

# Education in China: Educational Equity and Access

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**Abstract.** Education equity and opportunity are given new dimensions in China's modern period. Education equity is a basic indicator for measuring a country's level of civilization. China is currently thriving and connected to the rest of the globe. Future China will work miracles through its trials and put its faith in its youth. In 2023, China will continue its major programme of comprehensively promoting the grand renaissance of the Chinese nation. One of the vital initiatives to achieve the renewal of the greatness of the Chinese race is to develop education, and equity in education is an essential component of educational development. Equity in education constitutes an indispensable foundation on which social equity rests. The pursuit towards quality education and the realization of fair educational opportunities for everyone, however, continue to present significant difficulties. Different areas and ethnic groups in China have significant differences in education and access to educational resources.

**Keywords:** Educational equity, Urban-rural divide, Resource allocation, Compulsory Education Policy.

## 1. Introduction

Equity in education is the primary objective of education in modernized China, and the extent to which equity in education in China is being achieved is increasing through the interaction of educational development and policy implementation. The realization of educational equity has been a long-standing goal of China's struggle. It is also an essential feature of the socialist education system [1]. The significance of equity in educational opportunities has been studied by a vast number of scholars on a national and worldwide level. For instance, Hu, M. Y. discovered that unequal access to education often exists between rural and urban areas due to barriers such as regional development and financial inputs to education, which creates differences between individuals in the starting line, processes and outcomes of education [2]. Also, access to education is influenced by social and family factors [3]. Zhang Xiujuan points out that the presence of gender discrimination in social environmental factors can result in women being disadvantaged in accessing educational opportunities; The differing economic situation of each family determines the investment in the education of their children [3]. Wu, H., Irfan, M., Yan, G., Peng, Y., and Hao, Y. using the 2016 China Labour Dynamics Survey (CLDS) data. Empirical research showed family investment in children's education as a key factor influencing children's access to educational resources and opportunities [4]. However, by exploring China's social transformation, Zhao Jie and Liu Yongbing revealed the gradually widening gap between the poor and the rich within contemporary China, and there is a vast disparity in the economic status of individual families, which has led to an unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities. Consequently, students from disadvantaged groups can only enjoy quality resources through individual endeavors alone [5]. Furthermore, access to education is influenced by national policies and the economy. Xu, H, Li, M, Ji, X, and Wang, K. demonstrated the negative effect of urban-rural economic disparity on educational development in China. Their study draws from the theory of financial exclusion to conclude that in the newly developed dimension of financial inclusion, the urban-rural economic gap can be narrowed only by achieving a breadth of coverage [6]. Zheng, L., Weng, Q., & Gong, X explored the cognitive ability gap between urban and rural childhood in China. Evidence suggests a significant cognitive difference between children of the same age in urban and rural areas [7].

The existing academic literature has revealed the negative impact of urban-rural inequality on educational development in China; Also stated was the impact of social factors, family factors,

national policies, and economic factors on access to education. However, most of the literature lacks attention to the effectiveness of specific policies, such as compulsory education policies, in reducing the urban-rural education gap. Beyond that, there is less exploration among special groups (students with disabilities) and students of different ethnic groups. Thus, this paper focuses on teachers and students at different stages of education under China's compulsory education policy, as well as on students from particular groups and various ethnic groups. To examine the factors affecting educational inequality in China. Enrich the existing literature study further.

This paper is based on educational opportunities and equality in education in the Chinese context. The aim is to contribute to the creation of a more equitable education system in China. By providing in-depth analyses of the existing challenges and proposing feasible recommendations, the author endeavors to provide some favorable information for China's education reform. The paper first provides a graphical summary of the latest data on education development and national enrolment in China in 2023. Then through table analyses, the urban-rural education gap in China is exposed. Next, various factors affecting the inequality of education in China are pointed out through the method of literature analysis. Finally, the author suggests ways to improve this situation and how to promote equity and access to education in China.

