom-made. [...] He does it himself. I feel that this is super! He is really clever. He knows how to talk. He learned the same interior renovation as I did. What they do in their industry is not too different from ours. So, I hope I can be like him. [...] He learned a skill and then did that for a while. After he had some savings, he set up a store and slowly worked himself up. [...] He didn't graduate [from middle school], he quit in grade eight, dropped out. He just went on his own and started learning a skill. [...] He studied for two years before he opened his own shop, his parents sponsored him with some money, and he put in the money he made in those two years himself and opened a shop.

While Liang Hong is not currently doing what is exactly in line with his interests, he could be in the process of moving closer to achieving an interest-environment fit by further developing his interest in entrepreneurship.

In sum, a high degree of uncertainty made Liang Hong rely on information from his classmates and “blindly follow” them into a vocational school and the specialisation of car mechanics, a step that turned out to be disappointing and not in line with his interests. Then, in the implementation stage, Liang Hong reacted to newly available information about classroom behaviour and teaching quality in vocational school life and dropped out of school. After quitting his hairdressing job for unforeseeable personal reasons, the social support of his family ensured a gentle landing in a different type of employment, a family business. However, until now, one phase of turbulence follows upon the next, as he has not yet found a good interest-environment fit that would allow him to link his interests to a particular pathway.

6.4 Contrasting analysis and discussion

When comparing the two cases of Li Wei and Liang Hong, differences between the results of the decision-making period are apparent. While Li Wei had a subject-based interest, good access to information, and ‘facilitating’ social support, Liang Hong did not have a strong subject-based interest, was lacking accurate information, and did not enjoy the same type of ‘facilitating’ social support from teachers and parents. Liang Hong thus fell short of achieving the same good interest-environment fit that Li Wei had reached, although their decisions led both of them into the vocational school track. While the type and quality of the vocational institution and programme they attended might have also played a role, this thesis argues that there is also a crucial difference in motivation with

which they both approached the selection process and eventually their vocational school programme. While Li Wei saw the point in researching and eventually attending a vocational school that allowed him to pursue his interest in “Western Cuisine”, Liang Hong was not driven by a subject-based interest in his search for a vocational school programme and later could not link his vocational school attendance to his interests.

Both cases stood for broader patterns in the data. Li Wei’s experience was very similar to that of six other young people in my set of cases who all selected vocational schools, five girls and one boy (interviewees 14, 15, 29, 31, 32, 33). All six also reached a good interest-environment fit at the end of their decision-making process. The fit was equally characterised by a strong subject-related interest, sufficient institutional access (“medium access”), being well-informed about a range of vocational options, interest congruence with parents and teachers as well as ‘facilitating’ social support. Just like Li Wei, they all embarked on a vocational school pathway of their own choosing and in line with their interest. All of these cases subjectively saw the point of attending vocational school and achieved smooth transitions without dropping out.

It is noteworthy that the subject-related professional interests that guided Li Wei and the six other cases to pursue a vocational school track (such as wanting to learn about how to cook western-style dishes) were fundamentally different from the general academic interest required for the academic track (such as the desire to obtain a university degree; see chapter 5). Despite the qualitative difference between these types of interests, they can all be analysed with respect to how well they fit the social and institutional environment which shapes the decision-making context. This thesis argues that the concept of interest-environment fit is sufficiently abstract to capture both situations: whether a decision matches the pursuit of the academic track *and* whether it matches the pursuit of vocational school pathways.

Liang Hong was also no exception. There was one other boy whose school-to-work transition was very similar to that of Liang Hong. This boy (interviewee 38) also followed his friends into a vocational school, in this case, a semi-vocational private high school. His decision was not guided by a strong interest and he was equally ill-informed about the circumstances in the school. The decision-making setup can thus also be characterised as failing to achieve an interest-environment fit. Once enrolled at the new institution, this boy also soon dropped out. Just like Liang Hong, he was also caught by a family safety net after dropping out and hired into a family enterprise run by a close relative. Due to the absence of a sense of purpose and direction in his work, this boy's situation can also be characterised as a 'fragile' smoothness. It contrasts with Li Wei's sense of purpose and his interest-based choice.

Furthermore, a closer examination of Liang Hong's case brings to the fore the importance of timing. His case highlights how challenging it can be to establish a good interest-environment fit upon dropping out after an initial decision around middle school graduation. In other words, there is an opportune timing for finding a good fit for a vocational school pathway around the end of middle school when preparing the anticipated decision can be made without undue rush. It is at this critical juncture that norms and institutional opportunities favour those who find a good interest-environment fit. Once a particular pathway is chosen and later rejected (by dropping out), finding an alternative becomes comparatively more urgent, as the family intervention in Liang Hong's case shows. Such emergency reactions by close family members were common for those young people who dropped out of their pathways in my set of cases. The importance of *timing* evident in these cases resonates with insights offered by the life course perspective in sociology which also identifies the importance of timing of life

events relative to one's age cohort (Elder, 1985). As discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, the insight that timing is crucial might also have policy implications.

Both Li Wei and Liang Hong had access to a range of vocational schools since their parents' possession of Shanghai Residence Cards rendered them members of the "medium access" group. However, it should be noted that there were also some cases in the "narrow access" group who chose vocational pathways in Shanghai. Their choices followed a slightly different pattern. For them, the range of vocational specialisations and schools were much more constrained, and it was typically an overriding place affinity, a willingness to stay in Shanghai rather than return to the home province for a broader range of options in vocational schooling, that motivated them to stay in Shanghai. Their cases still fit into the concept of achieving a good interest-environment fit because vocational school, usually the adult education track of the Gastronomy School, represented a way to achieve the goal of staying in Shanghai vis-à-vis parental or teacher demands to return. Those young migrants who formed part of this pattern also achieved smooth school-to-work transitions.

6.5 Conclusion

Having introduced and contextualised what it means to pursue vocational schooling in China, this chapter reviewed and contrasted two cases of young migrants who started their pathways beyond compulsory education with entry into vocational schools. One case achieved a smooth transition, while the other one encountered considerable turbulence and dropped out. Through the comparison of these cases, the importance of achieving a good interest-environment fit was highlighted. This concept was linked to achieving persistence in the later stage of the school-to-work transition. In general, similarities and

differences for achieving persistence on both the academic track and the vocational school track were discussed. Finally, the analysis also pointed to the importance of timing for achieving an interest-environment fit since it is particularly opportune around the time of middle school graduation.

Chapter 7: Working after Middle School

7.1 Introduction

The majority of young migrants in this study pursued educational pathways after middle school, such as the academic track and the vocational school track. However, some young people decided to enter the labour market straight after middle school (see figure below), even though this is usually considered too early by many parents. What does it mean for these young people to begin working without qualifications beyond middle school? In this chapter, I contrast the experiences of two migrant boys, one who persisted on his pathway and one who dropped off. I highlight similar patterns as in the previous two chapters. A good interest-environment (I-E) fit during the decision-making period leads to a higher level of motivation, while embarking on the pathway without a good fit prevents establishing a high level of motivation and is likely to lead to turbulence. Collectively, this chapter along with the two preceding ones advances the argument that comparable patterns of turbulence and smoothness exist for young people on all three pathways (academic, vocational school, and work track) and that the origins of these patterns can be found in the decision-making process about the pathway.

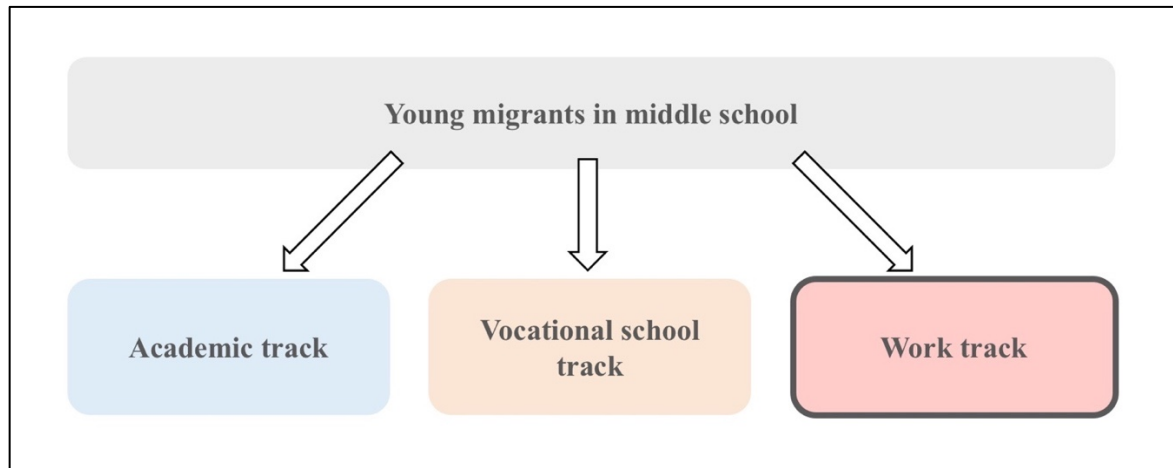


Figure 13: Highlighting work track among pathway options for young migrants

As I mentioned in the previous two chapters, detailed engagement with theoretical concepts and the pre-existing literature is purposefully delayed until the grounded theory is fully developed in chapter 8. By reiterating this point, I intend to remind readers why the theoretical engagement with extant concepts is kept to a minimum in this chapter.

7.2 What it means to enter the labour market after middle school in China

What does it mean to pursue the work track after middle school in China? Entering the job market in Shanghai straight out of middle school is typically considered very early by most Chinese parents, including migrant parents. As decreed by Article 15 of the *PRC Labor Law* passed in 1994, China has raised its legal working age to 16 in order to protect the rights of children. This step is in line with an evolving definition of childhood in social conventions and laws, which has prolonged the period of adolescence in different societies. Especially in economically prosperous and developed cities, such as Shanghai, working at the age of sixteen is seen by many as a sign of “poverty or catastrophic academic failure” (Ling, 2020, p. 118).

Moreover, beginning to work without educational qualifications beyond a middle school graduation certificate strictly constrains choices in the labour market. Due to the increasing demand for credentials in contemporary China, a tendency described as credentialism (Kim et al., 2016), options for middle school graduates are generally limited to work with low skill requirements. Ling (2020) even argues that entering the labour market is essentially a non-option and that it is, at best, marginally viable. In her ethnographic study of migrant youths in Shanghai, she did not encounter any case of young migrants who entered the labour market straight out of middle school.

However, while working right out of middle school might be considered a pathway that goes against the established norm in Shanghai, 4 out of 35 students in my set of cases nonetheless chose to pursue this pathway. Therefore, while a work-bound trajectory after middle school graduation might be described as a less commonly pursued pathway, it is still an empirically relevant and actively chosen option for some young migrants.

However, few studies of migrant youths explicitly include discussions of this pathway. Thus, the experiences of work-bound middle school graduates represent an essential yet overlooked empirical aspect of migrant school-to-work transitions. This study addresses this point by considering and theoretically integrating this work-bound trajectory. The following two sections present and analyse two cases of young migrants who chose to work right after middle school graduation.

7.3 Two cases of young migrants who entered the labour market directly after middle school

The two cases compared in the following two sections are those of two young male migrants, Liu Jun (interviewee 6) and Guo Yong (interviewee 2). Both of them have

similarly disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds with Guo Yong's parents earning a living in construction and factory work while Liu Jun's parents work as a truck driver and as a supermarket attendant. Both young migrants took their first steps beyond middle school by entering the labour market as unskilled workers.

7.3.1 The case of Liu Jun: a smooth school-to-work transition

Liu Jun (interviewee 6) was a male migrant student originally from Shandong Province. While at Javelin Middle School, he built up a reputation for being reliable and having excellent organisational skills. His father described him as “being highly socially organised and adaptable”. In middle school, his teachers gave him a range of opportunities to develop these strengths further. For instance, he became the captain of the school-wide dragon boat squad as well as a leader in the Young Pioneers League (a mass youth organisation under the administration of the CCP for children aged six to fourteen) which is typically given to students with outstanding leadership skills. However, these strengths contrasted starkly with his interest and ability related to academic learning.

[The homeroom teacher] Mr Zhang knew that when it came to study-related things he could not count on me, but for anything outside of studying he relied on me. Once he said something, I would settle the matter. Whatever task the school gave him, such as having to do some activity with the whole class or plan a performance, he would give it all to me, and I would return with a proposal by the next day. So, my relationship with the teachers was quite good, because I would help them with a lot of things. But for things related to studying, they would not call on me. [...] I was not involved in studying at all.

— Liu Jun (interviewee 6), male, 19 years, Shandong Province

Looking back, Liu Jun is still thankful to his teachers for these opportunities. He said, “I should thank my teachers for giving me more opportunities to grow. It was like learning how to manage things.”

While the feedback and opportunities given by his teachers encouraged him to continue pursuing his strengths in organisational work, he felt discouraged in his studies based on the comments he heard from his teachers. He began to oppose the idea of engaging in formal studies beyond middle school.

Maybe I wasn't the right person to study back then. I had many teachers tell me that I wasn't the right person to study, including Mr Zhang, who also told me that I wasn't suitable to study. And indeed, I am not the right person for studying.

While Liu Jun did not develop a keen interest in academic matters, he did have interests in two other respects. First, he had always felt enthusiastic about sports and improving his strength and endurance, qualities that had contributed to obtaining his role as captain of the dragon boat squad. A middle school teacher once commented jokingly on his muscular physique, suggesting that he could become a bodyguard in the future. Opposed to the potential violence involved in defending somebody else, he rejected the proposal but kept developing his thinking in a related direction.

I've actually always wanted to do physical training since middle school. In fact, my dream in middle school was to be able to be a personal trainer; that's what I thought at the time.

Second and related to this professional aspiration, he had also developed a strong interest in earning money right after middle school to achieve financial independence.

At the time, I wanted to become a personal trainer because, as far as I am concerned, the income of a personal trainer is higher. Because my goal is to earn money, so I would not want to waste my time with studying. I just wanted to earn money.

In his view, the main purpose of learning is generating abilities that can later be monetised. For Liu Jun, monetary income and the associated improved livelihood were strong motivations underlying his decision-making process.

Isn't all learning about earning money and supporting a family? I think so. [...] Why would people want to rise through the ranks [in a career]? It's because they want to earn

more money and live an even better life. [...] The reason why people are studying diligently, and the reason why the old folks at home talk about developing oneself, in the end, that is all still about money. However well you develop yourself, it's about money in the end.

These two interests congealed into a plan of what Liu Jun wanted to do after middle school. He planned on following his older sister who was working in the management level of a local chemical factory to earn some money. After saving up a bit through this work, he wanted to take a short-term, hands-on course to become a personal trainer. Through self-initiated online research, he had found out about a school offering such programmes in Beijing.

However, this plan prompted resistance from his parents and teachers who favoured pathways involving further formal education for him, either on the academic track or the vocational school track (see previous two chapters). This interest incongruence between him and his parents and teachers caused some conflict during the decision-making period. Both parents and teachers were generally opposed to him leaving the educational pathway. His father remembered some of the discussions they had within the family.

At the time, his ideas were different from mine. I hoped he would go to high school after middle school. Once in high school, if he can't get into a university, he can go to a vocational school, that also gives him proficiency in one area. [...] He said, "Dad, I don't want to study anymore", I said, "Why?", he said, "Well, dad, studying...". Kids have different views than we had in our time, a different understanding of society. He said, "I'm just not interested in going to school." He said, "I'm going to work, I'm going to look for a job". I said, "You're too young. You should rather stay here to study and get an education." [...] That's what I told him. I said, "Son, you're only 15-16 right now," and I said, "You should keep studying until you are at least a high school graduate, right? If you can't get into college after high school, at least you're a little older. That should be better."

— Father of Liu Jun (interviewee 6)

His mother joined his father in his opposition to Liu Jun's plans.

I just wanted him to go to school, so he could get a degree and find a job, right? I don't have any other intention. I just said, "You just have to go to school." He just didn't want to. When he didn't want to, his father would listen to him. I would say no.

— Mother of Liu Jun (interviewee 6)

Despite having already told Liu Jun a few times that he might not be suitable for studying, even his homeroom teacher pushed him to take the migrant *zhongkao* and at least try to pursue an educational pathway. He remembered, “Mr Zhang kept asking me, ‘Why aren’t you taking the *zhongkao* examination?’”

At the same time, his father had started preparing the necessary documents to qualify for the migrant *zhongkao* (see discussion of “medium access” group in chapter 4). He was hoping for his son to go to high school, although this would not have been possible in Shanghai given their status.

After his middle school graduation, you see... I have social security insurance and everything in Shanghai. I had already stayed in Shanghai for six years when he was to take the exam. We are migrants. If you don’t have social security, people do not let you take the exam. Finally, I did all that for him; the exam admission card was sorted. I told him to take the exam [...] it’s for high school.

— Father of Liu Jun (interviewee 6)

In addition to general opposition to entering the job market after middle school, his parents were also against Liu Jun’s preferred direction of learning to become a personal trainer who works in a gym. He remembers their disapproval of his idea at the time.

Perhaps they thought that personal training doesn’t make that much money and that it is just for young people. [...] They worried that after doing the job until I am 20 or 30, I might not be able to do it anymore. After that I would have to change jobs. So, they did not agree.

— Liu Jun (interviewee 6), male, 19 years, Shandong Province

They suggested that if he wanted to depart from educational pathways, he should instead follow his father’s vocational choices. Liu Jun remembered that they asked him to do “the same as dad, working in transport, helping people move things, because that may be relatively quick money.” They regarded the job as a truck driver as more suitable for old age and expected higher earnings for their son.

However, Liu Jun had already made up his mind. The following reasoning led him to oppose his parents' suggestions of continuing to study by attending a four-year vocational school programme.

Isn't that an absolute waste of my time? Having the family invest money in making me study [in vocational school] and needing to get used to [the work environment]? I could absolutely use a small portion of that money to learn how to become a personal trainer and use a much shorter time to get used to it while earning more money.

He thus still preferred becoming a personal trainer through the short-term professional training programme of only several weeks which he had found through his own online research.

The apparent interest incongruence between the parents and their son could be overcome when Liu Jun leveraged the social support of his older sister. Having established herself successfully in business, his sister had vocational prestige in the eyes of their parents. "They trust my sister more, because she is more successful than me." Liu Jun found that his sister understood what he wanted and saw advantages and potential in his preferred pathway choice. She also knew how to talk to their parents. As Liu Jun put it, "my sister does business herself and she is in the management level, so she could brainwash my parents."

She didn't have any objections at that time. My daughter has already been exposed to many new things. She just said to me: "Dad, my brother, if he studies this, it's not bad. First, he will be strong and healthy. It's good for his body. You all can rest assured. Second, this profession is also a type of craft or technical skill, when learned well." My daughter was quite supportive of him at that time.

— Father of Liu Jun (interviewee 6)

My sister understands what I mean and what I think. [...] When I am 60 or 70 years old, I can teach others with my experience. I'm going to get money for that. I can also, for example, go to some tournaments. Once I make myself known, I can help people shoot ads, shoot magazine covers and so on, for clothes and these things. This way, I can also make money.

— Liu Jun (interviewee 6), male, 19 years, Shandong Province

Eventually, the concerted effort of both Liu Jun and his older sister convinced their parents to let him pursue his desired pathway. His parents were even willing to support him financially for the short programme in Beijing, but his father tied his approval to one condition. Liu Jun was not supposed to “take any detours”, the avoidance of which his father considered “part of success.” In his father’s view “it’s not just about the right way, it’s about going it right.” His recommendation to his son was as follows.

You have to study hard and work hard. Okay? You take this job and learn it well to offer a better service to those who come to work out. [...] I told him, “money is not a problem. Your parents will support you. You just have to behave yourself. Learning a skill, I’m all for it.” I said that money is no issue, but that he needs to learn it well, right? I said, “What you have learned others will not be able to take away from you”. He said: “Okay”.

— Father of Liu Jun (interviewee 6)

In sum, the above narrative illustrates that several factors characterised the way Liu Jun embarked on his first step beyond middle school. His interests in earning money early and his passion for sports led him to want to start his first job with his sister while saving up for the personal training programme in Beijing which he had researched online and for which he had obtained financial support from his parents. The initial interest incongruence was overcome partly thanks to the social support of his sister who helped Liu Jun achieve a conducive constellation of factors, a setup that I term a good interest-environment fit.

Based on this good interest-environment fit, Liu Jun saw the point of pursuing his chosen work pathway as it was linked to his interests. As planned, he took up his first job in the chemical plant with his sister, at first in Jinshan District and then in Guangdong Province in Southern China. During this time, the continuous guidance and support of his sister were indispensable to him.

That was through my older sister. She was like my guide. For everything related to my path — she helped me pave the way. After graduation, I went straight to her [factory]

and then to a chemical plant in Guangdong to work. [...] My sister was in the management [of the factory]. She was responsible for these things.
— Liu Jun (interviewee 6), male, 19 years, Shandong Province

He worked in the plants with his sister for a few months until he had saved up enough money. Then Liu Jun started the six-week-long personal training programme in Beijing.

While attending the course, Liu Jun struggled with the pressure to complete the programme and suffered from prolonged cold symptoms. However, he persisted and saw the course through to completion. After obtaining the certificate in Beijing, Liu Jun took up his first job in the city of Suzhou. Looking back at his first week as a personal trainer, Liu Jun recalls how he persevered in the face of adversity. Due to a hiccup with his bank account, which had been blocked, he did not have access to money. However, he did not want to tell his parents about the problem and pretended that everything was going well. He said that he had been given a place in a dormitory, while he did not have the money to arrange for the pre-payment. Not wanting to bother his parents with the issue, Liu Jun proceeded to spend the week almost entirely without money.

I just ate steamed buns for a week. [...] You won't imagine where I slept. I slept in an emergency corridor used for escape routes. Because in these shopping malls [...] they have these emergency corridors. Our gym was on the fifth floor. After work, I would just wear some more clothes and spend the night there on the fifth floor for one week. I just ate those steamed buns in the street, four for one yuan. One day I would eat ten of these. That's how I suffered my way through these days. But my family does not know. I did not dare to tell them. I suffered through this by myself. [...] When I look back at this time, it was really grim. [laughs] Extremely grim. [...] In fact, this experience made me more stable now.

In hindsight, Liu Jun still remembered how this rough period taught him a few lessons about life. He learned what it is like to live life without money, an experience he draws on in his interactions with colleagues in his current position in a gym. When eating out with subordinate personal trainers, he makes sure to pay for their meals. The second lesson was that he could persevere despite obstacles if he just wanted it. He narrated his

experience of suffering during the early stage of his professional career with a sense of humour, pride, and accomplishment.

This perceived success stemmed from the later stage of his school-to-work transition when Liu Jun's personal trainer pathway began to yield more and more impressive results. After working with Liu Jun for a few months, a former colleague from the gym noted his social and organisational skills (that his teachers had already appreciated in middle school) as well as his motivation on the job. When this colleague started his own chain of gyms, he encouraged Liu Jun to join him as a personal trainer. Liu Jun recalls how the trusted relationship between them helped him to receive more and more responsibility.

What [my former colleague] said to me helped me. At the time, when I came for a job interview [to his new gym], he said something to me. I went to interview for a position as a personal trainer, just working one-on-one [with customers]. Then, he said, "what about you become supervisor?" I went, "I would be okay?" And he said, "you would". Having been supervisor for half a month, "You want to be manager?" "I would be okay?" He said, "You can do it". So, I became manager.

Liu Jun thus became a manager at the age of 19 years, a fact he proudly shared with his former teachers and classmates in Javelin Middle School. His social savviness, partly developed through his organisational roles in middle school, contributed to his climbing the career ladder because he maintained a good relationship to his then-colleague and now-boss.

It is because of his help. If the management level had not supported me, would I have had a way to climb up? [...] No matter how good your skills are, if you are not seen, or if they do not want to help you, it's of no use.

Finally, his persistence and motivation led Liu Jun to become a general manager as the gym chain kept expanding. He was in charge of two locations when I interviewed him last, and they were scheduled to expand to a third one. Liu Jun is happy about where his initial decision about what to do after middle school took him. He said, "but now, look at

me. I have money to spend; I am happy, right? I have a lot of friends. Everything is all right.”

It is from this point of view that Liu Jun evaluates alternative opportunities in hindsight. When analysing his justifications, it needs to be taken into account that Liu Jun described his pathway choices retrospectively and that he might rationalise his decisions from today’s point of view, having already established himself in a gym (see methodology chapter for a more detailed discussion of interpreting retrospective accounts). However, especially given the similarities between his accounts and that of his parents, the picture that emerges still suggests that his reasoning was probably comparable during the initial decision-making period. He is aware of the fact that if he had chosen a four-year programme in vocational education, he would still be studying now. “I think that would have been a waste of time for me. I do not regret [not having studied at vocational school].”

Similarly, he is happy about having rejected the option of attending high school in his home province.

If I had returned to my hometown to study [for high school] [...], I would perhaps not be as happy as I am today. I would be spending every day memorising things, learning English, studying physics and chemistry, wasting my brain.

Liu Jun found a pathway to which he could tie his interests. He had found his calling early on in middle school and shaped his social environment vis-à-vis his teachers and parents, to the extent that it was possible, in such a way that pursuing the pathway became feasible. The next case presented in the following section shows that the ability to overcome interest incongruence is by no means guaranteed and establishing a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making stage in middle school can also fail because of this.

7.3.2 The case of Guo Yong: a turbulent school-to-work transition

Guo Yong (interviewee 2) was a male student who also attended Javelin Middle School. Originally from Sichuan Province, he arrived in Shanghai at age nine. His parents were very busy earning a living through their work as manual labourers, his father in construction and his mother in a smartphone manufacturing plant. Consequently, his maternal grandmother, who had also moved to Shanghai, helped to look after him as he grew up.

In middle school, Guo Yong aspired to go to high school and work in a company as a white-collar worker, just as many of his migrant peers in my study. He was frustrated to find out that this pathway was impossible for him in Shanghai.

I've thought about what to do after middle school a lot before, I've thought about it since grade seven. After graduating, I would go to high school. That was when I didn't know I couldn't go to high school here. Well, so I wanted to go to high school, and after graduation, I wanted to go into a company as an employee or something to make some money, and then by grade eight knew I couldn't go to high school.

— Guo Yong (interviewee 2), male, 17 years, Sichuan Province

His family did not have many social ties in their home province in Sichuan anymore. Their plot of land was rented out to a small cooperative who looks after it, and most relatives had migrated elsewhere. Against the backdrop of these weak ties back to the home province and based on the perceived inconveniences of living in a rural setting, Guo Yong rejected the option of returning for schooling.

