

Comparative Experiences of Underrepresented Elementary Students: A Historical Analysis of Educational Inequality in the United States and China

Dingzhou He*

Department of Educational Studies, Trinity College, Hartford, 06103, United States

*Corresponding author: dhe2@trincoll.edu

Abstract. As educational systems around the world grapple with issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity, understanding the challenges faced by underrepresented groups becomes increasingly critical. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to investigate the unique experiences of underrepresented students within the educational systems of the United States and China, two countries with distinct historical, cultural, and social contexts. Drawing from intersectional identities such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, the study offers a nuanced perspective on how systemic barriers have historically impacted these students' access to quality education in both nations. Utilizing a primarily historical analysis methodology, the paper delves into the foundational policies, societal attitudes, and key transformative events that have orchestrated the educational experiences for these groups. The study is anchored in robust theoretical frameworks including "education debt," "cultural capital," and "interest convergence," providing a comprehensive lens to understand the multi-layered challenges and opportunities these students face. Our findings reveal both persistent challenges and evolving dynamics, contextualizing individual experiences within the broader sociopolitical landscapes of the United States and China. The study aims to both guide future scholarly endeavors and inform policy interventions, thus contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape in both countries.

Keywords: Underrepresented Students, Educational debt, Cultural Capital, interest convergence, U.S.-China Comparative Study.

1. Introduction

Underrepresented students, both in the United States and China, face unique challenges and experiences within their respective educational systems. These challenges stem from various factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, among others. This paper aims to explore the different experiences of underrepresented students in both countries, shedding light on the similarities and differences they encounter.

To begin, it is essential to define who underrepresented students are. Underrepresented students are those who belong to groups that are disproportionately underrepresented in higher education or face systemic barriers that hinder their access to educational opportunities. These groups can include racial and ethnic minorities, individuals from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation migrant students. The experiences of underrepresented students are shaped by the intersectionality of these identities, leading to unique challenges and opportunities. In the United States, underrepresented students have long struggled to overcome systemic barriers that limit their access to quality education. According to the report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to enroll in college compared to their higher-income peers [1]. Additionally, racial and ethnic minorities face disparities in educational attainment, with lower rates of college completion compared to their white counterparts [2]. These disparities are further exacerbated by the lack of representation and diversity within educational institutions, which can contribute to feelings of isolation and a lack of support for underrepresented students.

In China, underrepresented students also face their own set of challenges within the educational system. The Chinese education system places a strong emphasis on standardized testing, which can disadvantage students from low-income backgrounds who may not have access to the same resources

and test preparation as their wealthier peers. Additionally, rural students often face barriers in accessing quality education due to the concentration of educational resources in urban areas. These disparities contribute to a lack of representation and opportunities for underrepresented students in China.

Despite the differences in the educational systems of the United States and China, underrepresented students in both countries share common experiences. They often encounter stereotypes, biases, and discrimination that can hinder their academic and personal growth. These experiences can lead to feelings of imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and a lack of confidence in their abilities. However, underrepresented students also possess resilience, determination, and a strong desire to succeed, which enables them to overcome these challenges and thrive in their educational pursuits. In conclusion, this paper aims to explore the experiences of underrepresented students in the United States and China, highlighting the unique challenges they face within their respective educational systems. By examining the similarities and differences between these experiences, the study can gain a deeper understanding of the barriers that underrepresented students encounter and identify strategies to promote inclusivity and equity in education.

2. Methodology

To explore the experiences of underrepresented students in the United States and China, this study employs a multifaceted research methodology focusing primarily on historical analysis. The chosen method seeks to uncover the deeper historical roots of systemic barriers and to elucidate the continuous implications these barriers pose for underrepresented students. The main theme guiding this research is the intersectionality of identity in shaping the experiences of underrepresented students in the U.S. and China. By understanding the convergence of factors like race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, the research can comprehensively grasp the unique challenges and opportunities these students face. The research looks into how the historical events, decisions, and systems in both countries have either perpetuated or alleviated the challenges associated with these intersecting identities. Thus, a historical analysis method was employed to trace the evolution of educational systems, policies, and societal attitudes in both countries. Historical documents, archives, and previous research studies were meticulously reviewed to:

- Understand the foundational policies and decisions that shaped the educational experiences of underrepresented students.