## 2. Educational Equity and Access in China

### 2.1. Latest Statistics on Education Development and National Enrolment in China, 2023

On the 27th, China's Education Ministry released a statistical bulletin entitled "National Education Development in 2023". The China Education Information Network (CEIN) shows that China has made tremendous progress toward promoting equity and access to education. The building of a robust educational nation takes a resounding step. The increase in the number of schools and enrolment rates at all levels reflects China's commitment to providing accessible education for its people. This section summarizes the latest number of schools at each stage in 2023 (Table 1), and the latest enrolment rates (Table 2). However, despite these achievements in education development in China, challenges remain. The statistics in the next section (Tables 3-4) highlight the educational inequalities in China. In the third part of this essay, the author focuses on the causes of these educational inequalities.

**Table 1.** Schools by Level/Type

Education Level/Category	Number in 2023	Change from the Previous Year	Change Percentage
Kindergartens	291,700	+10,500	+3.75%
Ordinary Primary Schools	158,000	-2,169	-1.35%
Junior Middle Schools	52,800	+390	+0.74%
High Schools	24,500	+82	+0.34%
Colleges and Universities	2,738	+50	-
Special Education Schools	2,244	+52	+2.37%
Private Schools	186,700	-4,820	-2.47%

As can be seen from Table 1, China's education has made great strides in 2023. Clearly, the data shows a positive trend. This includes an increase in the number of Kindergartens, Junior Middle Schools, High Schools, Colleges and Universities, and Special Education Schools. However, there has been a decrease in ordinary primary schools as well as in the number of private schools.

These statistics reflect China's commitment to expanding access to education, particularly in early childhood and higher education.

**Table 2. Enrolment Rates**

Education Level/Category	Enrolment Rate in 2023	Change from the Previous Year
Preschool Education	85.2%	+1.8%
Nine-Year Compulsory Education	95.2%	-
Primary School Age	99.96%	-
Junior Middle School	102.5%	-
Senior Secondary Level	91.2%	+1.7%
Higher Education	54.4%	+2.8%

Table 2 shows China's remarkable achievements in terms of education coverage and enrolment. The increase in the gross enrolment ratio for preschool education indicates that children's access to early education has improved. This reflects the fact that preschool education is the beginning of lifelong learning and the cornerstone of basic education. In the national education system, preschool education plays an indispensable and important role and starting stage [8]. Of these, the Primary School Age enrolment rate is an impressive 99.96 percent. This figure reflects the near-universal enrolment of children of primary school age. It shows the success of China's efforts to provide access to primary education for all eligible students. It is also worth noting that the gross enrolment rate at the lower secondary level exceeds 100 percent, at 102.5 percent. This figure indicates a high rate of enrolment in lower secondary schools. In other words, China is focusing on expanding enrolment and access to secondary education.

Increased enrolment in Preschool Education, Primary School Age, Junior Middle School, Senior Secondary Level, and Higher Education demonstrates China's comprehensive approach to ensuring equity and access to education. These improvements reflect the Chinese Government's commitment to building a high-quality education system and promoting the country's continued progress in education.

It can be inferred from the data shown in both tables mentioned above the Chinese Government is placing increasing emphasis on inclusive and equitable education, aiming to provide quality education to a wider segment of the population. It is worth pondering that behind these huge figures are the policies and initiatives that China has implemented to achieve its education goals. Furthermore, it is impossible to judge from the data that an existing Education Gap exists among China's Remote and Urban Areas. However, a gap does exist. In the section below, the author will build on the data analyzed in this section and added the latest statistics on educational attainment in both rural and urban areas of China. The author will use statistical data to clarify the inequality in education that still exists in China.

## 2.2. Urban-rural Education Gap in China

As the 21st century progressed, education in China's impoverished and Rural areas has made great strides. However, it is still undeniable there is a huge gap between the level of education in both rural and urban areas in China [9]. Data show that there are now 890 million people of working age between 16 and 60 years of age in China, with an average of 10.63 years of schooling, including 8.99 years in rural areas [10]. The total population aged 25 and over is about 1.01 billion, with an average of 9.46 years of schooling, while in the rural areas, the population aged 25 and above has an average of 7.78 years of schooling, which is 1.68 years below the level of average years of schooling [10]. In this section, the author compares the figures for the number of teachers and students in compulsory education in urban and rural China in 2023 (Table 3), as well as data on investment ratios at all levels of Chinese education (Table 4). Summarizes the disparities in educational levels between China's rural and urban areas.