I didn't want to go back, because life is very tough back home in the countryside. You have to do a lot of things yourself, farming, herding cattle, and so on. It's also hot in summer. There are a lot of mosquitoes. It's very far to go shopping, and it's very troublesome to walk on dirt roads.

Excluded from high schools in Shanghai and having ruled out the academic track through the home province, Guo Yong had developed a tentative professional interest in cooking. “I wanted to be a chef. [...] I like to eat a lot of different things.” While not yet well-

developed, this interest might have still guided him towards a vocational school, as in the case of Li Wei (interviewee 4) in the previous chapter. However, two further obstacles stood in the way. The first was related to his access to vocational schools, and the second emerged because of interest incongruence with his parents, especially his mother.

Access to vocational schools in Shanghai is tied to parents having (permanent) Residence Cards (see chapter 4). Guo Yong's mother had wanted to upgrade her temporary Residence Card to a permanent one and thus needed documents and administrative help from her landlord. However, due to a lack of cooperation from the landlord, the process took longer than expected, and her temporary Residence Card expired. Guo Yong thus ended up being excluded from admission to most vocational schools in Shanghai.

They required a permanent Shanghai Residence Card, you understand? I don't have one. I haven't got my permanent Shanghai Residence Card yet. I have to wait until August because the landlord has to have it done for me. In the meantime, my temporary Residence Card expired, so I have to wait for half a year before I can get it. [...] It has to do with the landlord. As soon as I moved here, I told the landlord that I wanted a permanent Residence Card, but the landlord said that there is no need to get one. I told him that my child might not be able to go to school; what about that? [...] He didn't care.

— Mother of Guo Yong (interviewee 2)

Guo Yong found that some of his migrant classmates considered a commonly chosen local vocational school, the Petrochemical Academy. "They all thought that they had a lot of opportunities after graduation. So, I also wanted to go there after graduation."

However, he realised that this option was impossible.

But plans did not keep up with reality. The teachers told me that we needed an employment permit,¹⁹ and I thought, "We don't have that."

— Guo Yong (interviewee 2), male, 17 years, Sichuan Province

¹⁹ In order to obtain a Shanghai Residence Card, migrants are required to have a temporary employment permit (Shanghai Citizen Information Service Network, 2020).

He wanted to go to the Petrochemical Academy a tiny bit. But he also knew that he could not go.

— Mother of Guo Yong (interviewee 2)

When he found out that the vocational school option which his migrant friends considered, the Petrochemical Academy, would remain unavailable for him, he started to care less about his future. The frustration led him to draw a general conclusion. “So, forget it. I just don’t continue [formal] studying.” A common alternative for many of his migrant peers in the same “narrow access” group, such as four other young people in my set of cases, was the Gastronomy School. He knew about the school since one of their teachers had given a presentation at his middle school shortly before graduation (see also chapter 4) and his mother also suggested for him to go there. However, any active and conscious consideration of this alternative was clouded by the immense frustration due to the numerous blocked pathways he had already encountered. He thus rejected this potential educational option that might have fit in with his interest in cooking.

My son himself did not want to go to school anymore. When middle school was almost finished in grade nine, the Gastronomy School came to recruit students. At that time, he was not willing to go.

— Mother of Guo Yong (interviewee 2)

Although they said at the time that I could still go to the Gastronomy School. But [clicks tongue] I thought that I had already decided not to study anymore. So, I did not pay attention to it that much anymore. But some of my classmates went to the Gastronomy School. [...] At the time, I did not think much about the Gastronomy School. In my impression, my social circle only extends so far. I just thought about the Petrochemical Academy. When I found out that I could not go to the Petrochemical Academy, I just gave up, just decided not to study. Learning outside of school is just the same. When looking for a little bit to learn, it’s all the same, and then, later on, I wished [clicks tongue] Well, I had already worked it out anyway, all that about going out to learn that and not [formally] studying anymore. When I found out that the Gastronomy School existed, I didn’t think about going back and enrolling.

— Guo Yong (interviewee 2), male, 17 years, Sichuan Province

Guo Yong had already made up his mind about not going to vocational school anymore. Moreover, his statement that his “social circle only extends so far” can be seen as a reference to his limited perception of viable (and thoughtworthy) opportunities through

the choices of his few close friends, most of whom considered the Petrochemical Academy.²⁰ His irritation about being excluded from the Petrochemical Academy led him to abandon the option of vocational schooling altogether. Guo Yong's narrative also illustrates how overwhelming and confusing the decision-making process during middle school can be due to limited and changing information.

At this crucial time in the decision-making, social support through teachers could have been essential. However, Guo Yong had experienced a process of gradual alienation from most of his teachers. His best memories of helpful interactions with teachers date back to his elementary school days.

There was this elementary school teacher, teaching us mathematics [...] he was very good to us. He was particularly strict [*tebie yan*], unlike some of our relatively lazy teachers. If you didn't do the homework, they would not discipline you, not even scold you. If you didn't change, there was no way to help you. But our maths teacher was different. If you didn't do your homework, he would not let you go home. You had to finish it before going back home. That was very, very good. Up to grade six, after that, it did not go well anymore.

One exception was a mathematics teacher in middle school who reminded him to study and kept encouraging him, also through personal conversations in her office. However, towards the end of middle school, Guo Yong also felt that she did not care much anymore.

Actually, our middle school maths teacher was also quite good; she was strict to me [*guan de hen duo*], which also helped me a lot. Sometimes, when there was a lot that I didn't understand she would take the time to talk to me, call me to her office for a chat. She was also very understanding of me, but later... [clicks tongue] she also saw that I really could not learn the material, but she also reminded me many times to study well [*haohao xue*], told me that I used to have excellent grades, but later... [clicks tongue] I myself couldn't do it anymore, and slowly she also did not care anymore.

²⁰ The perception of viable pathways can also be linked to the concept of the 'horizon of perceived opportunities' in careership theory (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

These interactions with teachers mainly focussed on studying school material, and Guo Yong did not recall any conversations about his future beyond middle school. He thus received little social support from his teachers in overcoming the frustration of exclusion from most vocational schools and no guidance that might have encouraged him to give the option of the Gastronomy School serious thought. He described the process of approaching graduation as hopeless.

We didn't hold any hope for graduation. It felt distant and indistinct. It was like we would never graduate. We didn't care anymore. [...] After all, my heart had given up on graduation, so I didn't care so much.

Reorienting towards his interest in cooking through 'facilitating' social support from his parents might have helped him in the process. However, the second obstacle was an interest incongruence with his mother. Further conversations with his mother revealed that she did not give him a clear endorsement of the Gastronomy School at all. She had reservations both about her son's ability to persist through a vocational school programme and the value of learning about cooking in a formal vocational school environment.

What I'm afraid of is that my son will have to go there for three years, starting from his first [vocational school] grade and then three years. I'm afraid that he won't be able to remain there.

Also, if he goes there to learn baking pastry, that means bread and these kinds of things, you can just learn about these things outside [of a vocational school].

— Mother of Guo Yong (interviewee 2)

Besides, she also opposed her son's enrolling in a vocational programme in cooking due to his corpulent physique. Guo Yong remembered the conversation.

I just wanted to be a cook. But my mum thought that I was really fat, so she did not let me become a cook. "If you were a cook, you'd be even fatter. After all, as a cook you have to eat a lot of things."

— Guo Yong (interviewee 2), male, 17 years, Sichuan Province

Instead of supporting her son's interest, she suggested a different specialisation, car mechanics, also offered at the Gastronomy School (despite the name of the institution suggesting a selection of food-related programmes). Guo Yong rejected this suggestion.

He wanted to learn Western-style pastry, [...] that is, to make pastry, learn how to make bread and so on, anyway, food, I do not care. I do not care what he studies. At that time, I said that he might as well learn car mechanics, but he said that car mechanics is too messy.

— Mother of Guo Yong (interviewee 2)

At that point, his mother intervened and suggested a profession that she herself had learned on the side while working, without needing the formal four-year instruction required in typical vocational schools. Rather than taking into account her son's interests, she was mainly concerned about the future earning potential of the vocation, a preference that has also been found in the vocational school choices of young people and their families in Northern China (Kim et al., 2016). This initiative can be seen a well-meaning attempt focussed on finding a way out (*chulu*) of the low-income section of society for her son.

At that time, there was an auntie in the barbershop. She was giving beauty therapies, and she was very good at it. She had even won a few awards. My mum went to learn from her. [...] She was also still working in the [manufacturing] company at that time. She learned it while working. Slowly, she also knew how to do it and offered it to others. She said that it was good and that she was making a lot of money doing this. One therapy for several hundred [yuan], some for several thousand [yuan]. She told me to learn this. She said I was still young and that it was easy to learn.

— Guo Yong (interviewee 2), male, 17 years, Sichuan Province

Guo Yong remembers how she took him with her for a training weekend in Sichuan during his final grade in middle school. He was not very interested in the vocation.

In grade nine, she wanted me to join her and learn how to do beauty therapies. [...] When we went to do the training, I was the only man in the entire factory, except for the two teachers. At the time, I was extremely embarrassed. After two days of training, I had made no progress.

Realising that her son did not want to become a beautician, Guo Yong's mother started a second intervention. She used her personal ties in the neighbourhood to find an alternative opportunity for her son. The ties with a local family had built up over the years as they helped each other out.

At the time, we did not yet live where we live now. We lived on the other side of the street. The rent was going to go up, and my family was poor, so we couldn't afford it. We looked for a new place. It was the barber's wife who helped us find a place. The owner of the barbershop is also named Wang, and my mother's name is Wang, so I called him "uncle". He helped us find an apartment, so we invited them to dinner. We thus became acquainted. I started going to his house from grade seven, so almost three years ago.

Drawing on this network, Guo Yong's mother arranged an apprenticeship as a hairdresser for her son.

[My mother] told me to learn how to become a hairdresser. At the time, there was a hairdresser's salon next to our house. We were very well-acquainted with them. So, I went there to learn. The people there were also very nice.

Eventually, Guo Yong followed his mother's requests and accepted them despite not feeling a strong interest in hairdressing. "Then I went there to learn hairdressing. After all, at that time we were all acquainted with each other. I did not say much, just went there to learn."

The way that Guo Yong arrived at his pathway decision is thus characterised by a lack of institutional access, little teacher social support, and the rejection of an option that might allow for a fit between interest and pathway, partly due to an interest incongruence between parents and child that could not be overcome. It was also shaped by the absence of 'facilitating' social support that aimed at helping him to establish a good fit between his interests and the future pathway. The suboptimal interest-environment fit had consequences for Guo Yong's persistence on the work (or apprenticeship) pathway.

During our first interview, Guo Yong had started his apprenticeship and was three months in. However, he had already started questioning his pathway of becoming a hairdresser, giving indications that he might want to reconsider.

Sometimes I think, “why don’t I study in vocational school?” But then I also think, “now that I already do not study in school anymore, I should be a good apprentice”.

His pathway decision of becoming a hairdressing apprentice, which was not a good match for his interests, seemed increasingly doubtful for him. He indicated his readiness to do something else, perhaps something more in line with his own vision of his future.

The road ahead is still very long. Let’s see what happens. I will not necessarily become a hairdresser. Maybe I’ll do something else. [...] I am not sure if afterwards I might wander and do something else. After all, the profession of hairdressing relies too much on craftsmanship. There are now a lot of hair salons. Every salon is more or less the same. There is nothing novel. You cannot make anything new. So, it feels like you cannot earn much money. You cannot sustain a family. So, I might do something else. Something that earns more money.

It is noteworthy that, perhaps through internalisation of his mother’s preference for future earning potential of a profession rather than an interest-based choice, Guo Yong voiced his concerns in these terms as well. He also began to have doubts related to the prospects of sustaining a livelihood through his current pathway. It is clear that Guo Yong did not feel a strong sense of purpose as he could not link his current pathway to any of his interests.

When I followed up with Guo Yong a few months later, and we met a few more times, he had indeed dropped out of his apprenticeship and was currently unemployed at home.

When I followed up with him again about a year later, the exchange was rather brief, but I gathered that he had received social support from his family and had continued to try a range of different jobs, including electrician and car mechanic. However, he had not managed to start the vocational school programme in cooking. He was again at home unemployed, stuck in a cycle of turbulence. His case illustrates the difficulty of re-

establishing a good fit once the opportune timing of middle school graduation has passed. It also shows how institutional limitations, such as denied access to high schools and most vocational schools for the “narrow access” group, can result in unnecessary turbulence for young migrants.

7.4 Contrasting analysis and discussion

When comparing the two cases, several similarities are noteworthy. They are both male graduates from Javelin Middle School and come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. During their middle school years, they both rejected the option of returning to their home provinces for schooling, and both of them did not have a strong passion for academic learning. They also both had relatively poor grades in middle school, which is part of the reason for their narrowed choices. Moreover, they both started working after middle school instead of choosing a four-year vocational degree programme.

Furthermore, they both had subject-based professional interests; Liu Jun had a well-developed interest in sports and Guo Yong a more tentative one in cooking.

However, they differed in the institutional restrictions that they faced. While Liu Jun had access to vocational schools in Shanghai thanks to his father’s efforts of applying for the required Shanghai Residence Card, Guo Yong’s mother had a landlord who caused them trouble, and she was thus unable to obtain her permanent Residence Card in good time.

Guo Yong was excluded from vocational school programmes, except for the adult education programme in the Gastronomy School. Moreover, both boys differed in the way that the restrictions affected them. Liu Jun seemed almost unaffected by the institutional constraints for migrants in Shanghai and found his path beyond middle school voluntarily outside the established educational institutions. By contrast, Guo Yong

was struck by the exclusion, first from high school and then from the most popular local vocational school, the Petrochemical Academy. Liu Jun did not experience the same level of frustration as Guo Yong and kept on actively planning and researching a suitable pathway whereas Guo Yong let the frustration overwhelm his pathway choice as it led him to reject the Gastronomy School pathway.

Although both boys faced some opposition to their preferred professional choice, Liu Jun primarily from teachers and his father and Guo Yong from his mother, they dealt with this situation in different ways. While Guo Yong retreated into passivity and followed interventions by his mother, Liu Jun actively recruited the help of his older sister to overcome the interest incongruence.

The potential future earnings associated with the vocational choice featured prominently during the decision-making process of both of them. However, Liu Jun's case shows that there is no necessary dichotomy between focussing on future earnings and taking one's own interests into account. His family was eventually supportive of his pathway plan that matched his interest in sports. For Guo Yong, however, his mother's well-meaning suggestions primarily relied on the future income potential and did not take into account her son's interests. The two cases can thus be contrasted with respect to the social support they received. While Liu Jun experienced 'facilitating' social support, that is, support aimed at establishing an interest-environment fit, Guo Yong faced 'inhibiting' social support.

Moreover, they both lacked useful support by teachers in deciding on the pathway beyond middle school. However, this absence of advice did not matter too much for Liu Jun who had actively researched alternatives online and thus enjoyed better access to information.

By contrast, the lack of teacher support was consequential to Guo Yong who ended up confused and without a clear sense of direction.

Therefore, while both boys eventually decided to enter the labour market after middle school, they did so with different constellations of the abovementioned factors. Liu Jun can be characterised as having reached a good interest-environment fit while Guo Yong did not. This thesis argues that this difference matters for their later persistence in implementing their pathway decisions. A good interest-environment fit established through the decision-making process allows for subjectively linking the interest to the pathway. Since the young person can see the point in continuing to pursue the pathway, the level of motivation is higher. Liu Jun achieved such a high level of motivation which allowed him to persist even as he experienced hardships, such as during his time on the short-term course in Beijing or when he started his first job as a personal trainer in Suzhou. Guo Yong did not achieve a high level of motivation while working as a hairdresser apprentice. He did not see the point. Therefore, the two cases also differ in how the implementation turns out. While Guo Yong dropped out after a few months, Liu Jun stuck to his plan and persisted.

Given the societal view that casts working out of middle school as a “catastrophic failure”, why would it be significant to persist on this pathway? Liu Jun’s case points to a response to this question. His trajectory shows that persistence on a work pathway, when fuelled by an interest-driven motivation, can lead to significant subjective success as well as a sense of pride and self-worth. Therefore, regarding all work trajectories as *a priori* dead-end pathways does not do justice to the lived experience of cases such as Liu Jun. Persistence on a work pathway *can* be significant because it *can* pay off for some individual young people.

As discussed in chapter 4, the contrast between the two cases described in detail in this chapter also illustrates the fact that conflict or turbulence *during* the decision-making period can still lead to a good interest-environment fit and a smooth transition. Liu Jun is a point in case.

In contrast to the academic track, which favours a strong academic interest or desire to achieve a high educational degree, the type of interest conducive for a work pathway is different. In order to achieve a good interest-environment fit for a work pathway, a specific subject-focussed or professional interest is most beneficial, as in the case of Liu Jun who had an interest in personal training based on a passion for sports.

Two short notes should be added about gender and class. Deciding about entering the work pathway directly after middle school was gendered in that all four participants in my set of cases who made this choice were male. This pattern could be attributed to the fact that this was a small-n study, but it could also represent the greater social pressure on young men to earn a living in China (Ling, 2020, p. 68).

While this study can be largely understood as an in-class comparison that highlights in-class diversity and heterogeneity, the class background still did seem to matter for pathway choice, especially when mediated through categorisation in the “narrow class” group. Three out of four cases of those young people who decided to work after middle school were in the “narrow access” category. Rather than primarily highlighting the potential influence of class, this point can be seen as stressing the crucial impact of the system of institutional discrimination on pathway choices.

Finally, how can the two boys be contextualised in the broader set of cases? Liu Jun’s case is similar to six others in my set of cases (interviewees 12, 13, 16, 22, 23, 39) in that they all experienced considerable conflict during the decision-making period in middle

school and had to overcome interest incongruence to achieve a good interest-environment fit. They all managed to overcome the incongruence and eventually achieved smooth transitions. Guo Yong's case is similar to those of two other boys (interviewees 24 and 27) who were also in the "narrow access" group of migrants and embarked on a work trajectory after middle school. They also ended up in professions about which they were relatively ill-informed. Both of these cases also dropped out after a few weeks on the job. Moreover, Guo Yong's case also has parallels with the case of Zhang Jing (interviewee 11, chapter 5). Her case is comparable in that she also failed to overcome the interest incongruence with her parents and ended up pursuing a pathway that did not match her interests.

7.5 Conclusion

After introducing what it means to enter the job market right out of middle school in China, this chapter compared and contrasted two cases of work-bound young migrants. In addition to stressing the structural constraints these youths face, the contrast also pointed to the role of motivation in this context of constrained agency. It highlighted the importance of reaching a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making period in middle school. As the cases have shown, with a good fit, it becomes possible for young people to subjectively tie their pathway to one or multiple of their interests and develop the necessary motivation to persist. This mechanism helps to explain observations of persistence or dropping out, or, in other words, smoothness and turbulence in school-to-work transitions. In conjunction with the three previous chapters, this empirical chapter has argued that patterns of smoothness and turbulence are comparable on all three main pathways observed in the data. It suggests that the multidimensional concept of 'interest-

environment fit' and its link to motivation can be used to explain persistence and dropping out on all three major pathways. The following chapter addressed how these insights from the four empirical chapters can be used to construct a theory of school-to-work transitions.

Chapter 8: Constructing a Grounded Theory of School-to-Work Transitions

8.1 Introduction

What theoretical insights can be gained from weaving together the analytical threads from the preceding empirical chapters? In this chapter, I construct a grounded theory of school-to-work transitions that prompts us to revisit our understanding of dropping out and persisting. By incorporating the decision-making period prior to enrolment in high school or vocational school, the theory challenges the prevalent view (e.g. Tinto, 1975) that persistence can be best understood through the interaction between students and the institution that they are *currently* attending. Moreover, the theory invites us to rethink the narrow focus on a single educational or vocational pathway when explaining dropouts. Instead, I argue that our understanding can be enriched by treating the phenomenon more broadly. As this chapter shows, theoretical insights can be gained by integrating the main pathways of the academic, the vocational school and the work track into a comprehensive theoretical framework. The theory also recasts the conceptualisation of ‘interest’ and extends it beyond the realm of education by highlighting its multi-directionality. Grounding the central concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ in this more complex understanding of interests has important implications for educational policy, practice and outreach with marginalised young people. This thesis also makes a methodological contribution. The insights produced through the elaborate process of theory construction

and final in-depth engagement with the literature underscores the utility of grounded theory as a suitable approach for generating new theoretical insights.

The first section of this chapter outlines an empirically grounded typology of patterns of turbulence and smoothness in school-to-work transitions, which comprises five different arrangements. They all share a distinction between the initial decision-making period about the pathway beyond middle school and the later implementation period. The second section develops the main theoretical concept, ‘interest-environment fit’. The third section constructs a grounded theory of school-to-work transitions by drawing on this theoretical concept. The fourth section highlights two potentially negative cases and shows how the theory is expanded to include them. The fifth section relates the constructed grounded theory to the pre-existing empirical and theoretical literature and highlights its contributions, especially to the literature on dropout and persistence.

8.2 Distinguishing five transition patterns

The complex and nuanced empirical material, a part of which was presented in detail in the previous three chapters, can be analysed with higher levels of abstraction. School-to-work transitions of young migrants in this study can thus be understood as following five patterns of smoothness and turbulence. These patterns stretch from the initial decision-making period in middle school into the implementation stage of the chosen pathway, which may also cover revisions of the initial decision. The implementation period as conceptualised in this theory covers at least the first step beyond middle school on each pathway into early adulthood. In other words, it extends to high school graduation for the academic track, to vocational school graduation for the vocational school track, and several years into the job market for the work track. Where data was available, the period

also extends a few years beyond these points. The observed implementation period for the construction of this theory thus usually covers four to seven years beyond middle school graduation, reaching into early adulthood.

As discussed in chapter 4, the decision-making period can unfold smoothly, without conflict or unexpected shocks, or in a turbulent way. The left side of the figure below illustrates this initial decision-making period. As for the implementation period, it can also be smooth (persisting on the chosen pathway) or turbulent (involving a dropout). Shifting from a turbulent first experience during the implementation stage of embarking on a chosen pathway to a smoother trajectory is also empirically possible and thus theoretically represented in the figure. The figure shows that type-1 is the smoothest type, while type-5 is the most turbulent type. The other three types range in between these two extremes. The next sections describe the five types in more detail. In the three-letter codes of transition-types, such as TSS or STS, S stands for smooth, and T stands for turbulent.

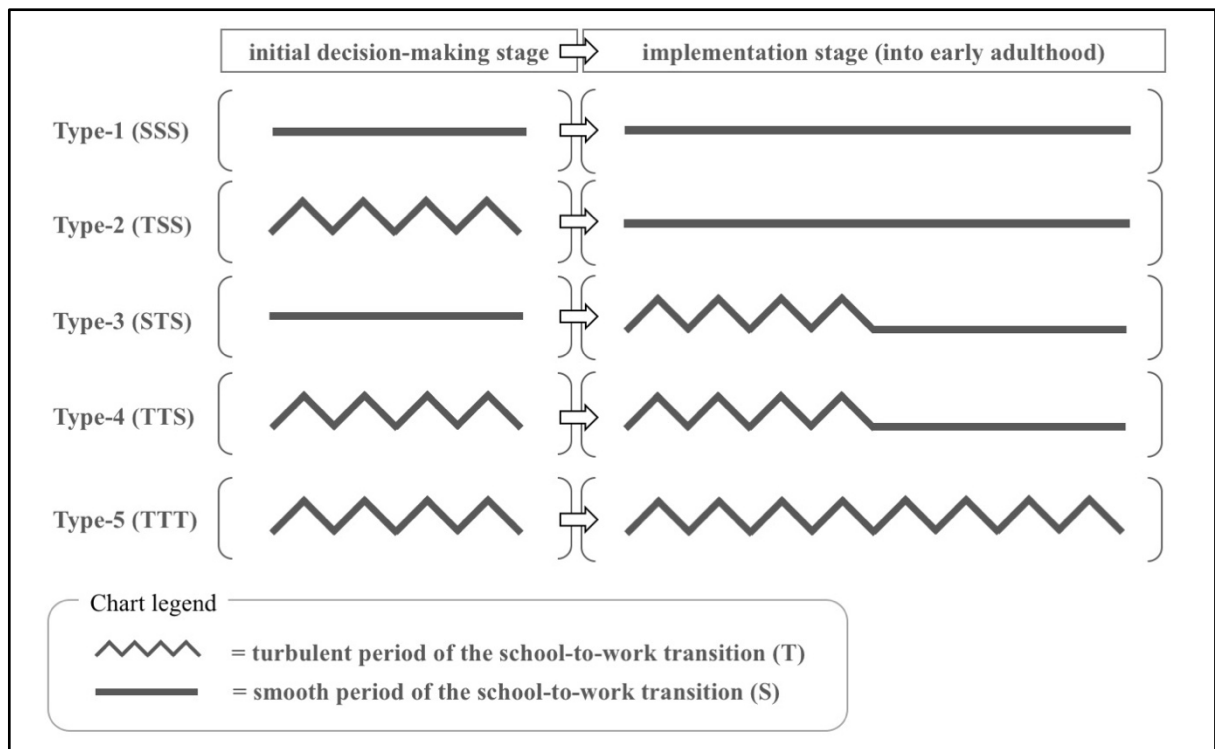


Figure 14: Typology of school-to-work transition patterns

Type-1 (SSS) transitions are smooth progressions with little uncertainty and conflict during the decision-making period, and no turbulence, such as dropping out, during the implementation stage. Thirteen out of 35 cases fit this pattern. Four cases returned to the home provinces to follow the academic track; nine cases stayed in Shanghai for vocational school. Two cases from this category were presented in the previous three pathway chapters. These cases were Wang Meiling (interviewee 34, see chapter 5) who returned for high school to her home province and Li Wei (interviewee 4, see chapter 6) who pursued a vocational school track.

Type-2 (TSS) transitions differ from type-1 (SSS) in that during the decision-making period young migrants and their families need to adapt to more-challenging-than-expected institutional restrictions, lower-than-expected grades, or conflict resulting from an incongruence between parents' and children's plans for the transition. Despite the turbulent decision-making process, type-2 (TSS) transitions lead to a smooth implementation stage. Eleven out of 35 cases fit this pattern. One young person returned to the home province for schooling; three shifted into a semi-vocational or an elite private high school in Shanghai; six cases stayed in Shanghai for vocational school; one started working right after middle school. One case from this category was presented in detail in the previous three pathway chapters. This case was Liu Jun (interviewee 6, see chapter 7) who went straight to work after middle school.