- Examine key events, movements, and reforms that influenced or responded to the challenges faced by these students.

- Uncover the patterns and trends in the representation and treatment of underrepresented students over the years.

The historical lens allows researchers to see not just the present state of disparities but also the root causes and the trajectories that have led this research to the current scenarios. It emphasizes the continuity and changes in the experiences of these students and illuminates the broader societal, political, and economic contexts that shaped their educational journeys.

The emphasis on historical analysis enriches our findings in several profound ways. By tracing the educational experiences of underrepresented students through time, the study discerns which challenges have been persistent and which have evolved, shedding light on the effectiveness of past interventions and highlighting areas demanding renewed focus. This method also roots the students' experiences in the broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts of the U.S. and China, offering insights into how overarching societal dynamics intersect with individual academic journeys. Ultimately, understanding these historical foundations empowers educators and policymakers to craft solutions that undermine the root causes of disparities, guiding the vision for a more inclusive and equitable educational future in both nations.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study of underrepresented elementary students in the U.S. and China requires a robust theoretical framework to understand the multifaceted issues affecting these students. Drawing from seminal works, three core concepts emerge, providing an analytical lens to approach this study: "education debt," the significance of "cultural capital," and the principle of "interest convergence."

3.1. Education Debt

Ladson-Billings' groundbreaking concept of "education debt" underscores the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components that accumulate over time, engendering educational inequality [3]. This theoretical construct aptly encapsulates the myriad factors that contribute to the disparities underrepresented students face. While the U.S. may grapple with its legacy of racial and socioeconomic discrimination, China has its own historical and sociopolitical components that shape its educational landscape. The application of the "education debt" framework facilitates an in-depth examination of how these accumulated debts influence the experiences of underrepresented students in both the U.S. and China. By assessing the specific debts each country holds, educators and policymakers can devise interventions that target these foundational issues.

3.2. Cultural Capital and Its Convertibility

Drawing from Richardson's exposition, the role of cultural capital is paramount in shaping the educational trajectories of students [4]. Underrepresented students, often stemming from diverse backgrounds, might confront barriers in assimilating and accruing cultural capital, especially in systems that privilege dominant cultural norms. This creates an educational milieu where these students might feel alienated or marginalized. Moreover, the challenges do not end with acquiring cultural capital. As Richardson posits, the conversion of this capital into tangible academic qualifications, which are integral for success in the labor market, can be fraught with difficulties for these students. This framework compels closer scrutiny of how U.S. and Chinese educational systems either facilitate or hinder the accumulation and conversion of cultural capital for underrepresented students.

3.3. Interest Convergence

Dixson and Rousseau Anderson bring forth the provocative concept of interest convergence, asserting that racial equity is seldom achieved unless it aligns with the interests of the dominant group [5]. This theoretical lens is instrumental in deciphering the policies and practices of both U.S. and Chinese elementary schools. It raises pertinent questions: Are reforms and policies primarily instituted when they align with the broader interests of the dominant group? How do these interests shape the experiences of underrepresented students? By juxtaposing the experiences of underrepresented students in the U.S. and China through this lens, a clearer picture emerges of the dynamics that either promote or inhibit their educational equity.