**Table 3.** Number of Teachers and Students in Compulsory Education (2023)

Area	Number of Teachers	Number of Students	Percentage of Total Teachers	Percentage of Total Students	Average number of students per teacher
Rural	3,300,000	53,784,000	32.6%	17.0%	16
Urban	15,503,600	110,216,000	67.4%	83.0%	7
Total	18,803,600	164,000,000	100.0%	100.0%	-

From the statistics shown in Table 3, a significant difference in the number of teachers in rural and urban China in 2023 can be deduced. The proportion is higher in Urban areas (15,503,600 teachers) than in Rural areas (3,300,000 teachers). This disparity highlights the enormous challenge of attracting and retaining qualified teachers in rural China. Go on with, the data on student-teacher ratios in the table suggests that the average number of students per teacher in rural China in 2023 (16) is more than double that in urban areas (7). This indicates that teachers in rural areas have higher workloads and larger school class sizes. In other words, in rural areas, teachers pay less individual attention to each student.

In addition, statistics from China's education sector in 2023 show that primary schools in urban areas have an average class size of only 24 students, while rural primary schools have an average class size of 30 students, and secondary schools in urban areas have a ratio of 42 teachers per 1,000 students, while secondary schools in rural areas have a ratio of only 30 teachers per 1,000 students. Based on the realities of the situation, a high teacher-student ratio affects the quality of teaching and undermines the ability of teachers effectively to meet each student's needs. These phenomena, therefore, point to a lack of teacher resources in schools in rural areas of China, leading to a decline in the quality of education. Rural students face challenges in accessing the same educational opportunities and resources as their urban counterparts.

On the other hand, Table 3 shows a high proportion of students in urban areas (83 percent), which indicates the trend toward urbanization. This trend leads to increased pressure on the education system in the cities and to causes the Government of China to neglect the advancement in the Rural Areas. In summary, disparities in the distribution of teachers between Rural and Urban China, teacher-student ratios, and investment in education are the reasons why the current status of inequality in education in China still exists. If these disparities persist, they may lead to widening education gaps in both Rural and urban areas, thereby hampering the growth and economic opportunities for people living in rural areas. Thus, one of the fundamental problems that China has not yet solved in terms of equity in education for both Urban and Rural Areas is that of the relative lag in the development of education in the rural areas. The capacity of education to contribute to the economic and social development of Rural Areas has to be enhanced [11].

**Table 4.** The proportion of Investment in Education at Different Levels in China

Funding Source	Proportion of Total Investment
Compulsory Education	Below 60%
Compulsory Education in Rural Areas	Less than 30%
Central Education Authorities	64.9%
Township Level	78.0%
County Finances	9.0%
Provinces and Localities	11.0%
Central Financial Administration	2.0%

Table 4 reflects the proportion of investment at all levels of education in China. The data reflect the current situation. China's education system still faces many challenges, especially in terms concerning the proportion invested in education in the countryside and in the distribution within the countryside of funds for mandatory education. Data showed that the proportion of compulsory education in the countryside was insufficient, remaining below 30 percent in recent years compared to the total education investment. This phenomenon reveals that rural schools are underfunded,

causing disparities in quality levels for education from Urban to Rural Areas. This data also reveals the sources of funding for compulsory rural education. Although Central Education Authorities' financial transfers for compulsory rural education have increased, they only account for about 64.9 percent of the total investment. The burden of funding falls disproportionately on the Township Level, up to 78 percent of total investment. Moreover, district finances account for 9 percent of the investment. Provincial and local contributions amount to 11 percent, while the central treasury's share of investment is only 2 percent. The distribution of funds shows that local authorities, especially township authorities, are endeavoring hard at meeting the financial requirements for mandatory education in the countryside.