Type-3 (STS) transitions involve a decision-making period with little conflict or unexpected shocks. However, the implementation stage leads to turbulence by dropping out or attempting to drop out. In response to turbulence in the implementation stage, these transitions involved "gentle landings" and shifts into a smoother trajectory. Five out of 35 cases fit this pattern. Two cases involved young people who entered vocational schools; one case was that of a young migrant who returned to the home province for schooling;

one entered a private high school. One case from this category was presented in the preceding three pathway chapters. This case was Liang Hong (interviewee 30, see chapter 6) who pursued a vocational school track.

Type-4 (TTS) transitions involve conflict during the decision-making period, that is, an incongruence of plans between parents and children or teachers and children, and turbulence during the implementation stage, that is, dropping off the pathway. However, after the turbulence, these cases experienced a “gentle landing” and transitioned into a smoother trajectory. Two out of 35 cases followed this pattern. One returned to the home province; one started working. One case from this category was presented in the last three pathway chapters. It was Zhang Jing (interviewee 11, see chapter 5) who returned to the home province, dropped out, and transitioned to a smoother vocational school pathway in Shanghai.

Type-5 (TTT) transitions are the most turbulent ones. They involve conflict during the decision-making period, dropping out in later stages and a “hard landing” instead of a “gentle” one, leading to recurring cycles of turbulence. Four out of 35 cases followed this pattern. Three involved young migrants entering vocational schools; one started working. One case from this category was presented in the last three pathway chapters. It was Guo Yong (interviewee 2, see chapter 7) who went to work after middle school.

While there are three more theoretical possibilities (SST, STT, TST), they are not observed empirically in the data provided by the cases in this study. Therefore, these theoretical configurations are purposefully excluded from the discussion beyond this point.

In sum, the five patterns sum up what phenomena this grounded theory aims to explain. It focusses on explaining persistence and dropping out in the later implementation stage

beyond middle school, that is, on the distinction between SSS and TSS on the one hand and STS, TTS, and TTT on the other hand.

8.3 Key concept in the analysis

In order to explain why some young migrants persist on their pathways and others abandon them, this section takes up and further develops the theoretical concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ that was mentioned throughout the preceding empirical chapters.

8.3.1 Interest-environment fit (I-E fit)

The cases presented in the empirical chapters illustrate how the active decision-making process eventually leads to a pathway decision. This thesis argues that one aspect of the decision is of great theoretical import for explaining persistence and dropping out. This aspect is the degree to which a good ‘interest-environment fit’ is reached with this pathway decision. This interest-environment fit is conceptualised as a continuum, ranging from a good fit to a bad fit. It is a multidimensional concept grounded empirically in the collected data. The following table outlines the two sides of the fit, interest and environment, and what these two aspects entail.

Interest	Environment
<p>Interest is defined as “a psychological state and a relatively enduring predisposition to reengage” in a particular activity with a particular goal over time (adapted from Renninger & Su, 2012).</p> <p>Interests are conceptualised as multi-directional: subject-based and professional, academic, spatial, social, monetary, and other.</p>	<p>Environmental factors are conceptualised as located in layers of a multidimensional system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to pathways, as given by institutions (macrosystem, exosystem) • Information about pathways, institutions, and requirements (mesosystem) • Interest congruence between parents and children or teachers and students (microsystem) • Ability to overcome interest incongruence, especially between parents, teachers, and children (microsystem) • ‘Facilitating’ social support that is aimed at establishing a good I-E fit (microsystem)

Table 20: The two sides of interest-environment fit

Interest represents the first part of the fit concept. The psychological literature on interest differentiates between two meanings of the concept. The definition includes “the psychological state of a person while engaging with some type of content” and “the cognitive and affective motivational predisposition to reengage with that content over time.” (Renninger & Hidi, 2015). In their four-phase theory of interest development, Renninger and Su (2012) further distinguish four types of interests: triggered situational interest, maintained situational interests, emerging individual interest and well-developed individual interest. As the last phase in the model of interest development, a well-developed individual interest is defined as a “psychological state *and* a relatively enduring predisposition to reengage a particular class of content over time” (Renninger & Hidi, 2015, p. 13). By contrast, the third phase, an emerging individual interest, is understood as merely “the beginning” of such a predisposition (p. 13). Moreover, the authors note that, in an educational context, well-developed interests can help learners to “persevere through frustration and challenge in order to meet goals”, while learners with merely emerging interests “may not persevere when confronted with difficulty” (p. 13). In

constructing the concept of an interest-environment fit, I draw on the above definition of a well-developed interest, but I extend it beyond the realm of education. The adapted definition of interest underlying this theory is thus: a psychological state and a relatively enduring predisposition to reengage *in a particular activity with a particular goal* over time. Therefore, only if young people have a relatively enduring predisposition to reengage, they are considered as having an interest in a particular activity. Based on this definition, interests are conceptualised as being oriented towards different activities and associated goals. The types of interests that emerge from the empirical context of this study are diverse. They include subject-based or professional, academic, spatial (and relational, that is, being close to the family), social, and monetary interests. Typically, one interest can be identified as most important for an individual young person. When more than one interest is important, prioritisation of interests becomes a crucial process. Failure to prioritise among competing interests could also result in a suboptimal interest-environment fit. It is also possible for kids not to have a strong interest. Not having any identifiable interest also implies not meeting the pre-requisite for a good interest-environment fit.

The environment, the second part of the fit concept, is conceptualised as a multidimensional concept consisting of several factors with which interests have to be congruent in order to achieve a good interest-environment fit. These multiple dimensions of the concept 'environment' can each be tied to layers in the socioecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) which identifies four layers that characterise the environmental systems in which individuals are located: the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystem. Moreover, both sides of the fit can also influence each other. In other words, environmental (e.g. institutional) factors can have an effect on interests. The

environment can not only influence whether individuals are able to act on their interests, but also influences what interests they have. This point is further discussed below.

The following sections explore the dimensions of the environment in turn. Institutional factors such as *access to pathways* play a major role in shaping interest-environment fit. These institutional factors belong to what Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) describes as the exosystem and the macrosystem, the two outermost layers of the environment. The exosystem “encompasses the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 227) while the macrosystem “is manifested in the continuities of form and content revealed by the analysis of a given culture or subculture with respect to the three prior levels of the ecological environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 258). When access to pathways is constrained, finding a good fit for one’s interest becomes harder, albeit rarely impossible. For instance, a young female participant in the “narrow access” migrant group (interviewee 13, see chapter 4) struggled at first but found a good fit through insisting on attending an adult education vocational school programme in Shanghai despite facing the most institutionally constrained pathway choice. Her ability to convince her mother resulted in an alternative becoming viable for her and enabled her to stay in Shanghai with a good interest-environment fit. Further details on how institutional access is curtailed for different groups of migrants were presented in chapter 4. This factor highlights the importance of the government and the state in shaping the experiences of young migrants, a point that is consistent with the broader literature on China (e.g. Yiu, 2016).

Moreover, informational factors such as *knowing about pathways, institutions, and requirements* are also important. This factor belongs to what Bronfenbrenner (1992)

refers to as the mesosystem, which “comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g., the relations between home and school, school and work place, etc.)” (p. 227). Knowing more about what precisely an educational programme entails, for instance, allows for evaluating whether it matches one’s interests before beginning the programme. Sources of information included *family*, especially parents and older siblings, *institutions*, especially through targeted booklets and information sessions, as well as *peers*, especially by observing them and imitating their behaviour. Lastly, some young people also used the *internet* as a source of information to do their own research. For instance, a young girl mentioned in chapter 4 (interviewee 15) was well-informed about her vocational programme in “Western Desserts” through her own research. By contrast, another girl also mentioned in chapter 4 (interviewee 25) started her major in “Environmental Measurement” in vocational school by imitating behaviour by her classmates without any clear understanding of what the programme involved.

Furthermore, social factors such as *interest congruence* between parents and kids as well as teachers and kids are also crucial. Within Bronfenbrenner’s theory of ecological layers (1992), these factors belong to the microsystem, which “is a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by a developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features, and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief” (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 227). When parents and children have similar visions of the future pathway after middle school, then an interest-environment fit becomes more likely. For instance, the cases of the two girls presented in chapter 5 illustrate this point. Wang Meiling (interviewee 34) made a decision against the backdrop of interest congruence while Zhang Jing (interviewee 11) faced considerable incongruence.

In cases where interests between parents and kids are not congruent, such as the case of Zhang Jing, the ability of both parents and kids to overcome the incongruence and find a solution that takes into consideration the interest of the young person is critical for achieving a good interest-environment fit. For instance, the case of Liu Jun (interviewee 6, see chapter 7) illustrates the importance of overcoming interest incongruence.

Another social factor is the availability of *'facilitating' social support*. This factor also belongs to the microsystem as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1992). 'Facilitating' social support is defined as support aimed at establishing a good interest-environment fit for the young person. Such support can entail paying attention to the budding interests of young people, respecting their interests, and giving them the freedom to choose in line with their interests, within the given constraints. It can also entail helping with emotional recovery after unexpected shocks (for instance, due to worse-than-expected grades or institutional exclusion) or by gathering information about alternative pathways that are potentially in line with interests. Parents, teachers, and peers are among the most important sources of this type of support. It can be contrasted with 'inhibiting' social support which does not aim at establishing an interest-environment fit. The empirical data shows that while many young people receive social support during the decision-making period, not all the support is aimed at facilitating a good fit. For instance, as in the case the young girl with "narrow access" who changed her mind about staying in Shanghai (interviewee 13, see chapter 4), parents have their own views of what might be best for their child to do after middle school and this might not be in line with their child's interest. If parents overpower a decision that could have been in line with the child's interest, this type of support can be considered 'inhibiting'. A similar effect can be brought about by strong peer influence that might prevent young people from following their interest. The distinction between these two types of support highlights the ambivalence of social

support. In other words, social support is not always useful for achieving smooth school-to-work transitions. This theoretical distinction parallels the understanding of the positive and the ‘dark side’ of social capital (Hero, 2003; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

In sum, the concept of interest-environment fit highlights the various factors that need to align in order to achieve a good fit. These multiple dimensions of the concept also point to the various ways in which a pathway decision can fail to achieve the ideal scenario of reaching a good fit. Some of these divergences can be overcome before the final decision is made. As the empirical data shows, a good interest-environment fit can be reached through both a smooth or turbulent decision-making process (see chapter 4 for examples and more details). In other words, a good fit can be reached, notwithstanding conflict and unexpected shocks.

Moreover, the concept of I-E fit captures a congruence or correspondence between one aspect of the young person — their interests — and the environment. This concept can be located in the context of pre-existing models of person-environment fit (P-E fit).

Psychological models of P-E fit propose that a match between individual characteristics and environmental contexts can have significant consequences for the individual (Caplan, 1987; Eccles et al., 1996; Pervin, 1968). Fit theories assert that congruence is “a more powerful predictor of individual outcomes [...] than either of its components (the person and the environment) alone” (van Vianen, 2018, p. 76). Fit theories have been developed for a range of contexts, especially in occupational psychology. For instance, a *person–job fit* captures the match “between individual abilities and needs and the demands and supplies of the job” while *person–organisation fit* examines the match “between individual and organisational values” (p. 77). Other fits include person–team fit and person–supervisor fit. However, these theories generally take a psychological view of the environment. They focus in particular on demands of the environment and needs of

individuals, a point which is further discussed in the literature engagement below. By contrast, the concept of I-E fit developed in this grounded theory takes a more sociological perspective by including class and institutional restrictions into the conceptualisation.

8.3.2 Linking I-E fit to motivation

Throughout the previous three empirical chapters, the concept of interest-environment fit was linked to pursuing a pathway with *high or low motivation* during the implementation phase of the school-to-work transition. I theorise that a good interest-environment fit brings about a higher motivation to pursue the selected pathway because young people can subjectively tie the pursuit of the current pathway ties to their main interest. In the context of this thesis, a pathway refers to either educational or professional trajectories, such as attending a vocational school, returning to the home province for high school or working in a particular job. In other words, when the choice of a pathway emerges from a good interest-environment fit, the current pathway makes sense subjectively for the young person pursuing it which leads to greater motivation.

The link between interest-environment fit and motivation can be seen as emerging from two related concepts in expectancy-value theory — ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘utility value’ (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Intrinsic value is the pleasure an individual derives from engaging in an activity. This concept resembles ‘intrinsic motivation’ (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harter, 1981) as well as the concepts of ‘interest’ and ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Renninger et al., 2014; Schiefele, 1999). By contrast, ‘utility value’ refers to the degree to which an activity relates to personal goals, such as career goals. Even if a young person is not interested in the activity for its own sake, it can be helpful in achieving

another important goal and thus hold ‘utility value’. As Eccles and Wigfield (2002) note “students often take classes they do not particularly enjoy but that they need to take to pursue other interests, to please their parents, or to be with their friends” (p. 120). This aspect can be understood as capturing the ‘extrinsic’ reasons for engaging in a particular activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harter, 1981) and it also ties in with young people’s internalised short- and long-term goals. A young person that reaches a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making stage is likely to see the point or reason, either intrinsically or extrinsically, of pursuing the current pathway.

The motivation to pursue the current pathway can be further strengthened through ‘facilitating’ social support. If young people receive ‘facilitating’ emotional support while on their pathway, they are more likely to strengthen the link between their pathway and their interest. This type of social support while pursuing the pathway can again be contrasted with ‘inhibiting’ social support, such as when young people drop out or quit their job and are supported to find an alternative quickly, regardless of whether this alternative is in line with their interests. Moreover, the development of motivation can also be affected by changes in interests. This process is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In sum, this section presented the link between the concept of interest-environment fit and motivation which is crucial for addressing the research question of this thesis aimed at understanding and explaining patterns of smoothness and turbulence in school-to-work transitions.

8.4 Constructing the grounded theory

8.4.1 Main theoretical narrative of the grounded theory

The previous section further developed the concept of I-E fit and its link with motivation. This section brings these concepts together in a theoretical account that explains persistence and dropping out in the post–middle school graduation stage. Table 21 below summarises the main mechanism of the theory.

Main theoretical narrative of the grounded theory

When young migrants reach a decision characterised by a good interest-environment fit by the end of the decision-making process, they are more motivated to pursue the selected track. With a higher level of motivation, these young people are more likely to persist on their pathways. In other words, these transitions remain smooth during the implementation period, which extends at least into early adulthood.

When young migrants fail to reach a pathway decision characterised by a good interest-environment fit, they are unlikely to tie their interest to the pathway subjectively and are less motivated to persist and engage. This motivational insight explains why many abandon their pathway. In other words, with a bad interest-environment fit, turbulence in the implementation stage is a likely result. This turbulence can then be seen as a rational response to not being able to tie the pursuit of the pathway to one's interests.

Turbulence in the implementation stage can result from one of the various ways in which a good interest-environment fit can fail to be established in the decision-making process.

Social support can vary in usefulness in the transition process. During the decision-making period, social support can ‘facilitate’ or ‘inhibit’ a good interest-environment fit. Assessing the role of social support relative to the aim of bringing about a good fit allows for a distinction between more (‘facilitating’) and less useful (‘inhibiting’) social support.

Table 21: Main theoretical narrative of the grounded theory

In order to illustrate the mechanism of how the concept of interest-environment fit (I-E fit) and its link to motivation explain either persistence or dropping out, the remainder of this section goes through several steps to construct a diagram of the dynamics captured by the grounded theory.

The diagram first distinguishes between two stages of school-to-work transitions; the first covers the decision-making phase about what to do after middle school that takes place during the middle school years; the second captures the implementation stage into early adulthood after the initial decision was taken.

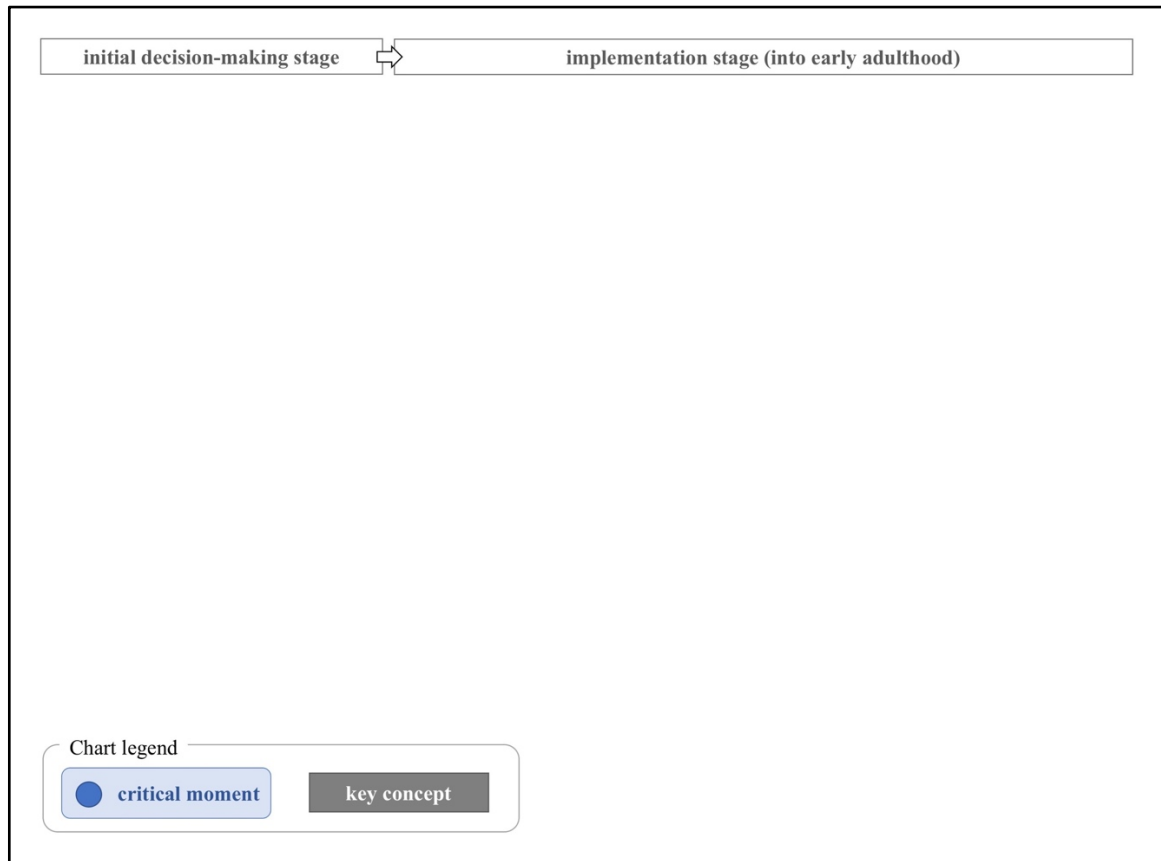


Figure 15: First step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

The second step introduces the process of ‘deciding about pathways’ which comprises the two subprocesses of information gathering and negotiating pathways (see chapter 4). It also captures the decision-making moment at the end of this stage.

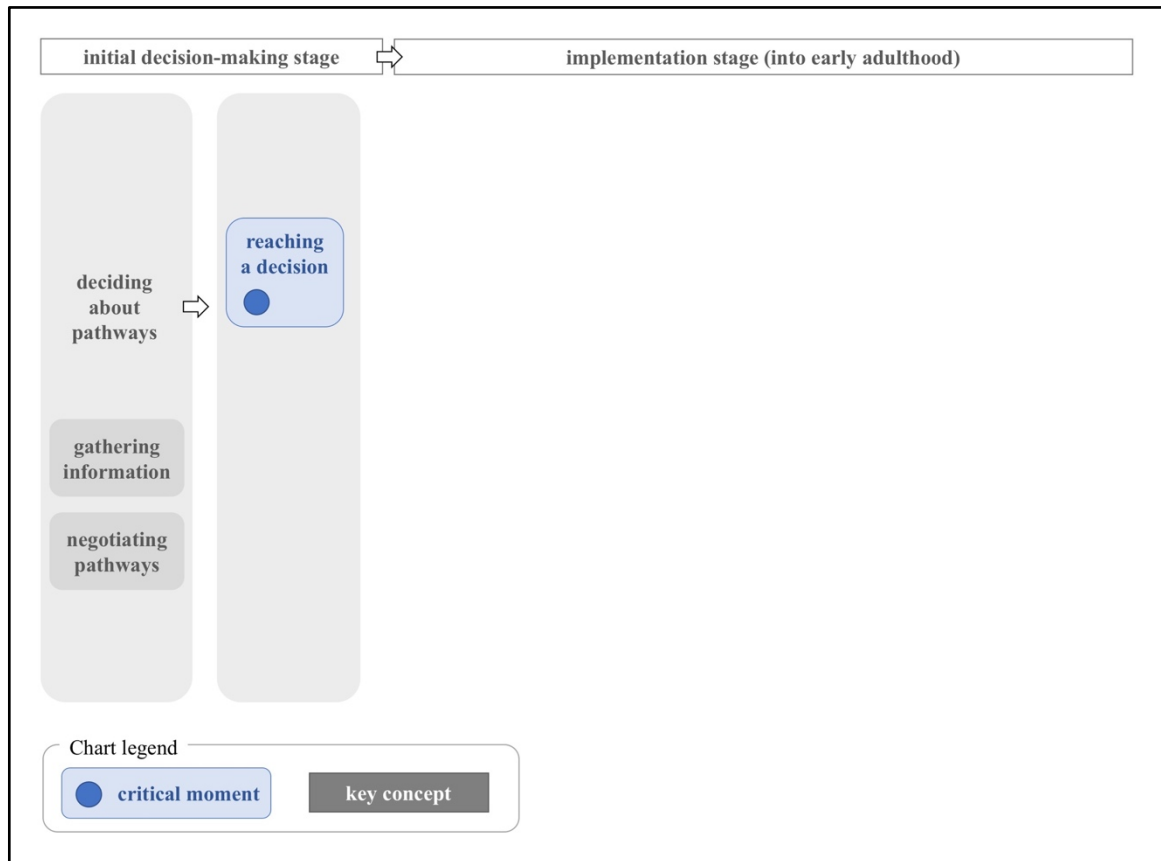


Figure 16: Second step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

The third step highlights how pathway decisions are associated with an interest-environment fit (I-E fit), ranging from good to bad. The continuum outlined in the previous section of this chapter is thus introduced into the diagram.

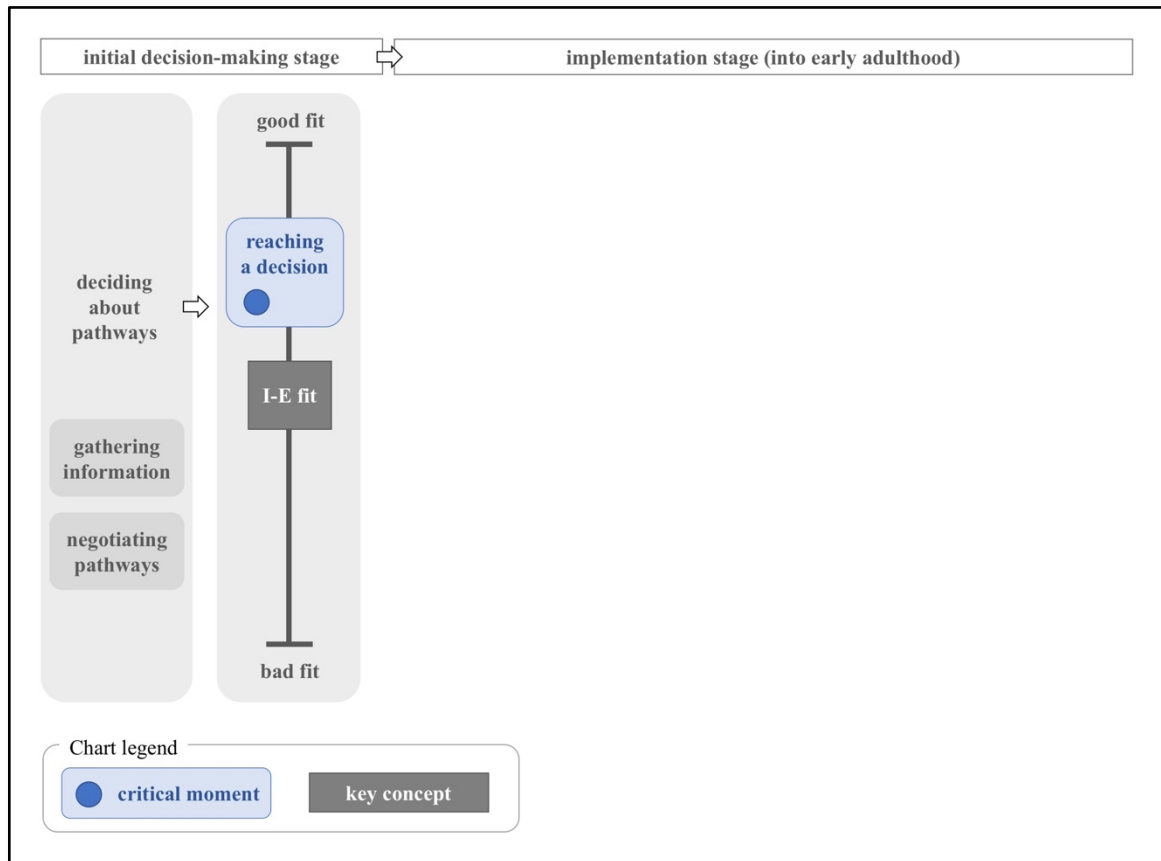


Figure 17: Third step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

The fourth step shows that a good interest-environment fit leads to a higher level of motivation to pursue the selected pathway. Moreover, a bad fit leads to a lower level of motivation.