4. Case Studies

4.1. The United States Perspective

In the United States, the complex relationship between racial and ethnic diversity in educational settings and individual student development has been rigorously examined, with seminal contributions like the comprehensive review by Rucinski providing nuanced perspectives [6]. Rucinski's study is particularly noteworthy for its emphasis on the multifaceted benefits of diversity, extending beyond mere intergroup relations to include positive impacts on academic performance, social-emotional well-being, and executive function development in students. The research employs Simpson's index as a robust tool for measuring diversity, capturing not just the presence but also the richness and evenness of various racial and ethnic groups within schools and classrooms. This

nuanced approach to measuring diversity allows for a more comprehensive understanding of its effects. Another critical insight from the study is the differentiation between the composition of individual classrooms and that of schools at large. Rucinski argues that classroom-level diversity might have a more immediate and pronounced impact on student outcomes, a point that could have significant implications for educational policy and classroom management. However, the research also serves as a cautionary tale, pointing out the systemic biases and practices that perpetuate racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic isolation within educational institutions. Such isolation can negate the potential benefits of diversity and contribute to the perpetuation of educational inequalities. These insights are particularly relevant in the current era of increasing support for school choice policies in the U.S., as they highlight the need for carefully designed policies that not only allow for choice but also promote diversity as a means to enhance developmental outcomes for all students.

Moreover, in Connecticut, the debate over the inclusion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in educational curricula has become a focal point for broader discussions about race, ethnicity, and inequality in schools, as highlighted in a CT Mirror article from September 2021. While CRT itself is not officially part of the K-12 curriculum, the public discourse around it has led to a complex landscape that educators must navigate [7]. Teachers report striving to create inclusive environments that allow for discussions on social justice, even as they face growing public outrage, misconceptions, and even threats. This controversy has a dual impact on underrepresented students: it risks stifling meaningful dialogue and efforts to address systemic educational inequalities, but it also brings heightened attention to these critical issues, potentially serving as a catalyst for more inclusive educational practices. Amidst this backdrop, some educators are cautiously adapting their teaching methods to incorporate diverse perspectives, keenly aware of the politicized nature of CRT. The Connecticut case serves as a microcosm of the larger, polarized national debate on educational content related to race and inequality, emphasizing the need for nuanced, evidence-based approaches in educational policy and curriculum design to benefit underrepresented students.

4.2. The Chinese Perspective

In China, the educational expectations of migrant children are shaped by a complex interplay of economic, cultural, and social capital, as highlighted in a study conducted by Ding, Q., & Wu, Q. that challenges conventional wisdom [8]. Interestingly, the study finds that lower economic capital correlates with higher educational expectations, possibly due to the high cultural value placed on education in China. This suggests that even economically disadvantaged families hold aspirational views about education. The study further distinguishes between different forms of cultural capital: while objectified and institutionalized cultural capital positively influence educational expectations, embodied cultural capital has a negative effect, possibly due to its stigmatization within the educational system. Additionally, the study emphasizes the outsized role of school and peer social capital in shaping educational expectations, often surpassing the influence of family social capital. Parental supervision, although important, has a relatively weaker impact. As migrant children age, their educational expectations tend to align more closely with their available capital and the realities of their educational stages, indicating a nuanced maturation of perspective over time. These findings have significant implications for educational policy in China, particularly for migrant children who represent an underrepresented group. They underscore the need for targeted interventions that consider the multifaceted influences on educational expectations and experiences, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

As highlighted in Zhen Li's study examining Co-ethnic networks and inter-provincial migration in China, the complexities of inter-provincial migration among ethnic minorities are shaped by a myriad of factors, including co-ethnic networks and education [9]. The study underscores the significant variations among ethnic minority groups in aspects such as language, religion, relations with the Han majority, intermarriage rates, and socioeconomic development. These variations indicate that the role of co-ethnic networks in influencing migration patterns is not uniform across all minority groups. Interestingly, education serves as a moderating factor in this relationship: for some

minorities, higher education levels may diminish the influence of co-ethnic networks on migration choices, while for others, it may amplify the effect. These findings have critical implications for educational policies aimed at underrepresented ethnic minority students in China. Understanding the nuanced roles that co-ethnic networks and education play in shaping migration can offer valuable insights into the unique educational experiences and choices of these students. Therefore, educational policies must be tailored to consider these specific circumstances, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. This case study emphasizes the need for nuanced, targeted policy-making that takes into account the diverse needs and influences affecting ethnic minority groups in China, especially those who are part of migration patterns.