Various data show that education investment in the Rural Areas was lower compared to the Urban Areas as well as the unequal distribution of funds [12, 13]. These conditions can exacerbate the rural-urban education gap. As a consequence, students in Rural Areas have limited access to high-quality education, causing potential inequalities in educational outcomes. On the other hand, insufficient funding also affects the availability of educational infrastructure and resources in rural schools; What's more, professional development opportunities are limited because of lower salaries. Rural areas face significant challenges in both attracting and maintaining suitably trained teachers.

To conclude, the lack of infrastructure, technology, and trained teachers can hinder the learning environment for rural students. China's present distribution of educations could reduce the opportunities for Rural students to access higher education. The disparity in educational attainment and future career prospects between Rural and Urban students persists.

### **3. Factors Affecting Equality in Education**

Educational equality is of enormous practical significance on the road to Chinese-style modernization, hence there has been a wide-ranging academic discussion on "how it is possible". On the whole, equality in education does not emerge as the result of a single variable, rather it is the result of the integration of a variety of influencing elements; Specifically, the three spheres of state, market, and society constitute China's modern society. Educational equality is inevitably influenced by these three spheres [3]. This section focuses on exploring the role of the state, the market, and the society. Factors affecting equality in education.

#### **3.1. Educational Inequalities in the Geographical Context**

In analyses of educational equality, geographic location, an often overlooked determinant, plays a key role in creating educational disparities. Rural students have unequal access to schooling due to the limitations of factors such as geographic location in remote areas, insufficient government financial inputs, and underdeveloped transport [9]. According to experts in the Shanghai Institute of Educational Research, each year in recent years about 5 Million children of school age in China do not finish their secondary schooling, and almost 2 Million of them do not graduate from their primary schooling. All of these children come from Rural Areas [9]. All these figures reflect the inequality of education between regions. In this section, the authors critically examine educational inequalities due to geographical location. The focus is urban-rural and regional disparities.

In 2023, there are 38 poor counties in the National Special Programme, they include 26 concentrated contiguous special difficult counties and 12 national poverty alleviation and development key counties [14]. They are Luoyang Songxian, Ruyang, Luoning, Luanchuan, Yiyang, Pingdingshan Lushan, Sanmenxia Lushi, Nanyang Nanzhao, Neixiang, Zhenping, Xichuan, Sheqi, Tongbai counties, Xinyang Yangshan, Xinxian, Gushi, Huaibin, Mall, Diaochuan counties, Zhumadian Xincui, Shangchai, Zhoushan, Pingpi counties, Kaifeng Lankao, Shangqiu Minquan, Ningling, Zhecheng, Suixian, Yucheng counties, Zhoukou Shangshui, Shenqiu, Dancheng, Huaiyang, Taikang, Anyang Slide County, Xinxiang Fengqiu, and Puyang Fan County and Taizian County.

Because of geographical location, schools in some districts are located far from the center of the city. It takes a great deal of money and time for rural teachers to return to their hometowns. Apart

from this, the high altitude and harsh environment of some remote areas make the working conditions of teachers in the countryside in China relatively difficult, resulting in teachers in these areas not being able to match the various advantages that teachers in urban areas have. Differences in geographical backgrounds make it difficult to retain qualified teachers in rural areas. These various geographical factors contribute to the overall low level of the rural teaching force. From two perspectives, the first is that young teachers cannot tolerate such a difficult environment, and the rural teachers left behind are on average older and possess a relatively aged knowledge structure. Meanwhile, these elderly teachers' lack of competence in characteristic discipline makes it difficult for students in remote areas to develop holistically. On the other hand, schools in remote areas have a lower proportion of highly educated and highly qualified teachers as well as backbone teachers compared to urban areas.