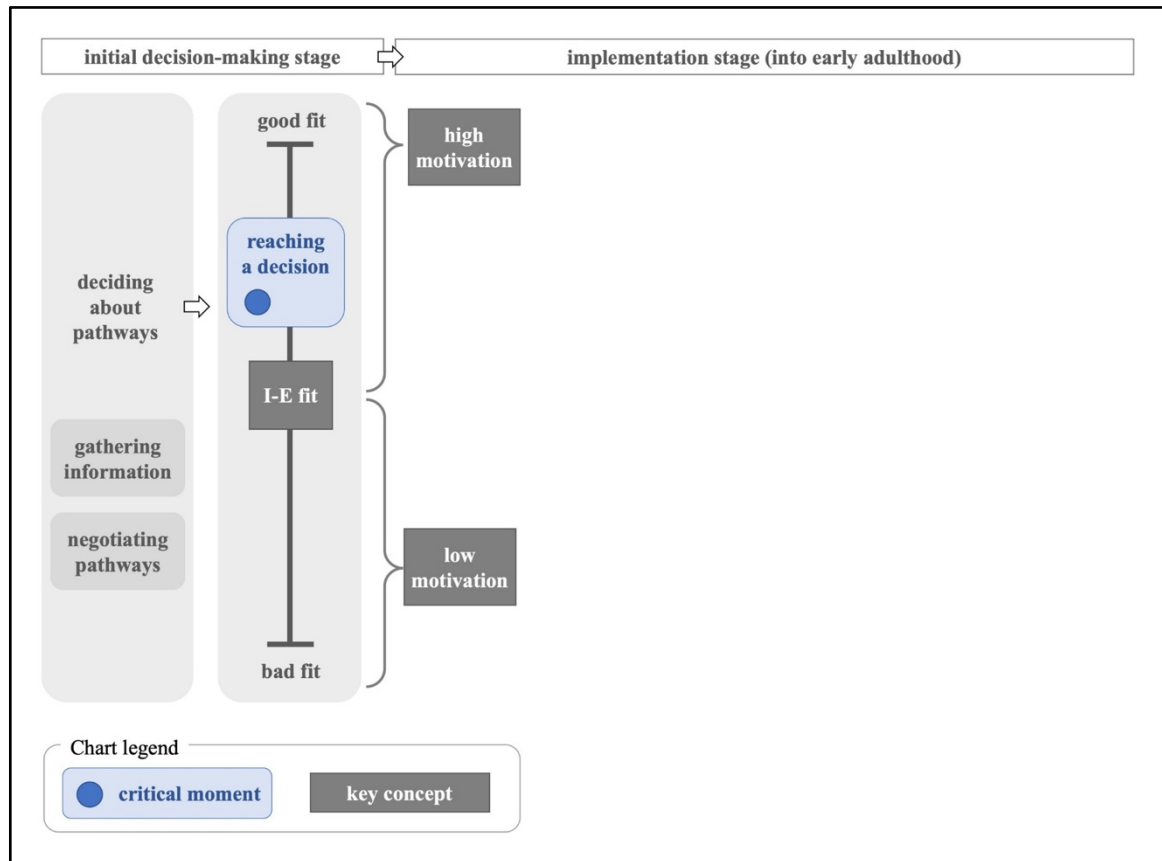


Figure 18: Fourth step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

How does a good I-E fit lead to higher motivation? As discussed in the previous section, the concept of a good I-E fit presupposes having an interest, having social support for pursuing the interest, having access to a pathway that is associated with the interest and having accurate information about this pathway. This constellation of factors allows young people to subjectively tie their pursuit of a certain pathway to their interest.

The fifth step shows how a higher motivation leads to smooth transitions. Why is that? The mechanism works through the motivation that comes from seeing the point in what one is doing. The higher motivation is what keeps young people on track as it increases the willingness to overcome adversity and lowers the emotional cost associated with

struggling. Persistence becomes even more likely if young people receive ‘facilitating’ social support along the way.

By contrast, lower motivation is what increases emotional costs as young people find themselves on a pathway which seems devoid of meaning. Since a good interest-environment fit can fail to be established due to various factors (see previous section), the mechanism of how a bad I-E fit prevents the development of high levels of motivation is more variegated.

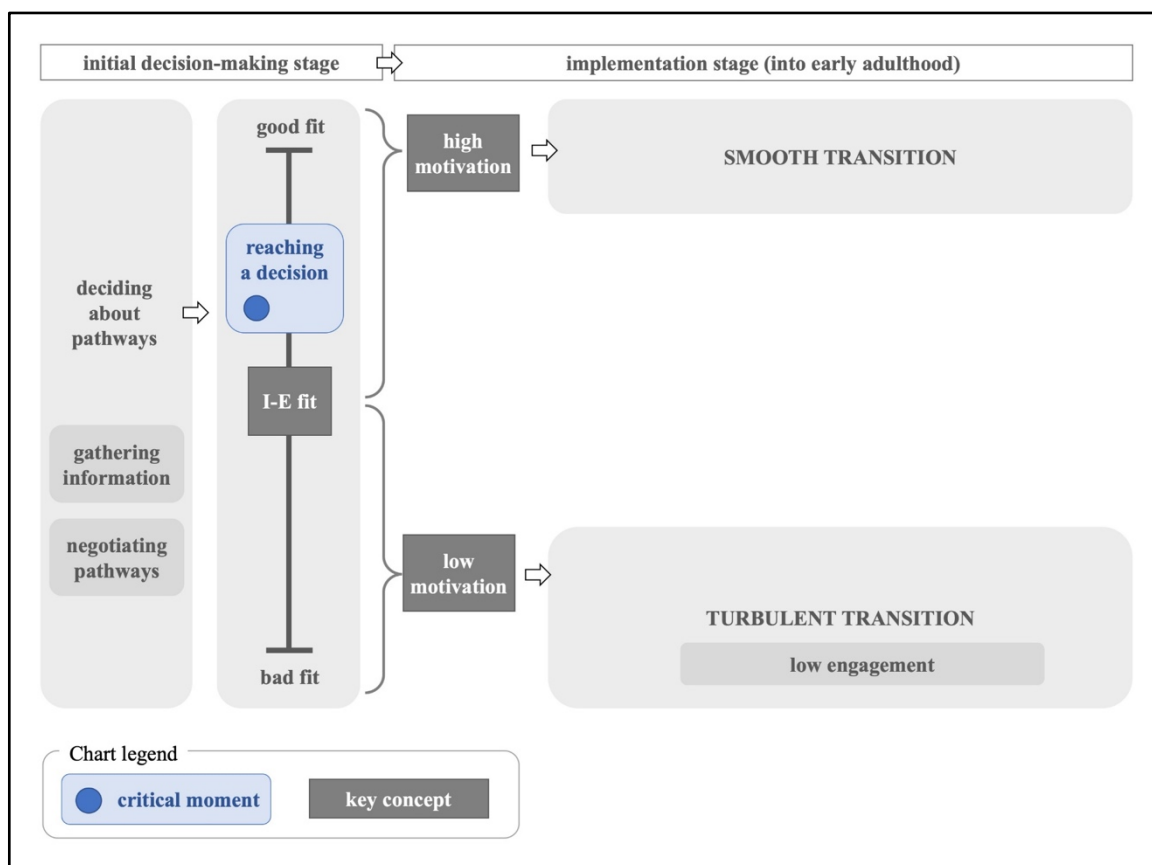


Figure 19: Fifth step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

First, if good information is initially missing during the decision-making stage, young people may struggle to see the tie between their interest and what they discover about their actual pathway. Such a scenario was present in the case of Liang Hong (interviewee 30, see chapter 6). Second, if young people cannot overcome an interest-incongruence with their parents or teachers, then the pathway is unlikely to be perceived as relating to

what young people want, or as a path that they feel their social environment supports. A high level of motivation cannot be established under these circumstances. Third, achieving a high level of motivation can also fail because of the nature of the interests involved. Some interests are inherently challenging to tie to one particular pathway. For instance, a boy (interviewee 19) primarily strived to evade parental control due to previous negative experiences with his father (domestic violence). Switching pathways could equally lead to the realisation of his interest. In the case of such interests, their pursuit is unlikely to lead to any motivation to pursue one *particular* pathway, rather than another. However, this is an exception. Most interests, such as academic, professional or even spatial and social ones can be tied to specific pathways. Fourth, a chosen interest-unrelated alternative can fail to allow for high levels of motivation to be established, if the reason for a bad interest-environment fit is that an interest-related pathway seems unavailable due to institutional exclusion or stigmatisation. This dynamic was observed in the case for the young girl who ended up picking a vocational school programme in “Environmental Measurement” (interviewee 25) because her preferred specialisation seemed unfeasible, given her impression of the school.

The sixth step shows how a low level of motivation leads to low engagement in school or work and rising emotional costs that lead to dropping out or attempts to drop out.

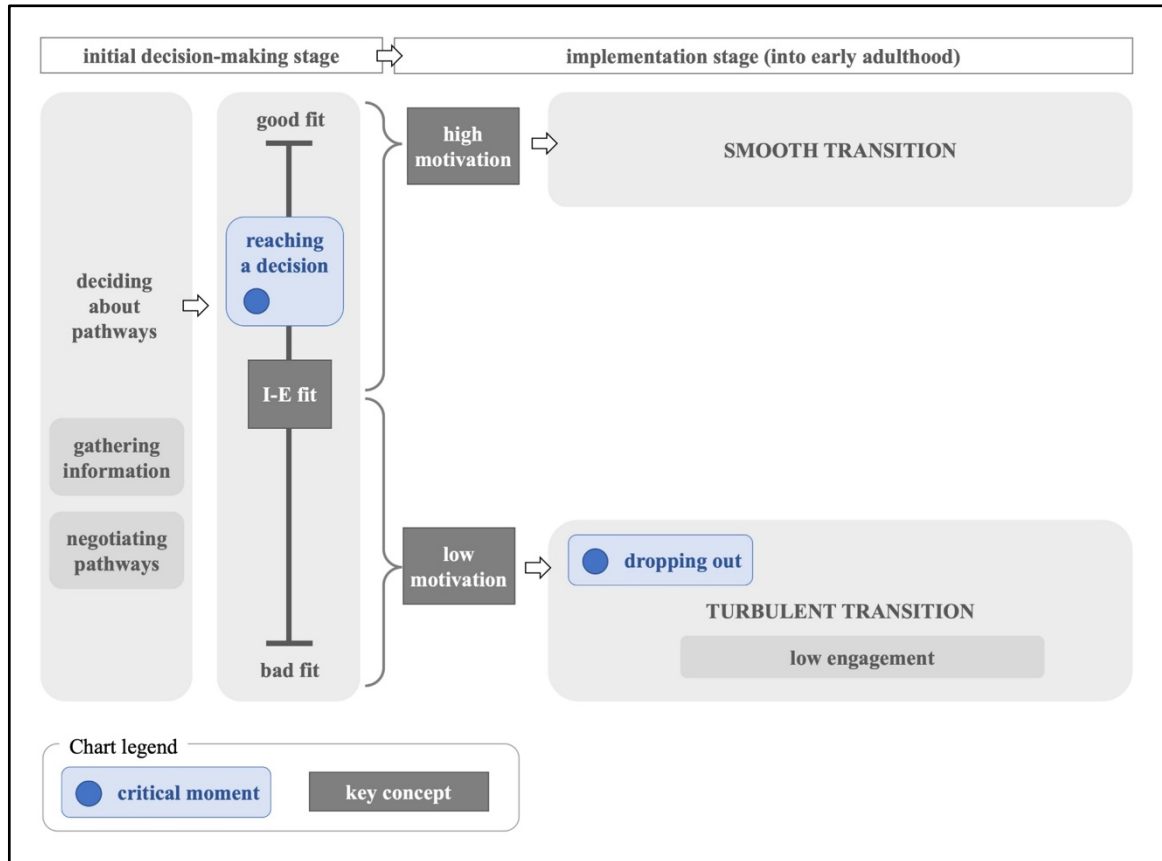


Figure 20: Sixth step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

As the seventh step shows, once a dropout is undertaken, young people have to restart the process of finding a pathway that achieves an interest-environment fit since the decision-making process is repeated. Depending on the previously outlined factors, the new decision will also have an interest-environment and can once again range from good fit to bad fit.

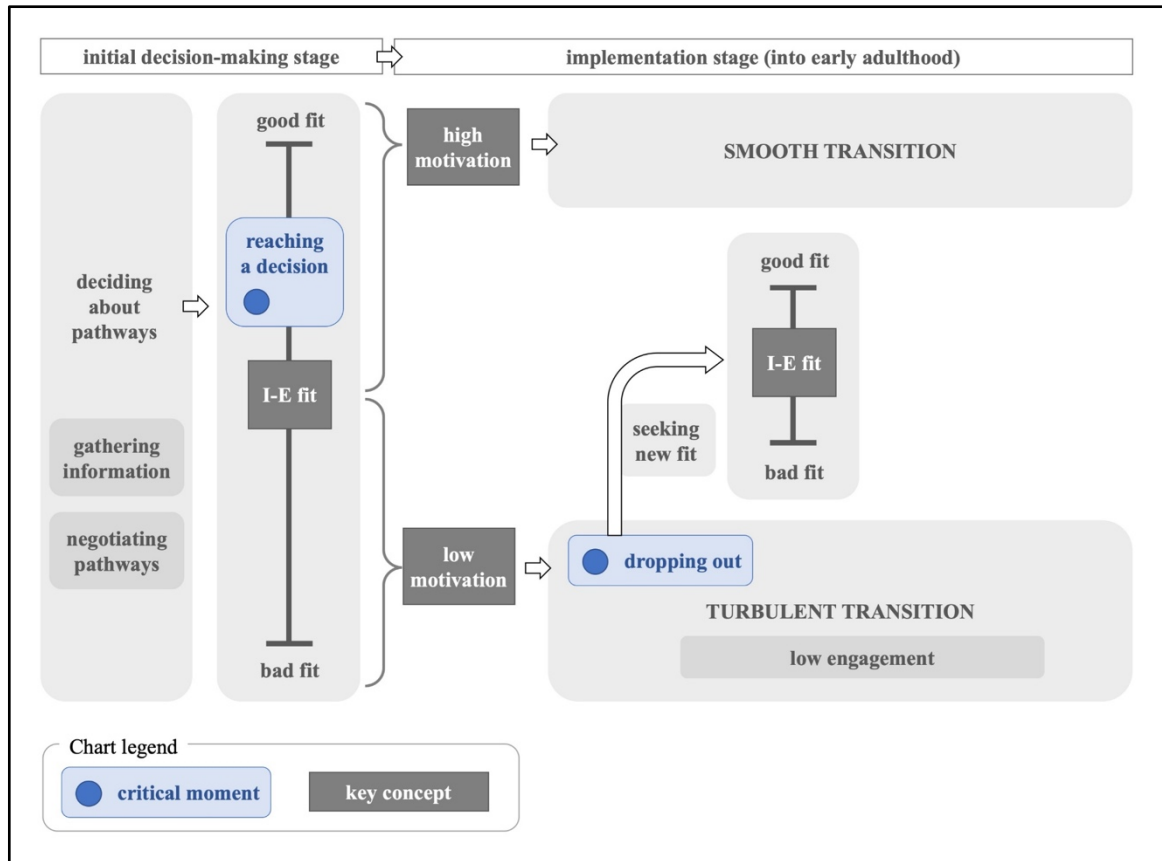


Figure 21: Seventh step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

The eighth step highlights the result of the renewed decision-making process. If the decision is associated with a good I-E fit, young people manage to establish a high level of motivation on the new pathway. This leads them towards a smooth school-to-work transition after a dropout, as shown in the case of Zhang Jing (interviewee 11, see chapter 5).

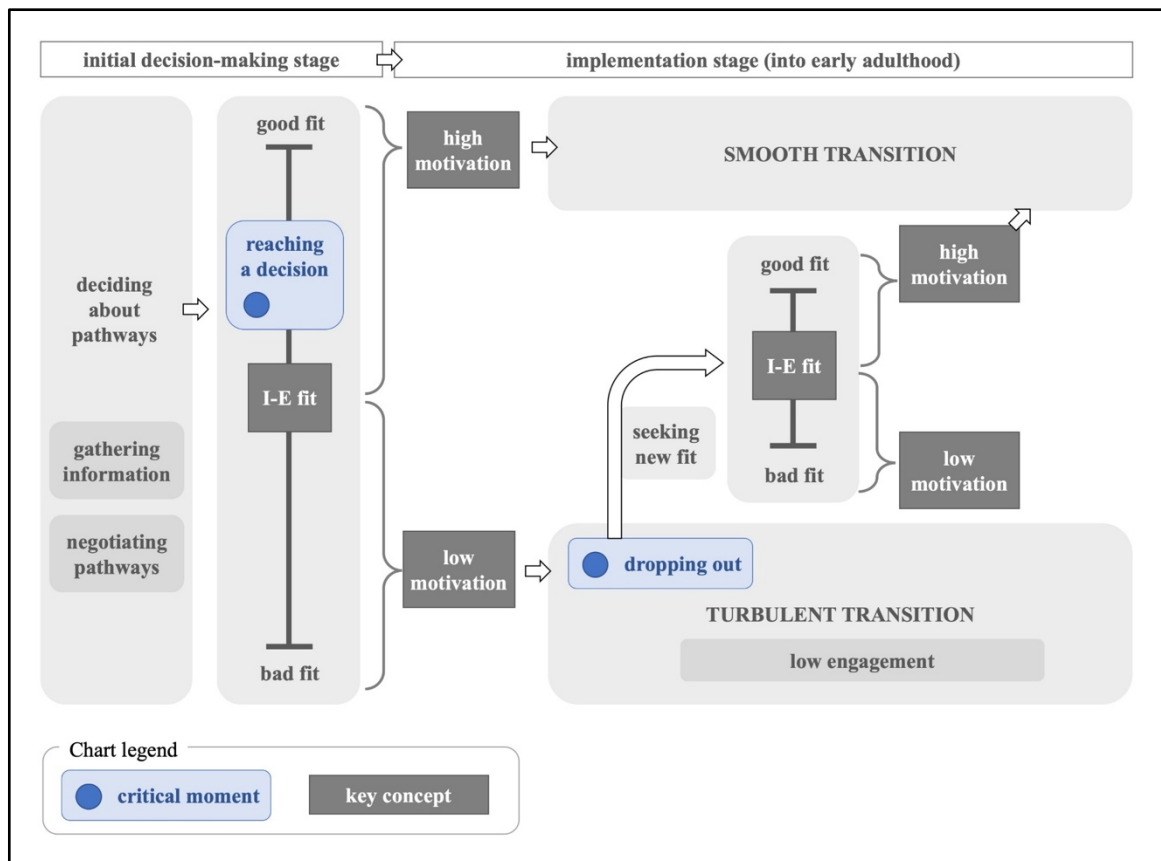


Figure 22: Eighth step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

The ninth and final step shows the two other options that can follow when no good fit can be established. Failing to establish a good fit either leads to falling short of reaching a high level of motivation on the new pathway and throws young migrants back into cycles of turbulence, such as frequent job-hopping or protracted periods of unemployment while staying at home. This dynamic was present for four participants in my study (interviewees 2, 3, 19, 25). Their experiences of cycles of turbulence lead to repetitions of the pattern of dropping out and seeking a new fit, as indicated by the white back arrow in the diagram.

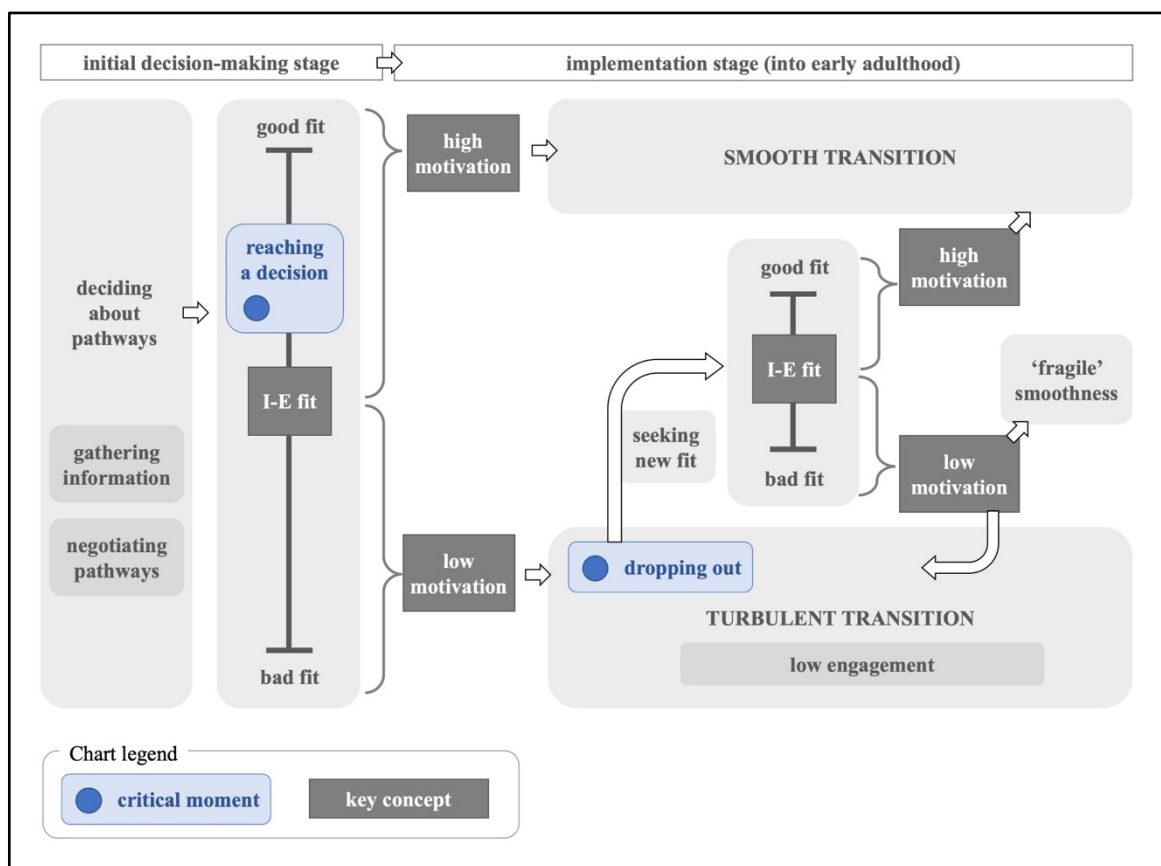


Figure 23: Ninth step in diagram outlining theory of school-to-work transitions

Failure to reach a high level of motivation after a dropout can also lead to a second outcome, a scenario I conceptualise as ‘fragile’ smoothness. In this scenario, dropping out is followed by a gentle landing guided by family support. This gentle landing usually results in either being forced back onto the original path (back to school) or beginning to work in family-arranged jobs, typically unrelated to previous qualifications or interests

(Kim et al., 2016). Under these circumstances, young people persist on their new pathway after a dropout, although they have not re-established a subjectively perceived link between their interests and this pathway. They thus have a low level of motivation. Six young migrants in my study experienced this scenario (interviewees 10, 21, 24, 27, 30, 38). This type of persistence is characterised as ‘fragile’ because, without a higher level of motivation, the stability is unlikely to last and is likely to lead to further turbulence. In other words, in this scenario the low level of motivation can be understood as an indicator of future turbulence. While it might have been possible to term this state ‘latent turbulence’ since future turbulence is likely, I opted for ‘fragile smoothness’ because the observed behaviour (at least for the period under observation) is that of smoothly persisting on the current pathway rather than dropping out. The following discussion section takes up these scenarios and explores possible reasons for their existence.

8.4.2 Discussion of constructed grounded theory

The grounded theory constructed in the previous section outlines a mechanism of how the initial decision-making process in middle school is linked to persistence or dropping off the pathways beyond middle school. Moreover, it highlights in which ways various factors align during the decision-making process to bring about a good interest-environment fit and thus affect persistence or dropping out in the later stage. This section discusses a range of issues related to this constructed theory.

The first issue concerns interactions between the two sides of the fit, interest and environment. The theory allows for the possibility that the two sides mutually influence each other. Indeed, there was evidence that suggested that the environment can have a notable influence on interests. For instance, teachers’ care and encouragements fuelled

the interests of some young people in the study, such as Wang Meiling (interviewee 34, chapter 5). Other cases of young migrants who developed their own interests thanks to their teachers include two boys who also returned to their home provinces and also successfully entered universities (interviewees 17 and 18). By contrast, young people can come to the realisation of what are non-viable interests because of a perceived lack of access, even before the end of middle school. In other words, the environment can also have a dampening effect on educational ambitions, often referred to as ‘ceiling effect’ (Xiong 2015). Knowing that it is impossible to access high schools, for instance, can lead to a rational diversion of energy into more realistically attainable pursuits. Such a lowering effect of institutional restrictions on ambitions has been documented among migrants in China (Koo et al. 2014).

Moreover, access to pathways and social class can influence whether a child might even be sufficiently exposed to an activity to become interested in it. I acknowledge that young people may be deeply affected by their understanding of life’s possibilities even before I had the opportunity to interview them. The theory thus allows for the possibility that interests form and develop when young people realise which pathways are accessible. Such interactions between interests and the environment can take place during the decision-making phase in middle school or even before and are consistent with the grounded theory developed above.

The second issue concerns the importance of institutional access, and thus indirectly the importance of social class as it is linked to institutional access (see chapter 4). The theory suggests that wider access to educational pathways can be helpful for finding a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making process. However, even beyond the initial decision-making period, access to pathways continues to be relevant. Even those who see the point of pursuing their current pathway and have a high level of motivation to

persist may continue to hear from peers, family, social media and other sources of information about alternative career paths. They may repeatedly wonder what else they could be doing with their lives. Switching to another career path remains a function of access, so the extent to which young people reflect upon their current situation continues to be framed by their perceived level of access, even beyond the initial decision-making stage.

The third issue is related to the question of why some young migrants, even in the more constrained migrant groups, seem to be relatively unaffected by the institutional restrictions. The theory — through its concept of interest-environment fit — can explain why some young people with a particular interest can do very well, even in a restrictive environment. Two such cases were Liu Jun (interviewee 6, chapter 7) and the girl who had always wanted to run a bakery since she was little (interviewee 15, chapter 4). Given that their interests were compatible with the given institutional access, they could achieve an interest-environment fit despite the restrictions. They pursued their interests without the agony of exclusion experienced by many others who had incompatible interests. As a result, the theory explains why some migrants proceed through their school-to-work transitions relatively unaffected by institutional restrictions. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, this insight does not exclude the possibility that interests have formed as a function of perceived access and opportunities.

A fourth issue is related to the question of how likely it is that dropping out results in young people finding a pathway with a better interest-environment fit. This thesis finds that while young migrants can find a new pathway with a good interest-environment fit after having dropped out (as the case of Zhang Jing shows, interviewee 11, chapter 5), this scenario is quite rare. Apart from Zhang Jing, all other ten participants who dropped

out either settled for a pathway without any high level of motivation and thus only reached a state of ‘fragile’ smoothness or continued in cycles of turbulence.