4.3. Comparison of Case Studies

The educational landscapes of the United States and China, as explored through the lens of four distinct case studies, present both unique challenges and shared themes. One of the most striking commonalities is the concept of "education debt," which manifests as systemic barriers limiting access to quality education for underrepresented groups. In the U.S., this debt is evident in the disparities faced by racial and ethnic minorities, as well as the controversies surrounding the teaching of Critical Race Theory. In China, the debt is most noticeable in the challenges faced by migrant and ethnic minority children, who often have limited access to educational and social resources. Furthermore, as pointed out by Leibold, and Yangbin, China's growing multiculturalism due to globalization demands attention from its educational system. The study suggests a "dual structure" in Chinese education that creates separate educational environments for the Han majority and ethnic minorities, posing challenges to the idea of cultural pluralism and equitable resource allocation [10].

Another shared theme is the complex role of cultural capital and its convertibility into educational success. In the U.S., racial and ethnic diversity in classrooms contributes positively to various forms of cultural capital, such as academic and social-emotional development. However, the controversy around Critical Race Theory suggests that not all forms of cultural capital are equally convertible into educational success. Similarly, in China, while some forms of cultural capital positively influence educational expectations, other forms, particularly embodied cultural capital, can have a negative impact. Both nations could benefit from creating more inclusive educational environments where diverse forms of cultural capital are recognized and can be converted into academic and social success.

Lastly, the principle of "interest convergence" also plays a role in both countries. In the U.S., educational reforms often gain traction only when they align with the interests of the dominant group. The Chinese case study on minority migration patterns suggests a similar dynamic, where educational and social policies may be influenced by the interests of the dominant Han majority. To improve, both countries could aim for policies that genuinely seek educational equity, rather than those that merely align with the interests of dominant groups. This could involve more participatory forms of policymaking, where underrepresented communities have a voice in shaping the educational reforms that directly impact them.

5. Conclusion

In sum, this paper has explored the experiences of underrepresented students in the educational systems of the United States and China, identifying common themes of education debt, the complexities of cultural capital, and the principle of interest convergence. While the educational landscapes in both countries are distinct, these shared factors offer valuable insights for policymakers aiming to create more equitable and inclusive educational environments. However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which include the focus on specific case studies that may not capture the full range of experiences and challenges faced by underrepresented students. Future research could expand on these themes by incorporating more diverse perspectives, including those of educators, parents, and the students themselves, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer insights into the long-term effects

of educational policies on these student populations. Ultimately, recognizing the commonalities and differences in the experiences of underrepresented students in the U.S. and China can guide the development of targeted interventions and policies, contributing to a global dialogue on educational equity and inclusion.

References

- [1] National Bureau of Statistics, The Report of Seventh National Census, 2021.
- [2] Alexander, K., & Morgan, S. L. The Coleman Report at Fifty: Its legacy and implications for future research on equality of opportunity. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2016. 2(5): 1–16.
- [3] Ladson-Billings, G. From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 2006, 35(7): 3–12.
- [4] Richardson, J., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986, 241-258.
- [5] Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau Anderson, C. Where are we? critical race theory in education 20 years later. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2017, 93(1): 121–131.
- [6] Rucinski, C. L. Racial and ethnic diversity in education and individual student development: Understanding the full picture in the era of school choice. *Review of General Psychology*, 2022, 26(3): 377–394.
- [7] Watson, A. Connecticut teachers clarify what’s being taught in their classrooms. *CT Mirror*. 2022.
- [8] Ding, Q., & Wu, Q. Effects of economic capital, Cultural Capital and social capital on the educational expectation of Chinese migrant children. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 2023, 18(3): 1407–1432.
- [9] Zhen Li, Co-ethnic networks and inter-provincial migration destination choice of ethnic minority migrants in China, *Asian Population Studies*, 2022, 18,3: 213-238.
- [10] Leibold, J., & Yangbin, C. Introduction: Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism. In J. Leibold & C. Yangbin (Eds.), *Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism* (pp. 1–24). Hong Kong University Press. 2014.