Habahe County Town is a small, remote county town on the far northwestern edge of Xinjiang. 2023 China conducted a special study of the county's education system. Research data show that the county town has 1,825 teaching staff, including 1,758 full-time teachers; 1,330 teaching staff in compulsory education, including 1,256 full-time teachers, and 788 full-time teachers from ethnic minorities, accounting for 62.73 percent of full-time teachers. Notably, 863 of these teachers were under the age of 35, 531 were from 36 to 45 years while 431 were above the age of 45. Among them, teachers with specialized degrees or below reached 945, and those with bachelor's degrees or above 880. 540 teachers are not competent to teach in the national standard language [15]. It is obvious that the development of the teacher workforce in Habahe County Town has not been effective enough and that there are problems with the education system in this county. In China in 2023, there are many, many other areas similar to the education situation in Habahe County Town, so the author will not give examples here. All in all, these areas are geographically remote and mountainous.

Geographical location does not only affect the distribution and quality of teachers. It also creates disparities in educational sources among Rural and Urban areas, distribution in school infrastructure and unequal distribution of educational resources. The remote geographical location will cause the residents to be closed and backward, and their ability to perceive information is relatively low. They will not have practical use of electronic devices such as computers, but only at the theoretical level [16]. According to a questionnaire in T, Jilin Province, China. Schools are the only place where rural students use electronic devices [16]. In addition, there remains a serious lack of educational facilities in the Rural Schools, such as libraries, laboratories, sports equipment, musical instruments, art supplies, electronic blackboards and projectors [16].

### **3.2. Inequality in Education Based on Social Factors**

This paragraph focuses on analyzing the social factors that contribute to educational inequality, including income disparities, the status of racial and ethnic minority groups, students with disabilities, and students with special educational needs. These social dimensions are equally critical in influencing educational equity and access in China.

#### **3.2.1 Inequality in education due to income disparities**

On the 28 February of 2023, the National Statistical Office published the 2022 Statistics Bulletin on the Development of the National Economy and Society, showing that the number of urban migrant workers in China has shown tremendous growth. The total number of migrant workers has reached 295.62 million [17]. Since the 20th century, the Chinese government has been making continuous efforts to take measures to change the influence of the family on children's access to education. These measures include providing educational opportunities for children of migrant workers, reducing or even waiving tuition fees, providing scholarships, and also providing living allowances for students in difficulty [3]. However, the educational problems faced by children of migrant workers entering the cities still exist. In terms of the schools they attend, migrant children are often only enrolled in specific public schools, which are mostly non-priority schools that are not open to more excellent educational resources for these students [18]. In Wuhan, a statistic shows that there are more than 300 public schools in the city that can accommodate migrant children, but none of them are key

institutions [18]. On the contrary, most of the students with urban household registration attend key primary and secondary schools that enjoy excellent educational resources. Children of migrant workers face the problems of low-quality of schooling, poor learning environments at home, and the pressure of social mobility. These various problems have led to unequal educational opportunities. Income disparities dominate in influencing inequality in education for children of migrant workers.

### **3.2.2 Students with Ethnic and Specific Disabilities**

To thoroughly implement and enforce the Party's Twentieth National Congress and the Party's education policy, the Chinese Government has set out the overall objectives of the Special Education Enhancement Programme. One of the points is that by 2025, a high-quality special education system will initially be established [19]. The enrolment of children of compulsory age with disability has reached 100 and that of certified children with disability in the first three years of preschool has reached more than 90 percent, and the opportunities for students with disabilities to enroll in upper secondary education will be significantly increased [19]. Despite such circumstances, students with specific disabilities face unacknowledged challenges. This leads to isolation, stigmatization, or discrimination. For special groups of students, in addition to the differences in medical treatment and social impact. Often, they also face interrupted or unavailable schooling [19]. Compared to their peers, such students with special health conditions can lack contact with society. It greatly affects their social skills, academic performance, and quality of life [20].

Moreover, students from some of China's ethnic minority regions face discrimination, marginalization, and language and cultural barriers. Minority students in China, especially those from the regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia. They face educational challenges. To a large extent, students from these minority regions experience prejudice from teachers and peers. Many minority students speak their respective languages as their mother tongue. This language gap hinders their understanding of the curriculum and communication with teachers and peers.