Why is it so difficult to readjust to a smooth trajectory after dropping out? A few reasons seem plausible for this observation. First, for many migrants, the dropout is followed by a gentle landing (that is, a quick transition into an alternative pathway) through family support. The dropout of a young family member is typically seen as an emergency that requires immediate attention and is thus associated with pressure on the young migrant to accept proposed alternatives, usually work placement with older family members, such as parents, uncles, or aunts. This social pressure to make a rushed decision renders it even less likely to find a good interest-environment fit than during the less hurried process of decision-making in middle school. Second, after dropping out, ‘facilitating’ support from teachers and peers is lower than it was during the middle school decision-making period. Few young migrants stayed in touch with their teachers, and those who did found that the relationship faded over time. Most peers of young people are not in the same situation at the time after the dropout as they are still pursuing other pathways. This situation is quite different from middle school graduation when all classmates and most friends are trying to find an answer to the same question of what to do after graduation. The similarity of the situation offers more potential for ‘facilitating’ teacher and peer support. Third, it might be that young people are more likely to accept a bad interest-environment fit after dropping out because they have already experienced one dropout that they might view as a “failure”.²¹ The inclination to avoid another perceived “failure” might make them more willing to accept a subpar match and persist on this pathway for a while despite not

²¹ While some young people viewed dropping out as a “failure”, in this thesis I refrain from applying any general value judgement that dropping out is necessarily worse than persisting. Indeed, for some young people such as Zhang Jing (interviewee 11, see chapter 5), dropping out turned out to be a better choice.

feeling that the pathway ties in with their interest. The willingness to avoid renewed failure might help to explain the observed phenomenon of 'fragile' smoothness. Fourth, the reason for why finding a good interest-environment fit after a dropout event is rare for those who drop out might be related to the fact that all those who drop out (at least in my study) had already experienced a suboptimal interest-environment fit before. Unless a factor in their environment or their interests changed, it is unlikely to expect a shift to a good fit. For Zhang Jing (interviewee 11), her ability to overcome the interest incongruence due to her father's divergent vision for her future changed after the dropout. This change made it possible for her to adjust to a new and better-matched pathway. However, the data seems to indicate that such a change is quite rare.

The fifth issue concerns rationality. Within the grounded theory, is it rational for young people to decide to drop out or is it an impulsive and irrational decision? As the theory has shown, when young people fail to achieve an interest-environment fit during the decision-making phase, a motivational deficit arises since young people do not see the point of pursuing their current pathway. Attempting to change the current pathway in the hope of achieving a better match is thus a reasonable step to take. The dropout behaviour of most young migrants in this study that followed such reasoning can be understood as rational decisions. However, the theory does not claim that all dropping out of educational programmes or quitting jobs must be rational and calculating; some dropout behaviour can also be highly impulsive. Rational and impulsive decisions also do not necessarily have to be opposites; decisions might sometimes be both rational and impulsive to some degree.

The last issue is related to the possible relationship between turbulence during the decision-making period and turbulence on the pathway beyond middle school. As discussed in chapter 4, based on dynamic stress process models, it could be assumed that

turbulence in the decision-making period, that is, the experience of conflict or unexpected shocks, could lead to turbulence in the implementation stage, that is, dropping out (e.g. Hammen, 2006, Liu & Alloy, 2010). This discussion can be related to the typology of school-to-work transition patterns developed in the first part of this chapter. SSS, TTS and TTT patterns support this thesis. However, the empirical evidence of patterns such as TSS and STS calls into question the hypothesis that early turbulence induces late turbulence. Turbulence during the first period is thus not a good indicator for explaining turbulence in the implementation period. Why might this be the case? I would suggest it is because turbulence in the decision-making period can be overcome, and a good interest-environment fit can still be reached at the point of decision-making. Cases of young people who experienced the pattern of type-2 (TSS) achieved a good I-E fit despite turbulence during the decision-making period and continued smoothly beyond the decision. Overcoming early-stage turbulence can be achieved through skilful negotiation or through ‘facilitating’ social support.

8.5 Integrating two potentially negative cases by extending the theory

There were two cases of young men (interviewees 8 and 9) who did not have a well-developed interest when they decided about their pathway beyond middle school. In other words, they fell short of reaching a good interest-environment fit due to this lack of interest. The grounded theory developed in this chapter suggests that failing to achieve a good interest-environment fit leads to turbulence in the implementation. However, these two young men managed to achieve smooth school-to-work transitions. Within qualitative research, negative cases are defined as “participants who have not responded

in the anticipated way, or who have opposite reactions to the majority to a particular phenomenon” (Morse, 2007, p. 240). The two cases of these young men might thus be seen as negative cases. How should grounded theory researchers deal with negative cases in general, and how should this study treat these two cases in particular?

Grounded theorists suggest two possible responses to negative cases. First, the theory can be modified to account for negative cases and effectively render them explicable through the theory. This method “ensures that the researcher continues to develop the emerging theory in the light of the evidence” (Willig, 2013, p. 71). If this approach is successful, the cases thus cease to be negative cases. Second, negative cases can be made explicit to enable the readers to “see any variation in cases from the major themes driving the theory” (Tenzek, 2017, p. 1086). In this way, highlighting the existence of negative cases can improve the transparency of the study.

Following the first approach requires us to examine these cases in more detail. Both cases were quite similar; they were both boys who had access to a wide range of vocational schools in Shanghai (“medium access”) with parents who left the decision about what to do after middle school entirely to them. The two young men were reasonably well-informed about their vocational school options. In the absence of a well-developed interest, both chose majors in the vocational school with the highest proximity to their middle school, which was also the most commonly chosen vocational school in the set of cases, the Petrochemical Academy. In both cases, their parents supported their choice. The two boys thus reached a decision in circumstances that did not represent overwhelming barriers in terms of institutional access, information and social support. The main aspect in which they fell short of achieving an interest-environment fit was lacking a well-developed interest. Furthermore, both of these young men developed an interest in their subject in vocational school, not because the interest had been well-

developed at the time when they made their decision in middle school, but because they simply happened to become interested in the contents and material of their programmes. Thus, both of them developed an interest *post-hoc*. With their new-found interest, they then achieved a high level of motivation. The development of interests over time in adolescence and early adulthood is consistent with empirical research on the issue (Low et al., 2005). Scholars suggest that interests can develop rather late in adolescence, starting around middle school and continue to form over time.

This analysis suggests that the grounded theory can be expanded to incorporate these cases. The expansion involves recognising ‘finding an interest post-hoc’ as a possible alternative route towards a high level of motivation for those young people who fall short of achieving an I-E fit merely due to a lack of interest. The diagram can thus be modified, as shown below.

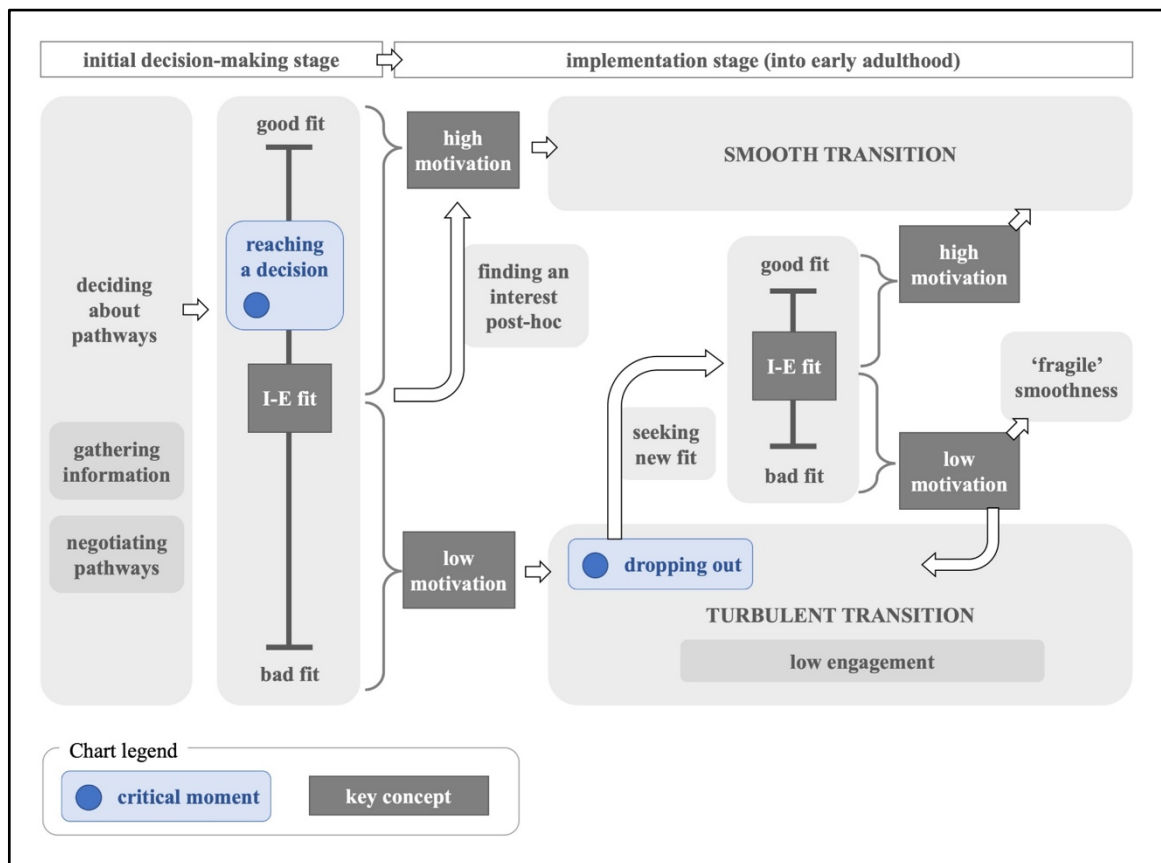


Figure 24: Diagram of expanded theory of school-to-work transitions

Extending the grounded theory in this way allows us to achieve theoretical consistency by integrating two otherwise challenging cases into a cohesive expanded theory. I have thus followed the first recommended practice for dealing with negative cases suggested in the methodological literature.

8.6 Final literature engagement that relates the grounded theory to the scholarly landscape

How does the grounded theory constructed in this chapter relate to pre-existing empirical and theoretical literature? This section represents the final engagement with the literature and integrates the final theoretical product, the grounded theory presented above, into the relevant scholarly landscape. It marks the endpoint of the research project, framed by the metaphor of ‘research as a journey’ presented in the introduction chapter. The section is structured into two main parts. The first one discusses empirical and methodological contributions, while the second one highlights theoretical contributions.

8.6.1 Empirical and methodological engagement with literature

The empirical literature on dropouts and persistence in China largely concentrates on local students in the countryside and does not explicitly focus on young migrants in urban contexts. The majority of studies that examine school dropouts and determinants of dropping out in China focus on rural areas where dropout rates are typically higher than in urban areas and on the middle school level (Chang et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2019; Li et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2012). Fewer studies focus on dropouts beyond the middle school level, such as dropping out from rural vocational schools (Yi et al., 2015)

or both rural high schools and rural vocational schools (Shi et al., 2015). Even fewer studies examine dropping out among young migrants who have arrived in urban centres. A rare study that focusses on migrants examines one single educational pathway, that into academic high school via returning to the home provinces (Koo et al., 2014). Another study examines migrants' *intentions* to drop out rather than actual dropout behaviour and is limited to a cross-sectional view of middle school (Wu et al., 2014). No studies, to the best of my knowledge, focus comprehensively on dropouts of young migrants in urban centres, that is, spanning their various pathways beyond middle school. By examining the phenomenon of dropping out on the three major pathways that young migrants in China's urban centres choose, this thesis addresses a gap in the empirical literature on dropouts in China.

Moreover, the prior literature on dropout and persistence in China is largely empirical and atheoretical (see, for instance, Chang et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2019; Li et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2012). Most theories of dropouts and persistence stem from contexts in industrialised countries, especially North America. This thesis addresses a gap in the literature on dropout and persistence in China by engaging in theory-building from a Chinese context.

Above and beyond the engagement with the empirical literature on the substantive topic of dropout and persistence of migrant youths in China, a key contribution of this thesis is methodological. Through its use of grounded theory, the thesis has shown that new insights can be generated by prioritising data over pre-existing knowledge. By carefully outlining the process of how the flexibility afforded by grounded theory methodology can be used to integrate young people's perspectives, the thesis can act as a guideline for other qualitative researchers. In the field of studies on dropout and persistence, a major theory, Tinto's theory of student departure (1975), is widely criticised for relying on

previous anthropological studies on tribal rites, rather than qualitative methodology focussing on students' lived experience (Attinasi, 1989, 1994; Tierney, 1991, 1992, 1993). By relying on an established qualitative methodology in which the everyday lives of young people take centre stage, this thesis stands as an example of best practice in terms of methodology. It shows how grounded theory represents an appropriate approach for theory-building.

8.6.2 Theoretical engagement with dropout and persistence literature

In this second part, I discuss how the developed grounded theory relates to, engages with and contributes to the pre-existing *theoretical* literature on dropout and persistence, namely interactional theories of persistence, educational and work theories of persistence, rational choice theories of persistence, motivational theories of persistence and dropout, developmental and life-course models of dropout as well as theories of vocational choice.

Interactional theories of persistence

Research literature written up to the 1970s attempts to explain dropout phenomena by focussing largely on individual factors, thereby neglecting the role of the institution which students attend. Aiming at attributing responsibility for the phenomenon to both students and institutions, sociologists Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975, 1993) developed theoretical models that focus on the *interaction* between students and institutions. Tinto's theory, which draws on Spady's, is the most prominent and widely cited model of college dropout and is also applied to other institutions, such as high schools (Rumberger, 2011). Drawing on Durkheim's theory of suicide (1951) and the

type of ‘egoistical suicide’ in particular, Tinto’s theory posits that dropping out, like suicide, represents a voluntary withdrawal from society. In his theory, withdrawal behaviour results from insufficient integration of students in the institutional environment in two realms: the academic and the social.

As a widely applied theory, Tinto’s model is subject to a range of critiques (see Braxton, 2000). One notable critique is that by exclusively focussing on how students behave and interact with their current institution, the theory masks the student selection problem, that is, that pre-matriculation motivation and non-cognitive factors might shape persistence behaviour instead of the degree of social and academic integration at the current institution (Melguizo, 2011). This issue becomes particularly evident when examining Tinto’s concept of ‘initial commitment’. Tinto assumes that students arrive in college with a given level of initial commitment to the goal of completing college and to the institution. Goal commitment is understood as a “commitment to the goal of completing vis-à-vis a cost-benefit analysis of personal career plans” (Johnson, 1991, p. 23).

Moreover, commitment to the institution entails regarding the school “as a viable entity for attainment of a future career” (p. 23). While recognising that these commitments can change through interactions with the current institution,²² Tinto does not incorporate into his model the process of how initial commitments originally form. Tinto argues that while goals and commitments with which individuals enter the institution matter, what happens after matriculation matters more (Melguizo, 2011). My substantive grounded theory developed in this thesis addresses this point directly by focussing on the process through which young people select (or are forced to attend) an institution (or a work track) and form initial commitments. In other words, rather than assuming an ‘initial commitment’, my theory understands the level of commitment as a *result* of a pre-matriculation

²² Tinto (1975, 1993) considers primarily residential universities in the United States.

decision-making process, which is subject to a range of additional factors that in turn shape persistence. In contrast to Tinto's theory, my grounded theory argues that what happens prior to matriculation matters more, as there is a crucial choice to be made that determines the setup that can lead to motivational persistence. Of course, my grounded theory does not suggest that what happens post-matriculation in the institution (or workplace) is irrelevant.²³ It might be challenging to resolve this debate on the relative importance of pre-matriculation and post-matriculation factors in general terms as it might shift for each case. However, the key point remains. My grounded theory suggests that the impact of the pre-matriculation decision-making process should not be neglected.

A further criticism of Tinto is that he does not show a precise mechanism of how academic and social integration lead to persistence (Melguizo, 2011). However, Bean and Eaton (2001) address this point by highlighting three psychological concepts that constitute a potential mechanism — self-efficacy, coping skills, and self-control. They argue that social and academic integration affect persistence through these three psychological concepts. While a psychological grounding of Tinto's theory presents a reasonable way to address the mechanism challenge, Bean and Eaton (2001) still limit themselves to considering factors occurring within the attended institution to outline their mechanism that leads to dropping out or persisting. By contrast, my grounded theory presented above addresses the pre-matriculation roots of the dropout or persistence issue.

Morgan's commitment-attainment theory (Morgan, 2005) can be understood as adding more nuance to Tinto's concept of 'initial commitment' by distinguishing three dimensions of what he calls 'pre-figurative commitment'. The three dimensions comprise purpose, normative and imitative pre-figurative commitment. They can be understood to

²³ The two cases of young boys who developed their interests after middle school graduation lend support to this notion (see section 8.5 in this chapter).

relate to the young person's own perspective, perspectives of significant others, and to perspectives of those who are perceived as similar, respectively. Purpose pre-figurative commitment is related to the statement "I will go to college because I perceive it to be in my best interest." Normative pre-figurative commitment is linked to the statement "I will go to college, if my significant others perceive it to be in my best interest." Imitative pre-figurative commitment is tied to the statement "I will go to college if other students similar to me will also do it." The concept of pre-figurative commitment can be contrasted with my concept of interest as captured in the interest-environment fit. Since Morgan (2005) aims at understanding college persistence in particular, his focus is limited to commitments to education. By contrast, interests in my substantive grounded theory can not only be tied to educational goals, but also others, such as spatial, professional, or social ones (see discussion in the second section of this chapter). Interests in the I-E fit in this theory thus introduce more complexity and nuance than Morgan's concept of commitment does. However, the three dimensions of pre-figurative commitment (purpose, normative, imitative) can be understood as important markers of influence during the decision-making process, highlighting the roles of others and the self in the negotiation process. I argue that Morgan's pre-figurative commitment can be understood as the outcome of the decision-making process conceptualised in my theory, when understood as a particular interest-environment fit. The three statements cited above thus highlight the links that can characterise a commitment to a goal, at the end of the pre-matriculation decision-making period. Lastly, my theory can be understood to argue that *purpose* pre-figurative commitments are most likely to occur if a good I-E fit is established during the decision-making period, and that *purpose* pre-figurative commitments are most important for persistence.

An important concept used first by Spady (1970, 1971), and then also adopted by Tinto (1975), is that of ‘normative congruence’ which can be contrasted with the concept of interest-environment fit developed in my grounded theory. In Spady’s and Tinto’s models, ‘normative congruence’ is understood as the “diffuse patterns of interaction” that mark the process of social integration into the college environment (Spady, 1970, p. 38). This process is based on the “dispositions, interests, attitudes, and expectations of the student” and on the “set of behaviors, expectations, and demands” to which students “may be exposed as the result of interaction with a variety of individuals in the college environment” (Spady, 1971, p. 39). In other words, ‘normative congruence’ can be understood as a degree of fit of the individual student in the social college environment. If expectations and influences are highly consistent, then students “will experience less strain in their general interaction with others, be they fellow students, faculty members, or administrators.” (p. 39) Thus, while ‘normative congruence’ can also be characterised as a type of person-environment fit, it differs in two ways from my concept of interest-environment fit. First, the concept of normative congruence is limited to social interactions in the college environment. By contrast, my concept of interest-environment fit focusses on the wider pre-matriculation environment. It thus includes structural factors such as institutional restrictions and the role of the family in the decision-making process, which includes information gathering and negotiating pathways. Second, while my concept of interest-environment fit explicitly affords central importance to young people’s interests, ‘normative congruence’ refers to a wider array of dispositions and attitudes (that also includes interests) of the students. ‘Normative congruence’ is thus more broadly defined. This point ties in with a more general criticism of Spady and Tinto that points to unclear definitions of what social integration actually means (Melguizo, 2011).

Persistence theories linking the realms of education and work

While Tinto's and Spady's models draw on Durkheim's theory of suicide, other theories of dropout and persistence highlight parallels between the realms of education and work. The model of educational adjustment (Brown & Kayser, 1982) draws on the concept of fit from the theory of work adjustment (Dawis et al., 1968) which highlights that a bad fit between the individual and the work environment will lead to rising turnover intentions. By analogy, a bad fit between the student and the educational institution can lead to rising dropout intentions. Another example for a dropout theory that links the realms of education and work is the student attrition model developed by Bean (1980, 1982) which draws on organisational psychology where turnover is understood as "the degree of individual movement across the membership boundary of a social system" (Price, 1977, p. 4), which renders turnover similar to student dropout. Bean (1980) explicitly assumes that "student attrition in IHEs [institutions of higher education] is analogous to turnover in work organisations — i.e., students leave IHEs for reasons similar to those that cause employees to leave work organisations" (p. 157). In both theories, a fit between the educational institution and student characteristics is used to explain dropping out. However, attempting to observe similarities in reasons between employee turnover and student dropout as theorised by both Brown and Kayser (1982) and Bean (1980) is only related to the post-matriculation, post-work entry period and not linked to the pre-matriculation or pre-work decision-making process. I also argue in my substantive grounded theory that there are important parallels between educational and work pathways. However, I differ in suggesting that these parallels are tied to comparable motivational reasons that develop during the pre-matriculation and pre-work period. I

thus integrate the realms of education and work pathways into a comprehensive theory of persistence or dropping out.

It is worth focussing in some detail on the distinction between the concept of ‘congruence’ in the model of educational adjustment and the concept of interest-environment fit in my grounded theory. The model of educational adjustment (Brown & Kayser, 1982) focusses on the degree of fit (also termed congruence or correspondence) between the individual and the environment in explaining dropout and persistence. It draws on Dawis et al. (1968) and their theory of work adjustment, as mentioned above. The person-environment fit developed in the theory of work adjustment takes a decidedly psychological perspective onto the environment by regarding it primarily through its rewards and reinforcing components, that is, the degree to which the environment addresses individual psychological needs. The two sides of the fit are characterised as ‘satisfaction’, i.e. how happy individuals are with their work environment, and ‘satisfactoriness’, i.e. how content the work environment is with individuals. The main difference between the concept of congruence in the theory of educational adjustment (as a derivative of the theory of work adjustment) and my theory is that I take a more sociological perspective. I regard the environment also in terms of constraining institutions and I take into account social class as well as the family environment. As mentioned above, a further difference is that the concept of interest-environment fit is also applied to the pre-matriculation and pre-work entry decision-making period, a viewpoint that this is neglected in both the educational adjustment theory and work adjustment theory. Any conclusion drawn from a theory of congruence aimed at explaining a particular outcome (in this case, persistence) is limited by the particular aspects that are taken into account (Tracey & Robbins, 2006). In my study, the aspects examined in the interest-environment fit are constructed from the data, in line with

grounded theory methodology, and are not *a priori* tied to any particular theoretical framework. The fit model is built from the data through a constructivist grounded theory methodology (see chapter 3).

A further conceptual comparison can be made between what Brown and Kayser (1982) in their theory of educational adjustment refer to as ‘marginal tolerance’ and what I refer to as ‘fragile smoothness’. Conceptualising congruence as a continuum, they characterise those young people who achieve high satisfaction and high satisfactoriness (understood as their academic performance) as likely ‘persisters’ and those who have low satisfaction and low satisfactoriness as likely dropouts. However, people who score moderately on both accounts and people who score mixed (such as high-low or low-high) are described as being in a state of ‘marginal tolerance’. In other words, they can be either ‘persisters’ or dropouts. This state of ‘marginal tolerance’ can be seen as similar to my concept of ‘fragile smoothness’ which, in my grounded theory, describes the state of a previous dropout who continues on an alternative pathway without a high level of motivation because they were unable to achieve a good interest-environment fit after the dropout. Both concepts, ‘marginal tolerance’ and ‘fragile smoothness’, give no definite indication of whether young people in this state will persist or drop out; both outcomes are possible. However, there is one conceptual difference. While ‘marginal tolerance’ does not indicate the direction at all, ‘fragile smoothness’ stresses that in the absence of a high level of motivation, dropping out is the more likely outcome. In my theory, the role of the interests of young people thus remains crucial.

Rational choice models of persistence

Rational choice theory can be applied to choices in the realm of education, as prominently shown by economist Gary Becker in his theory of human capital (Becker, 1967) and sociologists Breen and Goldthorpe (1997). Rational choice models offer a powerful way of explaining persistence in education by suggesting that people will continue to invest time and energy into the pursuit of schooling “if the present discounted value of the benefits (earnings differential) were greater than the present discounted values of the direct and indirect costs of the investment” (Paulsen, 2001, p. 59). However, they typically assume perfect information and do not take into account the usually imperfect process of information gathering. By highlighting the processes that affect the availability of information about educational and vocational pathways as part of the concept of interest-environment fit, my substantive grounded theory addresses a shortcoming of rational choice theories. In other words, my theory of how the decision-making process and its outcome influences post–matriculation and post–work entry dropout decisions also focusses on how people gather information.

Another approach based on cost-benefit analysis is expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) which suggests that young people will continue investing in education as long as they judge the expectancy-value of this activity as being positive. This judgement implies a calculation of how likely a particular outcome will be (expectancy) and the extent to which it is judged as pleasant (intrinsic value), important (attainment value), useful (utility value) and costly (in terms of effort, psychological cost and opportunity cost). As a decision-making theory, this approach is useful for assessing situations in which agents are autonomous deciders. However, the approach is less useful in examining decisions taken in a relational context, such as the pathway decision of young people in middle school, which is likely to be influenced and constrained by parents and other

adults. By explicitly taking into account parent-child and teacher-student interest congruence and the ability to overcome interest incongruence, the dynamic and relational aspects of the decision-making process are taken into account in my substantive grounded theory.

In sum, by integrating how information is gathered and how the decision-making process is relational, this substantive grounded theory addresses two constraints of widely applied rational choice models.

Motivational theories of persistence and dropout

Highlighting the importance of the psychological mechanism of motivation, Vallerand et al. (1997) develop a motivational theory of dropout. Evaluating dropouts in Canadian high schools, they draw on extrinsic-intrinsic motivation theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to distinguish between five types of motivation. *Intrinsic* motivation refers to engaging in an activity for the pleasure and satisfaction of doing the activity itself (Deci, 1975). *Extrinsic* motivation means engaging in an activity as a means to an end (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Extrinsic motivation can be subdivided into three types of regulation. *External* regulation occurs “when the source of control is outside the person” (Vallerand et al., 1997, p. 1162), such as when young people are forced to go to school. *Introjected* regulation is present when previously external pressure is partially internalised, such as when young people feel guilty about skipping school. *Identified* regulation occurs when people engage in behaviour out of choice and because it is valued as important, but not perceived as pleasant in itself. This is the case when, for instance, young people “go to school because they feel that this is the path they have chosen to follow to have access to the career they have selected” (p. 1162). Lastly, *amotivation* refers to the relative lack of motivation.

According to Vallerand et al. (1997), these five types of motivation can be ranked on a scale from most self-determined to least self-determined in the following way: intrinsic, identified, introjected, external, amotivation. Based on these distinctions, Vallerand et al. (1997) theorise that, all other things being equal, self-determined motivation (that is, intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) is more likely to lead to persistence. By contrast, external regulation and amotivation are more likely to lead to dropping out. The theoretical prediction of introjected regulation with regards to persistence is ambiguous.

Moreover, Vallerand et al. (1997) link persistence to the social context of young people in high school, especially to the type of social support they receive. They show evidence for their theory that if parents, teachers and school administrators behave in “autonomy-supporting” ways towards young people, they are more likely to have self-determined motivation, mediated through young people’s perceptions of competence and autonomy. Autonomy-supporting behaviour means allowing young people “to make certain choices and decisions about their schooling” (p. 1162).

The theoretical mechanism presented in the motivational theory of dropout that links self-determined motivation to persistence is consistent with the mechanism presented in my study, which implies that young people subjectively see the point of pursuing their pathway. What I understand by “seeing the point” can be related, in particular, to *identified* regulation in Vallerand et al.’s model. The activities involved are not necessarily pleasant or satisfying in themselves, but they are linked to other goals.

A further similarity between my substantive grounded theory and Vallerand et al.’s theory is related to the concept of an “autonomy-supportive” social environment and my concept of ‘facilitating’ social support aimed at establishing an I-E fit. ‘Facilitating’ social support in my theory is social support aimed at finding a good fit for the interests of the young

person and thus respecting their agency. As stated above, an ‘autonomy-supportive’ social environment aims at allowing young people “to make certain choices and decisions about their schooling” (Vallerand et al., 1997, p. 1162). The motivational theory of dropout is thus consistent with one aspect of my I-E fit concept: parental and teacher support for decision-making autonomy is important.

However, my theory differs from that of Vallerand et al. in four respects. First, Vallerand et al.’s theory does not adequately include the influence of institutional or societal restrictions. By contrast, my theory also takes into account structural sociological aspects, such as social background and institutional restrictions which are particularly relevant for migrants in China. Second, Vallerand et al. (1997) focus exclusively on the educational stage of high school. However, my theory covers multiple pathways, including vocational education and work. Third, my theory also covers the decision-making stage prior to high school and thus highlights that self-determined motivation comes from a particular decision-making process involving dynamic negotiation that requires autonomy-supporting adults but also other factors. It also requires institutional access, access to useful information and the presence of a sense of purpose, that is a higher-level interest. Fourth, in the motivational model of student dropout, Vallerand et al. (1997) only theorise one direction of motivation, that is, the motivation for schooling. I theorise a range of different interests that are in contention with each other during the decision-making period in middle school and can all lead to self-determined motivation and persistence on different pathways. These types of interests are *inter alia* educational, professional, spatial, and social interests. In sum, my grounded theory has a wider reach than the motivational theory of Vallerand et al. (1997), although the motivational component is an essential aspect of both theories.

In relation to motivational theories of dropout, it is interesting to note the ambiguity of the fuzzy middle category. On the scale of self-determination described above, *introjected* regulation is found in the middle. The motivational theory of dropout is ambiguous about what it predicts in terms of persistence for cases affected by introjected regulation, just as discussed above regarding the concept of ‘marginal tolerance’ in the congruence-model in student adjustment theory (Brown & Kayser, 1982) or as with the concept of ‘fragile smoothness’ in the case of my theory. I would argue that this common ambiguity in theoretical models highlights the difficulty of clearly distinguishing complex lives into binary categories of ‘persisters’ and dropouts. Perhaps the fuzzy middle is bound to remain, to a degree, theoretically ambiguous.

In the psychology literature on persisting, some scholars have also identified the importance of character traits, such as ‘grit’ (Duckworth et al. 2007), or ‘zest’ (Park et al., 2004). Grit is defined as a trait reflecting high levels of “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087.), whereas ‘zest’ refers to “approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated” (Park et al., 2004, p. 606). While these character traits might contribute to achieving persistence, they do not capture important social and structural requirements that also need to be in place for persistence to become possible. For instance, grit and zest theories do not take into account access to institutional pathways and access to information as well as socioeconomic background, factors without which character traits such as grit or zest cannot become effective. My theory, however, takes these sociological circumstances into account.

Developmental and life-course models of dropout

Several dropout theories take a long-term developmental view and identify early antecedents of dropout. Finn (1989), in his developmental theory of high school dropout, starts with early school entry and identifies two negative feedback cycles that lead to high school dropout. The first cycle, termed *frustration-self-esteem pathway*, starts with academic failure in school, which leads to a negative self-concept and further academic failure. The second cycle, termed *participation-identification pathway*, starts with kids being ill-prepared from home for social participation in school activities which leads to lack of identification with the school, that is, the absence of a sense of belonging, and further non-participation. The first cycle can be tied to Tinto's and Spady's academic realm, while the second can be linked to their social realm.

Moreover, Moffit (1993, 2008), in her developmental taxonomy of antisocial behaviour, understands dropout, in line with other criminologists, as one type of various deviant behaviours that shares many of the same roots with delinquency or drug use. Two pathways are suggested that lead to dropping out. The first one is an *early pathway*, similar to Finn's model, where individual risk factors accumulate and result in antisocial behaviour. The second one has *later origins* in adolescence during a period when rewards for risky behaviour are temporarily heightened from the perspective of young people. Consequences of risky behaviour during this period of experimentation, such as arrest, pregnancy, or car accidents, can interfere with schooling and lead to dropping out. Life-course theories of dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Dupéré et al., 2015) also take a long-term view of risk factors and explicitly take the broader societal and economic context into account. Another dropout theory that takes contextual factors into account is Rumberger's (2011) synthesis model of individual and institutional risk factors which relies on the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

A recent study of US high school dropouts by Dupéré et al. (2015) distinguishes between long-term risk factors and so-called precipitating factors that represent “situations emerging for high school students not long before the decision to dropout is made” (p. 592). These short-term shocks that can precipitate the dropout can include either health problems or one of the risky behaviours that Moffit (1993, 2008) identifies in her late adolescence pathway.

While these studies identify a host of potentially relevant early-stage and later-stage factors that can lead to dropping out, they fall short of appropriately integrating the motivational consequences of the pre–matriculation (or pre–work) decision-making period of young people. None of these theories places a major emphasis on the decision-making period that leads up to the decision to pursue the current educational pathway (or work pathway) where the dropout occurs. My grounded theory contributes to the body of knowledge by showing in which ways the middle school decision-making process is crucial for later persistence or dropping out. Linking the mechanism identified in my grounded theory to the distinction between long-term risk factors and short-term precipitating factors, the influence of the pre–matriculation (or pre–work) decision-making period can be understood as a medium-term factor. A medium-term factor stands in between long-term risk factors and precipitating factors. It can be seen as a mechanism of how long-term risk factors play out and shape motivational outcomes that can lead to persisting or dropping out.

Theories of vocational choice

My substantive grounded theory establishes a link between the *pathway decision*, that is, deciding between educational pathways, specialisations and various work pathways, and

persistence or dropping out in the post–matriculation or post–work period. On a theoretical level, this amounts to linking two sets of literature, the literature on vocational choice and the literature on persistence and dropping out.

In the literature on vocational choice, the most prominent theory is Holland’s theory of vocational personalities and work environments (Holland, 1997). The theory suggests that people who choose careers that are congruent with their personalities are more likely to achieve specific outcomes, such as job performance or satisfaction (Holland, 1959, 1997). It posits that people can have one of six personality types (realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional) and that environments can correspond to these types. Each of the six personality types reflects people’s “habitual or preferred methods of dealing with environmental tasks” (Holland, 1959, p. 35). Each type includes a distinct arrangement of skills, interests, and dispositions, but types can also co-exist or overlap (Sheldon et al., 2020). Work environments are understood as being characterised by features that can match each of the personality types. Research in this tradition has categorised the work environment profiles of a range of different occupations, establishing a framework covering both personalities and occupations to assess the degree of congruence. An important feature of Holland’s theory is that interests are one aspect of the personality that matters. However, Holland’s theory is critiqued for its primarily psychological conception of the environment that fails to appropriately recognise broader social phenomena that might affect occupational choices, such as ethnicity, gender, location, and access to various forms of capital (Furnham, 2001). These factors can also affect perceptions and limit opportunities. Without taking such factors into account, the theory of how a particular personality type reaches a job environment is necessarily incomplete.

A theory that addresses this point and recognises the influence of wider social phenomena on vocational choice is the career choice theory by Eli Ginzberg (1988). He argues that occupational choice is an ongoing process that occurs in three periods, tied to the stages of childhood (Trice et al., 1995). In the first period that lasts until children reach age 11, *fantasy* choices are made. These tend to be most impulsive and represent “an arbitrary translation [...] of needs into an occupational choice” (Ginzberg, 1988, p. 360). In the second period up to age 17, *tentative* choices are made, followed by *realistic* choices beyond age 17. Ginzberg recognises that in order to reach a decision, young people must “work out a compromise between their interests, capacities, and values, and the opportunities and limitations of the environment” (Ginzberg, 1988, p. 361). He also highlights that choices are always relational by arguing that “no adolescent ever makes an occupational choice alone” (p. 361). In sum, Ginzberg’s theory highlights how choices become increasingly realistic over time and how social factors may influence the decision. In his conception of career choice, the interests of young people also play a role.

In a recent paper on major choices of adolescents in Dalian, a city in Northern China, Kim et al. (2016) put the interest-centred vocational personality theory of Holland to the test. They find that most young people in their study do not choose majors in vocational education and university in line with their own interests, but rather based on their estimate for what might lead to better job opportunities. Referencing Holland (1997), Kim et al. (2016) conclude that there is no support in their data for the Western literature linking choice of vocation to personality or interest. Instead, credentialism and economic rationale (pay, prestige, security) govern the choice of majors. In other words, parents and kids behave in more economic ways (see discussion of rational choice theory and expectancy-value theory above) than in psychologically interest-focussed ways. Kim et al. (2016) reason that the hypercompetitive environment in which the study participants

make choices induces students to prioritise obtaining credentials over following their interests, making them prefer a higher degree over what they are interested in. The vast majority of the young people in their study are singletons. They receive substantial parental investment and face high aspirations and intense competition as well as diploma inflation. In this environment, they focus on economic rewards and opportunity costs rather than on personal interests. Kim et al. (2016) identify a second reason why young people in their study might disregard their personal interests. They find that “almost none received vocational guidance that emphasized matching majors and jobs to their personal interests” (p. 288). Their study can be understood as showing how contextual factors can interfere with the idealised process of following one’s interests in choosing a vocational direction.

My grounded theory can be understood as bringing together the theoretical insights of models of vocational choice (Holland, 1997; Ginzberg, 1988) and the empirical findings by Kim et al. (2016). In other words, my grounded theory recognises that, on the one hand, interests are an important component of vocational personalities that can affect occupational choice and that, on the other hand, in Chinese everyday practice many obstacles can interfere with following one’s interests from the young person’s perspective. Conceptually, the notion of interest-environment fit as constructed in my grounded theory captures the fact that despite the intention to choose in line with one’s interests, several factors can interfere. The empirical data presented in the previous four chapters illustrates this point. These chapters have shown that among the migrant youths in my study (who differ in many ways from Kim et al.’s sample of middle-class singletons) interests matter for choosing a vocational or educational pathway. However, the chapters also illustrate that many students are not given a chance to follow their interests, because either their social environment or the institutional environment pose

insurmountable constraints on their choice. Moreover, some young people do not have well-developed interests. Lastly, my theory also treats personal interests more flexibly by highlighting the multi-directional nature of interests which can also include non-academic interests aimed at social or spatial goals.

In sum, my grounded theory links the way the pathway decision is made and the degree to which an interest-environment fit could be reached to persistence or dropping out in the post-matriculation or post-work period. This connection involves linking concepts from the literature of vocational choice to the literature of dropping out or persisting. Although the linking involves two sets of literature, this grounded theory primarily contributes to the literature on dropout and persistence.

8.6.3 Theoretical contributions of the constructed grounded theory

As the above discussion has shown, three most important aspects set this grounded theory apart from the pre-existing literature. First, the existing literature on dropout and persistence focusses chiefly on dynamics in the currently attended institution, for instance, high school or college. Examples for this tendency are found in the interactional theories of dropout by Tinto (1976) and Spady (1970, 1971) and the educational adjustment model by Brown and Kayser (1982). My grounded theory incorporates the pre-matriculation decision-making process and highlights its importance.

Second, the vast majority of the dropout and persistence literature focusses on one single pathway, for instance, attending high school or college. The literature is heavily skewed towards the academic track of high school and university while few efforts have been made to develop a theoretical model of dropouts in vocational schools (see Johnson, 1991

for a notable exception). Moreover, no substantive theory has so far attempted to explain the phenomenon of dropping out as spanning the three pathways of the academic track, vocational education and the realm of work. My grounded theory acknowledges that the phenomenon of dropping out occurs in vocational schools and academic high schools. Additionally, my theory suggests that dropping out can be understood as sharing parallels with turnover in the world of work (see also Bean, 1980, 1982; Brown & Kayser, 1982). Therefore, my grounded theory spans three pathways in a comprehensive framework.

Third, while most theories of dropout and persistence treat interests as related primarily to educational motivation, my theory adds nuance and complexity by highlighting the multi-directional nature of interests. Based on the empirical context of this study, interests are conceptualised as diverse. They include subject-based or professional, academic, spatial (and relational, that is, being close to the family), social, and monetary interests.

When Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993) developed his prominent theory of student departure, he was determined to avoid building a ‘deficit-model’ which, as he found much of the prior literature had done, attributes undue responsibility for dropping out to the individual rather than to institutions. Instead, he wanted to highlight that institutions — he was thinking primarily about residential colleges in the United States — bore at least equal responsibility. It would certainly be possible to describe my grounded theory as a ‘deficit-model’ in that it highlights how some young people and their families fall short of achieving an interest-environment fit during the pre-matriculation decision-making period. However, I believe that a ‘deficit-model’ is not inherently problematic if sound conclusions are drawn from it. In more concrete terms, responsibility for falling short of a good fit in my grounded theory does not primarily lie with the individual young people and their families, but at least equally with the institutional and social environment that sets constraints and provides more or less complete and more or less accurate

information. Both sides of the fit, that is, young people with their interests *and* their environment, are responsible. In other words, the deficit might also be due to the environment. Indeed, my grounded theory suggests that wider access for migrants would go a long way towards addressing the dropout issue by giving people more space and possibilities to explore, find, and pursue their interests. Moreover, my theory is at least equally strengths-oriented as it is deficit-oriented in that factors leading to a good fit are also identified and stressed.

In sum, the theory constructed in this thesis outlines a mechanism that explains dropout and persistence of young people on three post-compulsory education pathways in a particular context, that of young internal rural-to-urban migrants in China. The theory captures the decision-making process and its outcome through the concept of an interest-environment fit. A good fit is shown to lead to more motivation on the respective pathway since young people subjectively see the point. This subjective perception, reinforced through a context of social support and met expectations, leads to less emotional cost incurred while pursuing the pathway, which in turn leads to higher persistence. My theory is a motivational theory of persistence and dropout that is grounded in contextual, relational — social and institutional — decision-making. The theory shows that structural factors such as institutions and social class matter, but that they do not predetermine the decision to drop out. Temporally located between long-term risk factors and short-term precipitating factors, the medium-term decision-making process leading to the pathway decision needs to be taken into account when understanding dropout and persistence behaviour on each path.

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a typology of five different patterns of smoothness and turbulence in school-to-work transitions of young migrants in Shanghai. It has then introduced the main concept of interest-environment fit and its link to motivation which were used to construct a grounded theory of school-to-work transitions. The theory outlined a mechanism to explain the patterns presented in the typology, especially concerning persistence or dropping out in the implementation stage beyond middle school graduation. The theory was extended to include two potentially negative cases. Finally, the last section of this chapter discussed how this grounded theory positioned itself relative to the pre-existing empirical and theoretical literature.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with a summary of the project and how it was implemented. Then it presents the main findings and highlights why they are relevant. Moreover, it discusses the limitations and strengths of this thesis. For grounded theory studies, Charmaz (2006) suggests evaluating a project based on four aspects: credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. This chapter undertakes a review of these four dimensions and argues that the results of this project can be described as fulfilling the requirements for a solid and relevant grounded theory. The last two sections of this chapter then discuss the implications of this project for social policy and suggestions for future research.

9.2 Summary of the thesis and its main findings

This thesis presents an effort to develop a deeper theoretical understanding of the complex dynamics involved in school-to-work transitions of young internal migrants in Chinese cities. It sought to address the research question of why some young migrants persist on their pathway beyond middle school, whereas others drop off their pathway.

This project constructed a substantive grounded theory based on intensive interviews with 35 young migrants (n = 35) and parents (n = 15) living in an outskirt district of Shanghai as well as participant observation during 11 months of fieldwork. Following the inductive methodology of constructivist grounded theory, the analysis involved initial coding, focussed coding, constant comparison and eventually theory construction. The analysis of

the data pointed to the various structural constraints that young migrants face in their school-to-work transitions, including the systematic institutional exclusion described at length in chapter 4. These structural constraints shape the context in which they choose their future pathways beyond middle school, a situation that can be described as constrained or ‘bounded’ agency (Evans, 2002, 2007).

The previous chapters have outlined that the theoretical answer to the research question involves the multidimensional concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ and its link to motivation. When young migrants reach a decision characterised by a good interest-environment fit by the end of the decision-making process, they are likely to develop a high level of motivation for pursuing their pathway since they subjectively tie it to their interest. As long as interest and pathway are linked, these young people persist on their pathways. In other words, these transitions remain smooth during the implementation period that extends at least into early adulthood. When young migrants fail to reach a decision characterised by a good interest-environment fit, they are unlikely to tie their interest to the pathway subjectively. They are less motivated to pursue their pathway and less likely to persist and engage. This mechanism explains why some young people abandon their pathways. In other words, with a bad interest-environment fit, turbulence in the implementation stage is a likely result. This turbulence can then be seen as a rational response to the inability to link the pathway to one’s interests. Turbulence in the implementation stage can thus result from one of the various ways in which a good interest-environment fit can fail to be established in the decision-making process.

Throughout the transition process, social support can have a significant effect on young people. For instance, social support can ‘facilitate’ or ‘inhibit’ a good interest-environment fit during the decision-making period. The role of social support relative to

the aim of bringing about a good fit allows for a distinction between more and less useful social support.

This thesis contributes to the pre-existing literature in several ways (for more detailed references to specific authors, see literature engagement in previous grounded theory chapter). First, the theory explicitly incorporates the pre-graduation decision-making period that explains post-graduation persistence or dropout. Second, it integrates work-bound youths into the theory of persistence by spanning the three main pathways that young migrants in Shanghai pursue after middle school: the academic track, vocational schooling and direct entry into the labour market. Third, the theory prompts us to rethink the concept of interest by expanding existing theories beyond the realm of education. Fourth, the theory is not primarily psychological. It takes a decidedly sociological view by considering institutional restrictions and social class. Fifth, the theory adds to the literature on young migrants in China as it is the first study to focus comprehensively on dropouts and persistence on all three major pathways beyond middle school. Lastly, given that most dropout literature on China is atheoretical, the theory counterbalances the heavy emphasis on the North American context in theory-building focussed on dropout and persistence. Above and beyond these theoretical and empirical contributions, the thesis also makes a methodological point. Through its application of grounded theory, the thesis acts as a guideline for other qualitative researchers interested in theory-building and shows what can be gained from prioritising data over pre-existing knowledge.

The argument in this thesis also included the following points. First, it highlighted that in contrast to predictions of dynamic stress models, pre-middle school graduation turbulence in the transition does not necessarily lead to later turbulence after graduation (see chapter 4). Second, it suggested that, in contrast to claims in the empirical literature on Chinese migrants (Ling, 2020), young migrants should be analysed as engaging in a

decision-making process in middle school, despite severe institutional and socioeconomic constraints (see chapter 4). Lastly, it proposed to add more nuance to our understanding of vocational schools in China by attending to differences between different schools and programmes rather than collectively regarding them as a channel into the lower rungs of the labour market (Lan, 2014; Ling, 2020; see chapter 6).

9.3 Limitations and strengths of the study

Every approach to research comes with its own set of limitations. Pointing to these caveats does not diminish the value of a study. To the contrary, transparency about limitations enhances the work as it brings to the fore underlying assumptions and premises and renders them open to critique (Patton, 2014).

9.3.1 Limitations

This study drew primarily on interviews with 35 young migrants and, where available, their parents. The small set of cases may be regarded as a limitation of this research project. However, the sample size is consistent with other grounded theory studies and allowed me to examine each participant in more detail (Woodgate & Kristjanson, 1995). Sample size is not a suitable yardstick for the quality for grounded theory studies, instead depth, richness and appropriateness for the purpose of theory-generation are more relevant indicators (Charmaz, 2006).

Moreover, while the methodology chapter of this thesis contextualises the set of cases within the larger population of migrants in Shanghai, the set of cases is not designed to be *representative* of the population of young migrants in Shanghai or even all of China.

Since achieving a representative sample is not the goal of qualitative research approaches, the generalisability of the findings of this study is limited. Nonetheless, the small set of cases and the depth of analysis help to achieve the purpose of deepening the understanding of the phenomena under investigation and engaging in conceptual extrapolation from the cases. Readers may still find that the insights in this thesis help to further the understanding of comparable phenomena in different contexts.

An additional point of criticism of interpretivist or constructivist research is that it does not do enough to advocate an agenda to help marginalised groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study, however, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the school-to-work transitions of the marginalised group of young migrants in Chinese cities. Although the primary goal of the study was theory construction and not policy advocacy, the generated insights might well be used to improve career counselling, social policy or education policy (see section on ‘implications for social policy’ below).

A further limitation is that this study partly relies on retrospective accounts which can be associated with recall bias (Cherry & Rodgers, 1979; Holland et al., 1999; Sudman & Bradman, 1973). However, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, this limitation was addressed through triangulation and reflecting on the need of perfect accuracy in recall for the research project.

Additionally, the fact that it was not possible to conduct follow-up interviews with all participants of the study is also a limitation of this research project. While I was able to follow up with all participants through a Chinese messenger service, in-person follow-up interviews were only conducted with 15 out of 35 participants.

Lastly, I am aware that due to the centrality of interpretation in this research approach, there might occasionally be potential for a broader view by taking into account more

information from parents or relevant adults. This limitation is also related to the methodological choice of affording priority to young people's perspectives. For some cases, there might be alternative interpretations of the stories and narratives shared during interviews. While I always sought to triangulate and ensure that my interpretation is the most plausible one, efforts to interview both young people and parents about the career choices still incur the risk that a shared narrative has arisen within the family about the pathway a young person should take. This shared narrative may have developed *posthoc* as a way of justifying a particular action or decision. Because data collection for this thesis was both retrospective and prospective, such post-hoc rationalisations can be countered, at least to some extent, with prospective data collection. However, there remains a risk that in some cases I may have over-interpreted decisions as being truly meaningful, when actually other options were available to the young person at the time and rejected. Therefore, despite my efforts at triangulation, I acknowledge the possibility of alternative viewpoints due to the importance of interpretation in this research project.

9.3.2 Strengths

There are several aspects of this project that can be regarded as strengths. First, by focussing on young people's perspectives, the thesis explicitly aimed at giving a voice to the marginalised group of young migrants. The theory is grounded in the experiences of the young people involved in school-to-work transitions. In other words, the potential limitation of focussing primarily on young people's perspectives is simultaneously one of the strengths of the study. Second, a further strength of the study is that I followed those young people who returned to their home provinces through *en-route* research. This measure ensured that perspectives of young people who left the base location of the

fieldwork were also included in the study. A third strength of the thesis is the in-depth focus on every participant. Thanks to the qualitative orientation of this thesis and the small number of cases, I was able to focus on each participant in considerable depth and detail. Additionally, the method of first building rapport through multiple months in the field to build trust with participants before conducting interviews. Immersing myself in the school also allowed me to understand the educational context of migrant middle schools. This approach led to collecting rich data that served as a solid foundation of the grounded theory constructed in the previous chapter. Fourth, interviewing parents extended the breadth of data sources beyond young people's accounts, which allowed for triangulation and can also be seen as a strength of this research project. Fifth, the choice of grounded theory methodology is also a strength. The methodology provided a structured approach to data collection and data analysis (see methodology chapter) and still afforded flexibility by suggesting to collect and analyse data concurrently while in the field. A final strength of the study is its explicit acknowledgement of the role of the researcher in the process of data collection and analysis. My positionality adds further layers of complexity to the interpretation of the research findings (see section on reflexivity in methodology chapter). This study thus recognises the potential impact of researcher bias, instead of dismissing it.

9.4 Criteria for evaluating a grounded theory study

Qualitative research can be evaluated with respect to a range of standards and criteria. As mentioned, Charmaz (2014) proposes four criteria for ensuring the quality of grounded theory studies: credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. The following sections

employ these four criteria to evaluate the research project. However, it ultimately depends on the reader to judge the usefulness of the work and its methods (Charmaz, 2006).

9.4.1 Credibility

The first criterion, credibility, describes the relationship between data and claims made in the thesis. It asks if systematic comparisons were made between observations and theoretical categories. It also assesses whether the research project has provided sufficient evidence for the claims so that readers are in a position to form an independent view and agree or disagree with the claims (Charmaz, 2014).

The research explored how young migrants in Shanghai navigate their school-to-work transitions. It found that patterns of smoothness and turbulence could be explained through the concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ and its link to motivation. In-depth analysis of interviews with young people and observations from my fieldwork have allowed me to achieve an intimate familiarity with the setting and the topic. The interlinked steps of data collection and data analysis (interviewing, observing, listening carefully to recorded interviews, transcribing, reading and re-reading) contributed to systematic engagement with the data sources. Keeping a clear research record through recordings, transcripts, ongoing field notes as well as memos throughout the entire research process helped to ensure dependability and reliability. Observations from the fieldwork allowed for contextualisation and triangulation of data and provided an additional data source for analysis and theorising.