## **4. Recommendations for Promoting Equity and Access to Education**

### **4.1. Upgrading Rural Schools and Improving Infrastructure**

Given the problems of remoteness, insufficient school funds, and inconvenient transport for rural students mentioned in the previous part, this paper will propose improvement measures in respect of the quality of schools and teachers. Firstly, remote rural areas lack significant infrastructure. Therefore, the government needs to increase the connectivity of rural school libraries, laboratories, and the Internet. Consider the world of the 20th century digital age. The Chinese state should prioritize the provision of Internet connectivity for rural schools. Secondly, in terms of quality development for teachers, local governments in all jurisdictions should provide substantial incentives. This is demonstrated by increasing teachers' salaries and providing them with housing benefits and professional development opportunities. At the same time, the Chinese Government needs to encourage a large number of qualified teachers to teach in rural areas. For students in rural areas, transport is a significant barrier to learning, so the Government should consider providing as many safe and reliable transport options as possible for students in remote areas. Regarding the content of the curriculum in remote areas, the Government should give more consideration to enriching the content of the curriculum by incorporating local culture, history, and traditions into the teaching of the curriculum. This will enhance students' sense of national pride.

### **4.2. Integrate Teaching Resources and Strengthen Tripartite Cooperation**

According to the educational problems faced by migrant children, and the inequality in education caused by the income gap. Improvement measures are proposed below in terms of teaching resources, teacher quality and actions to be taken by relevant departments [18]. First of all, the provision of quality teaching conditions for migrant children is the primary objective to be considered. The Government should actively monitor those private schools which have been approved to accept

migrant children. The main contents of the supervision include the teaching equipment and facilities, the quality as well as the teaching staff of each school. It is fundamentally important for students to be provided resources for high-quality education. Eligible private schools may also be incorporated into public schools as needed. Furthermore, the Government and other relevant authorities can increase both the mandatory public schools and the number of high schools. In this way, the problem of low-quality teaching and poor learning environments faced by migrant children or children from low-income groups can be largely resolved. Secondly, in terms of school management, the basic threshold for teachers to teach should be raised. It should be stipulated that only those who hold a teacher's qualification certificate and those who have attained the required overall qualifications should be allowed to enter the profession. At the same time, a standardized and scientific school management system should be developed and strictly adhered to. On the other hand, migrant children or children from low-income families will face problems from unfamiliar environments, pressure from schools, and so on. Therefore, the relevant departments should take the initiative to take positive measures to strengthen the tripartite cooperation among families, schools, and communities. State education departments should implement good supervision of schools, to ensure close ties between schools and families. Children should be allowed to learn in a healthy and warm environment.

## 5. Conclusion

This study found that China is dedicated to creating a high-quality educational system and has been successful in advancing education throughout the nation. However, access to educational opportunities and resources varies significantly across areas and ethnic groups in China as well. Educational advancement in remote Rural Areas is lagging behind; migrant children and special groups (students with disabilities) face difficulties in accessing schools and poor quality of education. This acute "imbalance" hinders students' equitable access to quality education. This can be proved by the following evidence. Firstly, the statistics in Tables 1 and 2 clearly reflect that China has made great progress in education in 2023. The penetration and enrolment rates of education have shown a phenomenal growth trend. Second, Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate an imbalance in the number of instructors and the allocation of educational resources among China's various regions. The government hasn't made a lot of investments in rural schooling. The main contribution of this study is the graphical integration and summary of the latest data on China's development in education in 2023. On top of that, the study examines and analyzes the various features of the variations in educational resources throughout the various areas of China. These contents help educators and decision-makers better comprehend the challenges facing China's education system as well as the current trends in its development. As a result, they will be able to develop more thorough and targeted strategic approaches to address the current issue of educational disparity. Create a learning environment that is more welcoming, equal, and inclusive for all People's Republic of China residents. Make sure no pupil falls behind. Although this study offers some favorable data regarding China's progress in achieving educational parity, the author believes that this paper has several shortcomings. The study relied solely on statistical data and prior literature support, limiting the scope of primary data collection and analysis. By concentrating more on empirical research, surveys, and interviews based on literature analyses, future research should expand on the body of knowledge and validate findings. Future research ought to use a combination of literature review and empirical data collection to produce more in-depth findings.

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