In keeping with constructivist grounded theory methodology, I recognise that the theoretical insights in this thesis are mediated through the researcher’s interpretive

standpoint and are thus not final truth (Kayrooz & Trevitt, 2005). Therefore, throughout the thesis, I sought to show how I derived analytical insights from the collected data. In particular, I chose to present several cases in detail and linked them with other similar cases where relevant to ensure credibility. Readers are thus in a position to cast an independent judgment of the claims presented in this thesis (Charmaz, 2014)

9.4.2 Originality

Originality, in the context of a grounded theory study, refers to whether the categories and concepts in the theory are fresh and offer new insights (Charmaz, 2014). It asks whether researchers rendered the data with a new conceptual angle. It refers to the social and theoretical significance of the work and evaluates if the grounded theory “challenge[s], extend[s], or refine[s] current ideas, concepts, and practices” (p. 337).

As the engagement with the pre-existing theoretical literature in the previous chapter has shown, the multidimensional concepts developed in this study ‘interest-environment fit’ and its link to motivation are original in that they distinguish themselves in several ways from existing theoretical concepts, such as ‘normative congruence’ (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993) or ‘pre-figurative commitment’ (Morgan, 2005). The concepts offer a fresh and comprehensive understanding of dropping out and persisting on the multiple pathways that young migrants pursue beyond middle school. The work is theoretically significant because of its nuanced theorising of how patterns in school-to-work transitions of migrant youths occur across pathways. The theory is also significant for spanning the decision-making stage and the later implementation period. Moreover, recognising the multi-directionality to the concept of ‘interest’, which is fundamental to the above two

concepts, also contributes to the originality of this thesis. Social significance of the theory is derived from the policy implications discussed below.

9.4.3 Resonance

Resonance refers to whether the categories “portray the fullness of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 337). It asks if the study revealed both liminal and fluid meanings, which are often implied or hidden. It explores if the researcher drew “links between larger institutions and individual lives when the data indicates it” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 338).

The key categories of the study, ‘interest-environment fit’ and the link to motivation, are purposefully developed as multidimensional concepts that portray the complexity of what it means for young people to achieve a good fit for a given pathway beyond middle school. Moreover, by comprehensively reviewing all main pathways (academic, vocational school, work) the theory spans the whole range of transition experiences of the participants, offering a full portrayal of the context. The analysis has revealed implied meanings of the transition experience of young people, such as which types of transitions are considered successful and which perceived hierarchies affect pathway and school choices. This study links institutional arrangements, such as the *hukou* status, residence card status and educational access of young migrants and their families, to their influence on the individual lives and transition experiences of young people in this study. These arrangements feature explicitly in the multidimensional category of ‘interest-environment fit’.

9.4.4 Usefulness

Usefulness refers to whether the analysis offers interpretations that can be used in everyday worlds. It asks if the analytic categories suggest generic processes with tacit implications. It poses the question of whether the work contributes to knowledge, making a better world or sparking new research (Charmaz, 2014).

The theorising conducted for this thesis can be useful in everyday worlds. The concept of ‘interest-environment fit’ captures an abstract congruence between a multitude of factors that, if aligned in a suitable fashion, are conducive to bringing about persistence in the pursuit of a given pathway that young migrants choose. This insight is based on a multi-directional conceptualisation of ‘interest’. The usefulness of ‘interest-environment fit’ can also be seen through the range of possible policy implications (as discussed in the following section). For instance, by highlighting the negative impact of the restrictive institutional framework and discriminatory practices on achieving a good fit, the concept suggests that opening up opportunities for young migrants through policy changes might improve persistence on post–middle school pathways. Moreover, the theoretical work in this thesis also sparks ideas and suggestions for further study that might be useful to other researchers. Lastly, the methodological exercise of using grounded theory (and critically engaging with some of its shortcomings) might act as a helpful guideline for other qualitative researchers.

9.5 Implications for social policy

While the primary objective of this thesis is the construction of theory, the insights generated in the process might still be relevant in considering how existing policy

approaches might be improved. This section thus offers suggestions for potential enhancements of social policy. The suggestions can be divided into two broad categories, namely (1) recommendations that mitigate the more negative effects of the current inequalities and (2) more fundamental recommendations that call for an end on discrimination based on *hukou* and socioeconomic background.

9.5.1 Mitigating negative effects of current inequalities

The insights generated by this grounded theory study suggest that achieving a good ‘interest-environment fit’ during the decision-making phase is crucial for persistence on chosen pathways after middle school graduation. How could social policy help young migrants achieve this goal? Middle schools could begin to offer young people more extensive career counselling that guides them to find and develop their own interests and suggests suitable pathways. Given that the grounded theory reveals the multi-directionality of interests, in practice, not all interests may be linked to a particular pathway. The career counselling process would have to address this by suggesting alternatives that are still in line with higher-level goals or interests. Throughout this thesis, I repeatedly stressed the critical role of teachers in this process and, in several cases, the excellent practice of homeroom teachers who cared about migrant students (see also Yiu, 2016). Caring teachers conducted home visits, offered multiple recommendations that took into account the interests of young migrants, and some even used their own social network for the sake of their students. However, already overburdened homeroom teachers should not have to shoulder the responsibility of career counselling by themselves. Instead, employing career counsellors to take responsibility for this vital part of guiding young people towards the end of their compulsory education

would be a sensible solution from the perspective of young people. Moreover, social organisations could be tasked with complementing school services and assisting in the process of vocational counselling. In my study, no social organisations were involved in this process at the two fieldwork schools. Social workers could fill this gap.

This point about career counselling is particularly pertinent given the finding that it is highly important when an interest-environment fit is found (see chapter 6 and 7). In other words, *timing* matters. I found that those young people who miss the opportune moment of middle school graduation for finding a good fit, struggle even more to re-establish it after graduation.

The theory suggests that, from a young person's perspective, having an interest is not sufficient by itself. The social and institutional environment needs to be favourable in order to support this interest. For instance, parents should grow more sensitive to the relationship between persistence and interest congruence. Forcing young people into a direction that ignores their established personal interests is problematic, even if parents are convinced that they act in the long-term interest of their children. During parent-teacher meetings, schools could offer parents insights into the importance of empowerment, giving their children a sense of ownership over the decision-making process and bolstering their children's sense of agency. Specifically, middle schools could involve parents more actively in these meetings and promote two-way discussions about which pathways could facilitate the interests of their children.

Drawing on the insights about the importance of *timing* in finding an interest-environment fit, the theory suggests that those who have already experienced turbulence and dropped off their initial pathway beyond middle school are particularly vulnerable and unlikely to achieve a good fit for their next alternative step. Social policy could be improved to

address this issue. During my fieldwork, I found that no social organisation assisted any of the young migrants during their various dropout experiences. Introducing a service point for young people that helps with counselling and assists young people in finding training or work opportunities that are in line with young people's interests would be a possible option. However, I acknowledge that it remains a challenge to reach out to those who have already dropped out, especially if this dynamic occurs across provinces and is thus associated with spatial mobility. Appropriately assisting dropouts is likely to be the most challenging point to address through social policies.

9.5.2 Calling for an end to discrimination based on *hukou* and socioeconomic background

Moving into the second category of more radical recommendations, the theory also suggested that the restrictive institutional environment limits the possibilities for achieving a good interest-environment fit. This thesis showed that the current policy framework segregates migrants into three groups depending on their socioeconomic background (see chapter 4). While all groups still retain a choice over their pathway, this policy severely limits the opportunities for young migrants. My theory suggests that the discriminatory approach based on *hukou* and socioeconomic background needs to be discontinued, not least because it prevents many young people from finding pathways that fit their interests and thus results in higher degrees of turbulence in the later stages of transition.

The segregation system implemented in middle schools separating migrant students and local students has detrimental effects on the motivation and atmosphere in migrant classrooms. This approach should be abandoned in order to offer equal opportunity to

migrant students. However, this demand would only be feasible if implemented in parallel with a sweeping reform of the *hukou* system that currently restricts access to public high schools for migrants. Cities such as Shanghai have taken steps towards reforming access to education for migrants (for instance, by introducing the 120-point system mentioned throughout the thesis), but these steps are not yet sufficient. Only through thoughtful reform of this system can the incentives of schools to provide equal opportunities to both migrants and local students be aligned with the ambitions of migrant students and parents. Reforms to render the *hukou* system less discriminatory are complex since such changes would require setting up many more high schools in urban centres, such as Shanghai, and necessitate a rethinking of the secondary education and university systems, and thus the economy as a whole. A comprehensive discussion of the complexities involved in *hukou* reforms is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

9.6 Future research

There are several ways in which future research could build on the work undertaken in this thesis. First, a quantitative evaluation of the grounded theory constructed in this thesis might shed further light on the processes observed and theorised. Such a study could treat the relationships established in this grounded theory as hypotheses and test them through a longitudinal quantitative study design. Such a study could also integrate an explicit comparison between migrants and local youths in Shanghai. The grounded theory would suggest that a major difference between migrants and locals would be the less restrictive institutional environment that locals face. This variation, in turn, is likely to affect the process of attaining 'interest-environment fit'. Such a study could also address issues of generalisability by improving our understanding of how the theory fares

in different contexts. Second, it would be interesting to set up a comparative study between a larger number of migrant participants whose parents obtained 120 points (“wide access” group, see chapter 4) and locals. This study could shed light onto potential differences between those migrants who gained access to high schools via this limited institutional opportunity and their local counterparts. Such a study would undoubtedly benefit from staying sensitive to critical moments or turning points, just as this thesis has done. Third, it could be interesting to test the grounded theory outside the context of Shanghai and establish whether its insights hold in other areas of China or even outside of China. Lastly, it might be productive to turn this doctoral research project into a long-term evaluation of trajectories beyond early adulthood. As stated in the grounded theory chapter (chapter 8), I am aware that the implementation period considered in this study extends only into early adulthood. It would be interesting to assess the sustainability of smooth or turbulent school-to-work transitions as the lives of the participants continue to evolve and other transitions, such as finding a spouse or having children, affect their lived experience. Such a longitudinal study, involving continuous follow-up interviews with participants of this study, could offer insights into these phenomena.

9.7 Conclusion

This chapter has summarised the doctoral project and presented its main findings. After discussing the limitations and strengths of the study, it has evaluated the final product, a middle-range grounded theory of school-to-work transitions, with respect to the four commonly reviewed criteria of credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. It concluded that the grounded theory is both valid and relevant. However, the judgment of the eventual use of the theory remains with the readers. Then, the chapter offered

suggestions on how the main findings of the study and the grounded theory could contribute to social policy. Finally, I offered an outlook for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent documents for schools (English and Mandarin Chinese)



University of Oxford
Department of Sociology
Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, United Kingdom
Director of Study: Lukas Lohove
Tel: +44 1865 281 740

[School principal name]
[School name and address]
[Date]

Dear [School principal name],

I am writing to enquire about conducting some research in your school in the next academic year. I am a doctoral research student at Oxford University, supervised by Dr Rachel Murphy (Professor in Sociology of China) and Dr David Kirk (Professor in Sociology) and funded by the Alice Yin Hung Scholarship. In my research project, *Education or Work? Youth Transitions of Urban Migrant Families in China*, I will explore the decision-making process of young migrant students and their families when approaching middle school graduation.

The research will take place with classes in the year 7 to 9 in your school. I am looking for a teacher who teaches both migrant and local students. I am not aiming to change what or how the teacher chooses to teach, and will not be making any judgements about teaching. My research focus is on migrant students' career planning and experience of transition.

By participating in the research, your school would be contributing to a project that will deepen our understanding of youth transition processes of the vulnerable population of second-generation migrants.

The commitment from the school would be to allow me into school lessons over the course of two terms, from the beginning of the next term (September 2017). I would be available to assist any English teaching in your school, if this suits your school's teaching schedule. Moreover, I am proficient in Mandarin Chinese and available to assist teachers in other ways in the classroom, if required. I would audio-record students engaged in whole class discussion, observe and take notes, photocopy some of the students' written work, and interview students individually, if they and their parents and/or guardians give explicit consent.

Oxford University has strict ethical procedures on conducting ethical research with teachers and young people, consistent with current British Educational Research Association guidelines. Before beginning the research, I would inform parents and guardians about the research and offer the students, parents and guardians the opportunity to refuse to participate. Throughout the research students, parents and guardians will be able to refuse to participate at any time.

All participants, including students, teacher and the school, would be made anonymous in all research reports. The data collected would be kept strictly confidential, available only to my supervisor and myself, and not used other than specified without the further consent of all involved being obtained. All tapes would be destroyed at the end of the research period, and kept in locked conditions until then. I have enclosed copies of the leaflets for parents and students with this letter.

If you feel you would like to take part in the study, or need more information about what is involved, please contact me. Whether or not you feel it would be appropriate for your school to participate, I would be grateful if you would complete the pro-forma below, and return it to me in the stamped addressed envelope enclosed in this letter.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Lukas Johannes Lohove
DPhil Candidate in Sociology
Department of Sociology
University of Oxford

Contact Details:

lukas.lohove@gtc.ox.ac.uk

Education or Work? Youth Transitions of Urban Migrant Families in China

Lukas Lohove
Oxford University Department of Sociology

[School name]

[School address]

[School principal name]

- We do not wish to participate in this project.
- We would like to find out more about this project.
- We would like to take part in this project.

If you would like further information, or are interested in taking part, please give the name of a contact person for your school, and details of the best way to contact him or her.

Contact name: _____

Contact email: _____

Contact telephone number: _____

Please return this form by email to the following email address:
lukas.lohove@gtc.ox.ac.uk

Thank you for your help.



牛津大学
社会学系
Manor Road, 牛津 OX1 3UQ, 英国
研究主任: 罗凯世 (Lukas Lohove)
电话: +44 1865 281 740

XXX 校长
上海市 XX 中学
上海市金山区

2017 年 06 月 05 日

尊敬的 X 校长, 您好:

我希望询问可否下一个学年在您的学校进行研究。我是牛津大学博士生, 跟复旦大学人口学教授任远博士合作。我的导师是中国社会学教授 Rachel Murphy 博士和社会学教授 David Kirk 博士。我的研究项目由 Alice Yin Hung 奖学金资助。研究题目为《教育还是工作? 中国农民工子女青年渡过》。我将在接近中学毕业时探讨农民工子女及其家人的决策过程。

这项研究将在您所在学校的 7 至 9 年级进行。我希望找到一位教本地和外地学生的老师。我不是想改变老师所选择的教学方式, 也不会对教学做出任何判断。我的研究重点是农民工子女的职业规划和过渡经验。

通过参与研究, 您的学校将为我的研究项目做出贡献, 这将加深我们对第二代移民弱势群体青年过渡进程的认识。

您学校的贡献是允许我从下一学期(2017 年 9 月)开始在课堂上听两个学期的课。如果这适合您学校的教学时间表, 我很乐意协助您在学校任何英语教学。此外, 我精通汉语, 所以也可以在教室中以其他方式协助教师。为了进行研究, 我希望录音学生参加全班讨论、观察和笔记、复印学生的书面作业。最后, 如果学生和父母或监护人明确同意, 我也希望单独面试学生。

牛津大学严格遵守道德规范, 特别是关于老师和青少年进行伦理学研究, 所有规范符合英国教育研究协会指导方针。因此, 在开始研究之前, 我会通知家长和监护人, 并向学生、家长和监护人提供拒绝参与的机会。在整个研究过程中, 家长和监护人都可以随时拒绝参加。

所有参与者，包括学生、老师和学校将在所有研究报告中匿名。所收集的数据将严格保密，只有我的主管和我自己才可以使用。数据只能以参与者同意的方式使用。所有录音将在研究期间结束时销毁，并保持在锁定状态。这封信的附件是发给父母和学生的通知信。

如果您想参加这项研究或需要更多有关涉及的信息，请与我联系。无论您觉得自己的学校是否适合参加，如果您填写下面的表格并将其发电子邮件给我，我不胜感激。

感谢您的关注和时间。我期待着您的回音。

此致

敬礼

罗凯世 (Lukas Lohove)

博士生
社会系
牛津大学

联系方式：

电子邮件：lukas.lohove@gtc.ox.ac.uk

教育还是工作？中国农民工子女青年渡过

罗凯世 (Lukas Lohove)
博士生
社会系
牛津大学

XXX 校长
上海市 XX 中学
上海市金山区

- 我们不希望参与这个项目。
- 我们想了解更多关于这个项目。
- 我们想参加这个项目。

如果您想了解更多或有兴趣参加，请提供您学校联系人的姓名以及与他或她联系的最佳方式的详细信息。

联系人姓名： _____

联系电子邮件： _____

联系电话： _____

感谢您的帮助。

Appendix B: Assent documents for participants (English and Mandarin Chinese)

ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN UNDER 16 (AND GUIDELINE FOR VERBAL ASSENT)

Migrant Families in China

Child/young person (or if unable, parent/researcher/teacher on their behalf) to circle all they agree with:

- Has somebody else explained this project to you? Yes / No
- Do you understand what this project is about? Yes / No
- Have you asked all the questions you want? Yes / No
- Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand? Yes / No
- Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time? Yes / No
- Are you happy to take part? Yes / No
- Are you happy for your voice to be recorded? Yes / No
- Are you happy to have photographs taken? Yes / No

If any answers are "no" or you don't want to take part, that's OK! No one will be cross with you.

The researcher can also talk to you and explain the project in person. Afterwards, the researcher will ask you the questions directly. In this case, you can tell him or her directly if you want to take part. Again, if any of your answers is "no", that is no problem at all. No one will be unhappy.

What you tell the researcher will be confidential, unless it puts you or your family at immediate risk.

If you do want to take part, please write your name below.

Your name _____

Date _____

The researcher who explained this project to you needs to sign too:

Print Name _____

Sign _____

Date _____

Thank you!

16岁以下未成年人的知情同意书
(以及口头同意原则)

中国的迁移家庭

孩童/未成年人（如不能，则由父母/研究者/教师代表）圈出他们同意的所有选项：

- 有人向你解释这个项目吗？ 是 / 否
- 你明白这个项目是关于什么的吗？ 是 / 否
- 你已经问过你想问的所有问题了吗？ 是 / 否
- 你明白对你所问的问题的答案了吗？ 是 / 否
- 你知道你随时都可以中止参与吗？ 是 / 否
- 你愿意参与吗？ 是 / 否
- 你愿意让研究者录下你的声音吗？ 是 / 否
- 你愿意让研究者拍照吗？ 是 / 否

如果有任何答案是“否”或者你不想参与，没关系！没有人会因此而对你生气。

研究者也可以面对面地向你解释这个项目。然后，研究者会直接对你提出以上问题。这时，你可以直接告诉他或她，你是否愿意参与。再提醒一次，如果你有任何答案是“否”，这是完全没问题的。没有人会因此不开心。

你告诉研究者的所有东西都会被保密，除非它让你或你的家人处于直接风险之中。

如果你愿意参与，请在下面填写你的名字。

你的名字 _____

日期 _____

向你解释这个项目的研究者也需要签名：

印刷名（正楷姓名） _____

签名 _____

日期 _____

谢谢！

Appendix C: Consent documents for participants (English and Mandarin Chinese)

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY



Lukas Lohove
DPhil Candidate
Manor Road
Oxford OX1 3UQ, United Kingdom
lukas.lohove@gtc.ox.ac.uk
Tel: +44 1865 281 740
<http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/>

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (AND GUIDELINE FOR VERBAL CONSENT)

CUREC Approval Reference:
Research Ethics Approval (CUREC 2) Ref No: R51459/RE002

Migrant Families in China

- You and your children are asked to take part in a study run by Oxford University looking at the current situation of migrant families in China.
- The goals of this study are to understand better the life conditions of migrant families in Chinese cities and the Chinese countryside and to inform social policies for improving these conditions.
- With your rural hukou status in Shanghai, your family's experiences are relevant to this research project. The research would benefit greatly from the participation of you and your family members.
- If your child takes part, a researcher would arrange an interview with them for about one hour and ask a few questions. The interview would take place in a location that is convenient for you and/or your child, for example a public tea house or restaurant. Moreover, a researcher might contact you to arrange one or more follow-up interviews in the next 12 months.
- **If you are happy for your child to take part, please fill in the form below and return it to the principal researcher, Lukas Lohove. As an alternative procedure, the information can be explained verbally and you can inform the principal researcher, Lukas Lohove, whether you agree that your child takes part in the study.**
- If you have any questions about the study, you can contact Lukas Lohove, DPhil Candidate, by email at lukas.lohove@gtc.ox.ac.uk or call at
- If you decide to withdraw your participation in the study or the participation of your child, it is possible to do so at any time of the study.
- Additional information collected of you and your child includes name, date of birth, hukou status, place of origin, residence history, and the number of family members. All data will be anonymized and stored securely in the Nexus Sharepoint System provided by Oxford University.
- All information will be kept confidential, unless anything is revealed that is putting you or your family at immediate risk.
- Your data will be used for writing a doctoral dissertation and may be published in anonymized form in academic journals or conferences. Access to raw data is limited to the core research team.
- If you would like to make a complaint, the supervisors of this study, Prof Rachel Murphy and Prof David Kirk can be contacted by email at rachel.murphy@sant.ox.ac.uk and david.kirk@sociology.ox.ac.uk

a) Consent on behalf of the child

Name of child: _____
Forename Surname

(if applicable, name of school: _____)

I have read and understood the details of the above study, and have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study with others. I have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand that the project has received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford's ethical approval process for research involving human participants, and I understand who will have access to the data, how it will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the study. I understand that participation is voluntary and that my child and I are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my child's education being affected in any way. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

Please tick appropriate box:

<u>I agree for my child to be audio recorded</u>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>I agree for my child to be photographed</u>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>I understand how audio recordings and photos will be used in research outputs</u>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

I give permission for my child to take part in the above study (either in written form or verbally).

Name of parent/guardian: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

b) Consent of parent/guardian/others as participant

Please initial each box

- | | | |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or academic penalty. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by designated individuals from the University of Oxford where it is relevant to my taking part in this study. I give permission for these individuals to access my data. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 | I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 | I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 | I understand how this research will be written up and published. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 | I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 | I consent to being audio recorded | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 | I consent to being video recorded | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 | I consent to having my photo taken | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 | I understand how audio recordings / videos / photos will be used in research outputs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12 | I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication against my name | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13 | I agree to take part in the above study (either written or verbally). | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____



Lukas Lohove
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联系电话: +44 1865 281 740
<http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/>

父母/监护人 知情同意书

(以及口头同意原则)

CUREC 核准通过:

研究伦理核准 (CUREC 2) 编号: R51459/RE002

中国的迁移家庭

- 您和您的子女被邀请参与牛津大学的一项研究，此项研究关注的是中国的迁移家庭的生活现状。
- 此项研究的目的是进一步了解在中国城市及农村的迁移家庭的生活现状并提出报告，以使社会政策能改善此状况。
- 您持有农村户口而在上海生活，您的家庭经历与此研究项目密切相关。您和您家庭成员的参与将对本研究提供重大支持。
- 如果您的子女参与研究，将由一位研究者安排一次时长约一小时的采访，访谈中将进行一些简单的提问。采访的地点将定在您和/或您的子女方便的地点，如公共场所的茶室餐厅。此外，研究者可能会在未来 12 个月之内联系您并安排一次或多次跟进访谈。
- 如果您愿意让您的子女参与研究，请填写以下表格并返还给研究负责人，**Lukas Lohove**。您也可以要求获得这项信息的口头解释，并告知研究负责人 **Lukas Lohove** 您是否愿意让您的子女参与研究。
- 如果您对此项研究有任何疑问，请通过邮件联系博士候选人 Lukas Lohove，电子邮箱地址为 lukas.lohove@gtc.ox.ac.uk，或联系电话号码
- 如果您决定让您自己或您的子女退出本研究的参与，您可以在本研究过程中随时提出这项要求。
- 本研究需要收集您和您的子女的部分个人信息，包括姓名、出生日期、户口、籍贯、居住历史、家庭成员人数等等。所有资料将会以匿名形式呈现，并妥善保存在由牛津大学提供的 Nexus Sharepoint System 系统中。
- 所有信息将会被保密，除非所披露的内容使您和您的家人面临直接的风险。
- 您的资料将会被用于一篇博士学位论文的创作，也许会匿名地被发表在学术期刊或会议中。原始数据的获得权仅限于核心研究团队之内。
- 如果您需要投诉，可以通过邮箱联系本研究的监督者 Rachel Murphy 教授和 David Kirk 教授，他们的电子邮箱地址分别为 rachel.murphy@sant.ox.ac.uk 和 david.kirk@sociology.ox.ac.uk。

b) 父母/监护人/其他人作为研究参与者的知情同意书

请在每个方格中
签名(全名)

- | | | |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | 我确认我已经读过并理解了关于以上研究的信息。我有对这些信息进行考虑和提问的机会，我的问题已经得到满意的答复。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | 我知晓我的参与是自愿的，我可以在任何时候自由地退出而不必给出原因，也不会导致任何不利后果或学术惩罚。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | 我知晓研究所收集的资料中与我的参与相关的部分可能会被牛津大学指定的人查看。我允许这些人获得我的资料。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 | 我知晓此项目已经被牛津大学研究伦理委员会复查并通过了伦理核准。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 | 我知晓谁有权利获得我提供的个人信息，这些资料将会被如何保存，以及在项目结束时这些资料将如何被处理。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 | 我知晓这项研究将会被撰写并发表。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 | 我知晓提出问题或做出投诉的渠道。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 | 我同意配合录音。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 | 我同意配合摄像。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 | 我同意配合拍照。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 | 我知晓录音/录像/照片将如何用在研究成果当中。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12 | 我允许我说的话以我的名义被直接引用在研究出版物中。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13 | 我同意参与上述研究(书面或口头形式)。 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

研究参与者姓名: _____

签名: _____ 日期: _____

研究者姓名: _____

签名: _____ 日期: _____

Appendix D: Information sheet for participants (English and Mandarin Chinese)

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY



Lukas Lohove
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Manor Road
Oxford OX1 3UQ, United Kingdom
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<http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/>

Migrant Families in China

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS AND PARENTS / GUARDIANS OR PARTICIPANTS

Ethics Approval Reference:
Research Ethics Approval (CUREC 2) Ref No: R51459/RE002

The University of Oxford is conducting a study to understand better the life conditions of migrant families in Chinese cities and the Chinese countryside. The research forms part of the doctoral project of Lukas Lohove, DPhil candidate in the Department of Sociology. We would like to invite you and/or your child to be part of this study. We very much hope you would like to take part, but before you decide, it is important that you understand why the study is being done and what it will involve.

What are we trying to find out?

This project is looking at how migrant families experience and navigate their educational and work opportunities. We are especially interested in how decisions about children's life after middle school are being made. We already know that pursuing education beyond middle school in urban areas is difficult for rural hukou holders and that some families decide to send their children back to their place of origin. However, we know very little about the children's role in this decision-making process and how they experience returning to their rural place of origin. This project will help us to understand better the life conditions of migrant families in Chinese cities and the Chinese countryside. We hope that our findings will allow us to inform social policies for improving these conditions.

More information about the project can be obtained by contacting the research team (contact details below).

What will happen if I and/or my child takes part?

If you and/or your child takes part, a researcher would arrange an interview with you/them and ask a few questions about their education and life experiences. Each session lasts about 45-60 minutes. The interview would take place in a location that is convenient for you and/or your child, for example a public tea house or a restaurant.

Moreover, a researcher might contact you and/or your child to arrange one or more follow-up interviews in the next 12 months. All interviews are completely voluntary and can be ended at any point without giving reasons.

To draw conclusions from the interviews, the researchers would like to audio record the interview. This is necessary because the way in which participants, especially children, speak about their experiences can contain a lot of detail that would otherwise be lost.

If possible, the researchers would like to take a few photographs of the research setting where the interview takes place. These photographs will be used to provide context to the research and might be published in public journals and conferences. If you do **not** want your child or yourself to be photographed, please indicate this on the consent form or inform the researcher verbally.

What happens to the results of the study?

Results for each participant are kept strictly confidential. Only a code number will be used to identify children and adult participants, and all information and results are kept in a secure and encrypted server (Nexus SharePoint) provided by the University of Oxford. Regular summaries of our findings will be available to interested families.

If you agree to participate in this project, the research will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will probably be published in academic journals and presented at conferences, but this may happen only two to three years after the end of the study. Access might vary from open access journals, that is, the information will be available to every internet user, to more restricted access based on purchase of the articles.

Research data in anonymized form will be kept securely for a minimum of 3 years after publication according to University Policy. It is not envisaged to destroy the anonymised data because of its continuing value to the wider research community.

All information will be kept confidential, unless anything is revealed that is putting you or your family at immediate risk.

Benefits and risk

For participants, there is a risk that the interview might touch on potentially distressing themes, such as migration experience, relationship with individual family members, experience at school, future perspective beyond school, feeling of loneliness or powerlessness, or experiences with discrimination. Moreover, for researchers, there is a risk that the interview might reveal disturbing information, such as abuse or neglect.

No immediate benefits can be expected for participants in this study.

Who is conducting this research?

The research project is organized by Lukas Lohove of Oxford University, who is DPhil candidate. The research is funded by the Ms Alice Yin Hung Scholarship and the Joint Research Ph.D. Fellowship, provided by the Confucius China Studies Program. This study has received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee, Ref No: R51459/RE002.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this project, please speak to Lukas Lohove (<new Chinese phone number>) or the supervisors Prof Rachel Murphy (+44 1865 432032) and Prof David Kirk (+44 1865 278599) who will do their best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of

Oxford (Mrs Claudia Kozeny-Pelling, Social Sciences and Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD). The chair will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner.

What should I do next?

Please fill in the enclosed form and return it to the researcher or alternatively verbally inform the researcher that you understand the purpose and conditions of the research project, if you would like your child to take part in this study. Please remember that you may withdraw at any time, without penalty and without giving a reason by notifying the researcher. If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

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社会学系



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中国的迁移家庭

研究参与者及其父母/监护人参与须知

伦理核准资格书:

研究伦理核准 (CUREC 2) 编号: R51459/RE002

牛津大学正在主持一项研究，以进一步了解在中国城市和乡村的迁移家庭的生活状况。这项研究是社会学系博士候选人 Lukas Lohove 的博士学位项目的一部分。我们非常希望您能参与研究，但您在决定之前需要先了解这项研究的目的以及它将包含什么内容，这是非常重要的。

我们试图发现什么？

此项目关注的是迁移家庭如何经历和选择他们的教育和工作机会。我们对子女初中毕业之后的生活抉择尤其感兴趣。我们已经知道，初中毕业后继续在城市接受教育对于农村户口持有者来说是困难的，所以一些家庭会决定把他们的子女送回老家。然而，我们仍不了解子女在这个决策过程中的角色，以及他们是如何经历回老家这一事件的。这个项目将帮助我们更好地了解中国城乡迁移家庭的生活状况。我们希望研究发现能为社会政策提供建议来改善这种状况。

欲知更多关于本项目的信息，可联系本项目研究团队（联系方式见下）。

如果我和/或我的子女参与了会怎么样？

如果你和/或你的子女参与，一位研究者将为你/他们安排一场采访，问你/他们一些关于教育和生活经历的问题。每次采访大约持续 45-60 分钟。采访地点将定在方便你和/或你的子女的地方，比如说公共场合的一间茶室或餐厅。

此外，研究者可能会在未来 12 个月内联系你和/或你的子女，安排一场或多场跟踪采访。所有采访都完全基于自愿原则，可以要求随时中止而不必给出任何理由。

为了从采访中得出结论，研究者希望对采访进行录音。这是必要的，因为参与者（尤其是孩子）说话的方式中含有大量细节信息，如果不是通过录音记录的话，这些信息就可能被丢失。

如果可能的话，研究者希望能拍几张采访现场的照片。这些照片是用来为研究提供语境的，并可能会被发表在公开刊物和会议中。如果你不想让你的子女或你自己出现在照片中，请在知情同意书中表明，或口头告知研究者。

AP25_v3.0 参与者须知 - 日期及版本 No: 16/05/2017 - No. 003

研究结果将如何处理？

每个参与者的研究结果都将被严格保密处理，只使用一个代码来辨别孩童和成年人参与者，所有信息和结果都将被妥善保存在由牛津大学提供的加密服务器（Nexus SharePoint）中。有兴趣的家庭有权利查看我们研究发现的规律性总结。

如果你同意参与此项目，这个研究将会被写成一份毕业论文。这份论文如果提交成功，将会以纸质版和电子版形式发表，并保存在大学档案馆中，以便辅助未来的研究。这份论文也许会发表在学术期刊上或在会议上展示，但这或许要在研究结束后两到三年才会发生。公开期刊对获取权限的规定各有不同，也就是说，在购买文章后可获得权限的情况下，每个互联网使用者都有可能获取到这些信息。

根据大学的规定，经过匿名的研究资料在发表后将至少被保存三年。匿名后的资料并不会被摧毁，因为它对更广泛的学术圈仍具有价值。

所有信息都会被保密处理，除非所披露之事会让你或你的家人面临直接风险。

收益和风险

对参与者来说，潜在风险是采访可能会触及令人紧张的主题，如迁移经历、与家庭成员之间的关系、在校经历、离校后的未来发展规划、孤独感和无权感、受歧视经历等等。此外，对于研究者来说，存在的风险是采访可能会揭示令人不安的信息，如虐待和忽视。

在本研究中，参与者将不会获得直接的收益。

谁在主持这项研究？

本研究项目由牛津大学博士候选人 Lukas Lohove 负责，由 Ms Alice Yin Hung 女士奖学金和孔子中国研究项目提供的联合研究博士助学金资助。本研究已经通过了牛津大学研究伦理委员会的伦理审核，编号为：R51459/RE002。

出现问题了怎么办？

如果你对本项目有任何方面的问题，请联系 Lukas Lohove () 或监督导师 Rachel Murphy 教授(+44 1865 432032)和 David Kirk 教授(+44 1865 278599)，他们会尽最大努力解答你的疑问。研究者应当在 10 个工作日之内答复你的疑问并告知对该问题将作何处理。如果你仍然不满意，或者希望做出正式投诉，请联系牛津大学研究伦理委员会主席（Claudia Kozeny-Pelling 夫人，人文社科交叉研究伦理委员会；电子邮箱：ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk；地址：Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD）。主席将对你的问题做出合理而高效的解决。

接下来我该做什么？

如果你愿意让你的子女参与研究，请填写所附表格并返还至研究者，或者口头告知研究者你已经明白了本研究项目的目的和情况。请记住，你随时可以退出，不会受到任何惩罚，也不需要告知研究者时给出原因。如果你希望提前讨论研究内容（或过后有任何问题），请联系：

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社会学系
地址：Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, United Kingdom
联系电话：
电子邮箱：lukas.lohove@gtc.ox.ac.uk

Appendix E: Interview guideline

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY



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Migrant Families in China

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Ethics Approval Reference:

Research Ethics Approval (CUREC 2) Ref No: R51459/RE002

The interview guide acts as a starting point for an open conversation about migration experiences, educational and job opportunities, and a range of factors that might influence the decision-making process about how to proceed after middle school. Follow-up interview questions will be shaped by the context of the conversation and the answers given by the participant.

I. Interview questions for young people (drawing on Charmaz 2006: 30-31)

1. Initial Open Questions

- Tell me about what will happen when you graduate from middle school.
- When, if at all, did you first experience the need to plan for your future?
- What was it like? What did you think then? How did you happen to plan? Who, if anyone, influenced your actions? Tell me about how he/she or they influenced you.
- Could you describe the events that led up to your middle school graduation?
- What contributed to your decision what to do after your middle school graduation?
- What was going on in your life then? How would you describe how you viewed your future plans before middle school graduation happened? How, if at all, has your view of your future job or education changed?
- How would you describe the person you were then?

2. Intermediate Questions

- What, if anything, did you know about vocational education, high school, university, jobs in the city?
- Tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you learned about your options after middle school?
- What happened next?
- Who, if anyone, was involved? When was that? How were they involved?
- Tell me about how you learned to handle the feeling of uncertainty.
- [If applicable,] how, if at all, have your thoughts and feelings about your future changed since you migrated back to the countryside?
- What positive changes have occurred in your life since the beginning of middle school / middle school graduation / since you have migrated back to your hometown / back to the city?

- What negative changes, if any, have occurred in your life since beginning of middle school / middle school graduation / since you have migrated back to your hometown / back to the city?
- Tell me how you go about planning for the future / finding out what to do in your life. What do you do?
- Could you describe a typical day for you when you are in your hometown? [Probe for different times.] Now tell me about a typical day when you are in the city.
- Tell me how you would describe the person you are now. What most contributed to this change [or continuity]?
- As you look back on your experience during and after middle school. Are there any other events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe it [each one separately]? How did this event affect what happened? How did you respond to [the event; the resulting situations]?
- Could you describe the most important lessons you learned through experiencing middle school graduation / migrating back to the hometown?
- Where do you see yourself in two years [five years, ten years as appropriate]? Describe the person you hope to be then. How would you compare the person you hope to be and the person you see yourself as now?
- What helps you to manage the transition into work/further education? What problems might you encounter? Tell me the sources of these problems.
- Who has been the most helpful to you during this time? How has he/she been helpful?
- Has any organization been helpful? What did the organization help you with? How has it been helpful?

3. Ending Questions

- What do you think are the most important ways to plan one's future? How did you discover [or create] them? How has your experience before middle school graduation / in the countryside affected how you handled the next steps?
- Tell me about how your views [and/or actions depending on topic and preceding responses] may have changed since you returned to / from the countryside / started middle school / graduated from middle school.
- After having these experiences, what advice would you give to someone who has just discovered that he or she [didn't know what to do after middle school]?
- How have you grown as a person since the beginning of middle school? Tell me about your strengths that you discovered or developed through moving back to the countryside. [If appropriate,] what do you most value about yourself now? What do others most value in you?
- Is there something that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
- Is there something else you think I should know to understand the time of changes for young people better?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?
- To whom should we talk to find out more about the transition from middle school into work or education?
- (Thank you for participating. The confidentiality of your responses now and in future interviews will be ensured. Request follow-up information)

II. Interview questions for other people in young people's lives (parents, teachers, friends, mentors) (drawing on Charmaz 2006: 30-31)

1. Initial Open Questions

- Tell me about what will happen when [young person] graduates from middle school.
- When, if at all, did you or they first experience the need to plan for your future?
- What was it like? What did you think then? How did you happen to plan? Who, if anyone, influenced your or their actions? Tell me about how he/she or they influenced [the young person].

- Could you describe the events that led up to [the young person's] middle school graduation?
- What contributed to the decision what to do after [the young person's] middle school graduation?
- What was going on in [the young person's] life then? How would you describe how you viewed the future plans of [young person] before middle school graduation happened? How, if at all, has your view of their future job or education changed?
- How would you describe the person [the young person] was then?

2. Intermediate Questions

- What, if anything, did you know about vocational education, high school, university, jobs in the city?
- Tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you learned about [the young person's] options after middle school?
- What happened next?
- Who, if anyone, was involved? When was that? How were they involved?
- Tell me about how you learned to handle the feeling of uncertainty.
- [If applicable,] how, if at all, have your thoughts and feelings about [the young person's] future changed since [they] migrated back to the countryside?
- What positive changes have occurred in [the young person's] life since the beginning of middle school / middle school graduation / since you have migrated back to your hometown / back to the city?
- What negative changes, if any, have occurred in [the young person's] life since beginning of middle school / middle school graduation / since you have migrated back to your hometown / back to the city?
- Tell me how you go about planning for the future [of the young person] / finding out what they can do in their life.
- Could you describe a typical day for [the young person] when they are in the hometown? [Probe for different times.] Now tell me about a typical day when they are in the city.
- Tell me how you would describe the person [the young person] is now. What most contributed to this change [or continuity]?
- As you look back on [the young person's] experience during and after middle school. Are there any other events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe it [each one separately]? How did this event affect what happened? How did you [or the young person] respond to [the event; the resulting situations]?
- Could you describe the most important lessons you [and/or the young person] learned through experiencing middle school graduation / migrating back to the hometown?
- Where do you see [the young person] in two years [five years, ten years as appropriate]? Describe the person you hope to be then. How would you compare the person you hope to be and the person you see yourself as now?
- What helps [the young person] to manage the transition into work/further education? What problems might [they] encounter? Tell me the sources of these problems.
- Who has been the most helpful to you during this time? How has he/she been helpful?
- Has any organization been helpful? What did the organization help you with? How has it been helpful?

3. Ending Questions

- What do you think are the most important ways to plan one's future? How did you [or the young person] discover [or create] them? How has [the young person's] experience before middle school graduation / in the countryside affected how you [or the young person] handled the next steps?
- Tell me about how your views [and/or actions depending on topic and preceding responses] may have changed since [the young person] returned to / from the countryside / started middle school / graduated from middle school.
- After having these experiences, what advice would you give to someone who has just discovered that he or she [didn't know what to do after middle school]?

- Is there something that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
- Is there something else you think I should know to understand the time of changes for young people better?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?
- To whom should we talk to find out more about the transition from middle school into work or education?
- (Thank you for participating. The confidentiality of your responses now and in future interviews will be ensured. Request follow-up information)

The general idea behind this interview guide is to remain flexible in the field when exploring issues that the participants want to address. I am especially interested in exploring the transition experiences of migrant children and their social relationships.

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References:

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.

Appendix F: Ethical approval documents from University of Oxford

Original approval document (17 May 2017)

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTER-DIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD
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ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk



17 May 2017

Mr Lukas Lohove
Sociology

Dear Lukas Lohove,

Research Ethics Approval (CUREC 2)
Ref No: R51459/RE002

Title: Education or Work? Youth Transitions in Urban Migrant Families in China

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Social Sciences and Humanities Inter-divisional Research Ethics Committee (IDREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to the IDREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly approval has been granted.

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project, which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application, you should submit details to the IDREC for consideration.

Please note that you may be required to submit an annual progress report on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed, and that your study may be selected for review by the SSH IDREC during an annual audit. External funders may also request ethics audits of any studies they have funded.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Claudia Kozeny-Pelling'.

Claudia Kozeny-Pelling
Research Ethics Manager and Secretary SSH IDREC

cc: Prof Rachel Murphy, Prof David Kirk, DREC Office

Amended approval document (9 February 2018)

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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9 February 2018

Mr Lukas Lohove
Department of Sociology
University of Oxford

Dear Mr Lohove

Amendment of research ethics application

Ref No: R51459/RE003

Title: Education or Work? Youth Transitions in Urban Migrant Families in China

Number of Amendment: 1

Month notification received: February 2018

Subject of amendment: Inclusion of 16-25 year old middle school graduates and their parents/guardians; same methodology/informed consent approach as previously approved.

The above request for amendment has been reviewed on behalf of the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (IDREC).

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to the IDREC, this amendment has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Claudia Kozeny-Pelling'.

Claudia Kozeny-Pelling
Research Ethics Manager & Secretary SSH IDREC

cc: Prof Rachel Murphy, Prof David Kirk

Appendix G: Confidentiality agreement for research assistant



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Fax: 01865 286171

Email: enquiries@sociology.ox.ac.uk

Website: www.sociology.ox.ac.uk

Shanghai, 25.11.2017

I, Liao Tianqi, being appointed a Research Assistant for the purposes of a research project: "Education or Work? Youth Transitions in Urban Migrant Families in China, R51459/RE002" as described below:

- Field work assistance in China
- From November 2017 until June 2018
- Field work assistance, transcription work, translation work

(the "Research Project") on behalf of the University of Oxford (the "University") agree:

- (1) that all information (whether or not recorded in documentary form, or stored on any magnetic or optical disk or memory) about the Research Project including and in particular personal information regarding the participants of the Research Project coming into my possession or of which I am made aware in the course of my involvement in the Research Project will remain confidential ("Confidential Information").
- (2) not to disclose any Confidential Information to any person, company or other organisation whatsoever at any time other than to the Responsible Researcher named below or persons nominated in writing by this Researcher, and to use my best endeavours to prevent the publication of or disclosure of any Confidential Information. that I shall only use the Confidential Information i for the purposes of conducting research activity for the Research Project and not for any other purpose.
- (3) that all the documents and recordings (including but not limited to forms, notes, voice recordings and electronic documents) regarding the Research Project given to me for the duration of the Research Project will remain the property of the University and that I will handle with care and protect all such documents and recordings.
- (4) at the conclusion of the Research Project or on termination of my appointment, whichever is earlier, to return all documents and recordings provided to me or produced by me for the purposes of discharging my duties as a Research Assistant

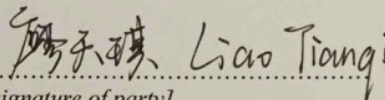
during the Research Project to the University, and to delete irretrievably any Confidential Information (including any copies) stored on any magnetic or optical disk or memory, including personal computer networks, personal e-mail accounts or personal accounts on websites, and all matter derived from such sources which is in my possession or under my control outside of the University's premises

- (5) Inform the Responsible Researcher immediately if I become aware of suspect that any Confidential Information has been disclosed to any person, company or organisation other than the Responsible Researcher or any person nominated in writing to receive that Confidential Information by the Responsible Researcher.

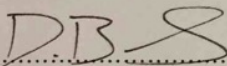
Responsible Researcher: Lukas Lohove

Signed as a deed on 25.11.2017 by

Liao Tianqi


.....
[signature of party]

in the presence of:


.....
[signature of witness]

DANIEL MARTIN BRADY (ENGLISH TEACHER)

Appendix H: Material collected at fieldwork middle schools

This is the transcript of a handout disseminated to students by the teaching staff. I collected the document from Javelin School on September 15, 2017.

Those students holding a hukou that is not of this city can participate in this city's middle level school high school period student recruitment exam if they fulfil one of the following requirements:

One parent of the examined student holds a valid Shanghai Residence Card and the points reach the points standard (120 points).

One parent of the examined student holds a valid Shanghai Overseas Talent Residence Card.

One parent of the examined student has a Shanghai hukou and the examined student has been holding a valid Shanghai Residence Card for at least one year. From 2016, those students qualifying via this requirement need to have been holding the Shanghai Residence Card for two years. From 2017 onwards, it has to be three years.

Those students holding a hukou that is not of this city can participate in this city's full-time middle level vocational school independent student recruitment exam if they fulfil one of the following requirements:

One parent of the examined student holds a valid Shanghai Residence Card and the examined student is currently in grade nine of middle school and has attended two consecutive years of full-time middle school in this city (after 2016, the requirement is three consecutive years of study).

One parent of the examined student is a flexibly employed employee and starting from the first registration date until May 31, 2015 has registered for two consecutive years for flexible employment at the residential district/neighbourhood community work routine handle a service/case centre (after 2016 the requirement will be three years), and holds a Shanghai Temporary Residence Card that starting from the first date of issue until May 31, 2015 has been valid for over a year (from 2016 for two years, from 2017 for three years), and the examined student is a current grade nine middle school student who has studied in this city's full-time middle school for two consecutive years (from 2016, the requirement is three consecutive years).

Appendix I: Analytical questions for interrogation of data

The following questions were used to stimulate engagement with the collected data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 51).

- What process(es) is at issue here? How can I define it?
- How does this process develop?
- How does the research participant(s) act while involved in this process?
- What does the research participant(s) profess to think and feel while involved in this process? What might his or her observed behaviour indicate?
- When, why, and how does this process change?
- What are the consequences of the process?

Appendix J: Licences

Licences of maps used in thesis

Map of districts of Shanghai: Map is licenced under the GNU Free Documentation Licence (Version 1.2) and under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>). It was retrieved via Wikimedia Commons and was originally created by User “Ran” in 2006.

Map of Provinces of People’s Republic of China: Map is in the public domain and was retrieved via Wikimedia Commons. It was originally created by User “Newfraferz87” in 2019.

Appendix K: Sample section of interview transcript

This is a sample section of an interview transcript from a conversation with Luo Li (interviewee 12). It is presented as a screenshot from QDA software ATLAS.ti. The left-hand side of the screenshot shows the original transcript in Mandarin Chinese and the right-hand side displays codes that were linked to the original transcript. One short segment of the original transcript was greyed out for reasons of confidentiality.

<p>你刚刚说后来初三的时候发生了什么事？</p>	<p>18:15: being admitted into a vocation... not wanting to go to vocation...</p> <p>18:17 我做题... choosing a high school in the ... studying at private high school</p> <p>18:19 我觉得... finding studying too difficult giving up university education not willing to persevere</p>	<p>18:16: considering distance to JS wh...</p> <p>18:18: moving from private high scho...</p>
<p>我想理解一下你的初中准备毕业的时候，你已经想好了你希望考上那个民办的高中还是你先觉得可能那边中专好？</p>	<p>18:20 因为本... having plan to return to home ...</p> <p>18:22 我做题... awareness of curriculum differ... fearing grade drop in maths d...</p>	<p>18:21 我觉得... fearing insufficient caregiving ... fearing that one will not adapt... not wanting to go to a "stran...</p>
<p>这个没有，因为本来我是想准备回老家，读公立的高中，因为我当时成绩回去读高中，再复读一年也是没有什么多大问题，但是我想呢我从小就在这边长大，爸爸妈妈都在这边，然后我突然回去一个陌生的地方，我有可能接受不了，我又怕，我当时理科成绩、数学成绩特别差，我又怕我回去跟不上，因为我们家里的数学是难的，然后我就选择在那边参加了中考(where?)，一开始也没有想过上民办的哪个高中嘛，我先是参加了一个中考，考了中专呢，我觉得太远了，然后网上查了一下，也不大好，然后我就选择了在这边上了民办的高中，我觉得我这么久还是挺平淡的，没有什么特别的</p>	<p>18:24: finding vocational school too f...</p> <p>18:26: downplaying importance of on...</p>	<p>18:23 我记得做题... being admitted into a vocation...</p> <p>18:25: choosing a high school in the ...</p>
<p>上这种高中的一些条件你可以给我解释一下吗？</p>	<p>18:27 我们这边... judging entering private high ... seeing bendi students with ba... seeing mostly waidi students i... taking part in the admission e...</p>	
<p>我们进去的时候要参加一个入学考试，然后也没有什么多大条件因为它那边主要接纳外地学生，没有本地户口，或者说有一些本地生，成绩没有达到(grades)，有一些会选择直接报送到这个学校然后我当时也就过来这个学校，参加了招生，后来也就过了，后续的话，这个学校进去你只要考试合格都可以过，还是比较容易的</p>		
<p>你觉得这个考试不难吗？</p>	<p>18:28 这个因为... finding admission exam for pri...</p>	
<p>这个因为它是语文、数学、英语、物理、化学、这些一张卷子，合为(to combine into)一张卷子，一百分，还是比较简单的，因为数学题目比较少 (laughs)</p>		
<p>那你也参加了这个外地的这个中考对吧？</p>	<p>18:29 中考难度... "having a subject preference" ... finding waidi zhongkao difficult</p>	
<p>中考我是参加的，在那个石化工业参加中考，中考蛮难的，因为我们外地生只考语文数学英语，100分一门，150分还是比较难的，尤其像我偏科 (be good at some subjects and bad at others)的人，更不行</p>		

Appendix L: Sample section of coding report

Report for code: “job-hopping” (based on in-vivo code “*tiao cao*”, 跳槽)

Linked to focussed code: “experiencing turbulence in transition”

Contents of quotations:

(Note: the first number refers to the document number within the project file and the second one to the quotation number.)

3:93: 说实在话，从去年到今年我换了到三分工作

8:253 我去了之后有一个地方，他说有一个电工的工作，不需要证。然后我跑过去，那边还算好吧

Co-occurring codes:

- **starting a new job**
- **working on a construction site**

8:265 所以说我就觉得我该学的学好了，我就可以走了。我就去外面找一下另外的企业去实践一下，学习更多的知识。

Co-occurring codes:

- **aspiring to learn more**
- **maintaining a flexible outlook on professional development**

20:1 毕业之后 先开始在餐厅工作了一个星期 后来觉得不合适 然后我爸爸就把我拉到自己家里面的公司工作，是一个物流，小公司

Co-occurring codes:

- **giving up one’s plan**
- **working in family company**

31:47 然后八年级你为什么突然就回到学校了？

我在外面做了一年多的工作

什么工作？

包括工地那些的，还有地下车库，还有做那些快餐的。应该差不多就这些，没什么其他的了。

Co-occurring codes:

- **doing odd jobs**

31:81 我去了湖北，三天。然后我就回来了。回来了然后我在我老家湖南，学了一个多月的厨师。