

Study of Educational Inequality in China: An Analysis of Cultural Openness

Jingbo Yao *

Department of Labor Relations, China University of Labor Relations, Beijing, 100048, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 2090602058@stu.culr.edu.cn

Abstract. In the realm of educational research, the investigation of disparities has long been a focal point, yet the intricate interplay between sociocultural factors and educational outcomes remains under-explored. This paper scrutinizes the nexus between educational inequality and cultural openness in China's distinctive socioeconomic framework. Anchored in the theory of social reproduction and leveraging economic sociology, the research adopts a qualitative analysis of the sociocultural milieu's impact on out-school education, positing that regional economic disparities culminate in varied degrees of cultural openness, which in turn shape the 'enlightenment level' of individuals. The study reveals that cultural openness significantly influences the distribution of educational resources, thereby affecting student performance and teacher quality, creating a feedback loop that exacerbates educational disparities. Conclusively, the paper asserts that regional economic heterogeneity and resultant sociocultural dynamics are central to educational inequality. It calls for a multifaceted scholarly approach to address these disparities, suggesting that enhancing cultural openness through societal transformation may be as critical as economic interventions to mitigate educational inequities.

Keywords: Educational inequality; regional disparities; cultural openness; Chinese education.

1. Introduction

Educational inequality remains a pervasive and persistent challenge within societies, impacting future generations' potential and perpetuating socioeconomic divides. This pressing issue is exemplified in the context of China, where rapid economic advancements have paradoxically coexisted with widening disparities in educational outcomes, particularly between socioeconomically diverse regions.

Extant literature has intensively explored various dimensions of educational inequality, ranging from the allocation of educational resources to the repercussions of policy enactments, with a significant emphasis on the urban-rural dichotomy [1-4]. Urban centers, often synonymous with economic prosperity, are consistently found to have superior educational infrastructures, a phenomenon that starkly contrasts with the under-resourced rural locales [1]. The urban-centric resource distribution has been broadly identified as the cornerstone of educational disparity, a sentiment echoed across numerous scholarly discourses [1]. Policy analyses have further delineated how educational stratification is perpetuated through preferential funding and policy initiatives that inadvertently sideline rural education [2, 3]. These studies collectively identify a pattern of inequality but often fall short in examining the underlying sociocultural dynamics that drive these disparities.

One critical aspect that has been underexplored is the impact of cultural norms and openness on education. The burgeoning field of economic sociology offers insights into how economic conditions influence social norms, which in turn shape educational opportunities and outcomes. This paper seeks to fill this gap by proposing a novel analytical framework that integrates economic disparities with sociocultural factors, examining how regional economic conditions affect educational inequality through the lens of cultural openness and societal expectations.

Furthermore, while previous studies have provided valuable insights into the mechanics of educational inequality, they have often neglected the out-school factors that are instrumental in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. This study aims to bridge this deficiency by focusing on the role of out-school education—informal learning experiences outside educational institutions—

and its correlation with in-school educational quality. It posits that out-school education, heavily influenced by regional cultural norms and openness, and plays a pivotal role in determining the 'enlightenment level' of individuals, which subsequently impacts their academic performance and motivation within formal educational settings [5-7].

The research method employed in this paper is an integrative literature review, supplemented by a qualitative analysis of the sociocultural environment's impact on out-school education. By interpreting the existing body of work through the proposed framework, this study advances a novel understanding of how cultural openness contributes to educational inequality, particularly in primary and secondary education within China's unique sociopolitical context.

2. Literature Review

Research on educational inequality in China has been extensive and multifaceted. This domain can be roughly categorized into several overarching areas that emphasize various facets of the issue, spanning from resource allocation and policy implications to educational outcomes and their societal repercussions [1-4]. The prevailing consensus suggests that urban regions and those that are more economically prosperous are better endowed with resources, culminating in a superior education quality in these regions [1]. This discrepancy in resource distribution is frequently underscored as the principal instigator of educational disparities [1]. Another prominent research domain pertains to the role of educational policies in either exacerbating or alleviating regional disparities. These studies typically employ policy analysis methodologies to scrutinize the efficacy of both state and local educational policies [1, 2]. Such research underscores systemic challenges such as preferential funding models and policy initiatives that inadvertently favor urban locales to the detriment of their rural counterparts [2, 3]. Scholars in this realm contend that more egalitarian policies are imperative to rectify the existing imbalances. Grounded in the theory of social reproduction and drawing on insights from economic sociology, this paper embarks on an integrative and holistic exploration of the endogenous factors in educational inequality stemming from economic disparities, while simultaneously endeavoring to examine the relationship between regional economic disparities and educational inequality, specifically from the perspective of the societal implications of economic challenges on individuals.

3. Construction and Analysis

Post the era of reforms and open-door policy, New China swiftly transitioned from a planned economy to a state-regulated free market economy. The ensuing economic boom resulted in significant enhancements in the living standards of its populace. However, this transition unveiled numerous societal challenges, among which the equality issues in school-based education garnered significant attention from the academic community. Numerous studies have identified an inextricable link between educational resource disparities and regional economic conditions.

A multitude of research underscores the pivotal role of regional economic development in shaping the allocation of educational resources, with more affluent regions invariably boasting richer educational resources. Within the context of China's educational landscape, many studies differentiate between developed and underdeveloped regions based on the "hukou system", typically segregating them into urban and rural categories, given the economic implications associated with China's urban and rural areas. For the sake of coherence in this discourse, we will eschew the conventional nomenclature of urban and rural areas, opting instead for the terms "relatively developed region" and "relatively developing region". Before delving into a detailed exposition of these terms, it is imperative to introduce some novel concepts.

3.1. Types of Education and Their Analysis

Education, in its broadest sense, encompasses all activities that disseminate and foster the acquisition of human civilization's achievements, be it in the form of knowledge, skills, or societal life experiences, aiming to propel individual socialization and societal individualization. Education manifests in myriad forms. Formal education transpires within an intricate institutional matrix, such as public schools. Non-formal education, while structured, unfolds outside the confines of the formal educational system. Informal education constitutes unstructured learning derived from daily life experiences. Both formal and non-formal education can be delineated into distinct levels, encompassing early childhood education, primary education, secondary education, and tertiary education. Herein, the focal point of non-formal education centers on the role certain societal factors play in an individual's milieu, such as the subtle influences of one's domestic environment, the social stratification of one's peer group, the extent of one's cultural capital, and the prevalence of conformity, to name a few. This paper designates all such informal learning experiences occurring outside educational institutions as "out-school education" and all learning within educational establishments as "in-school education". Furthermore, in-school education is bifurcated into tertiary education and primary and secondary education for the sake of this discourse.

The impact of out-school education on an individual's development, be it in shaping their personality, psychological makeup, or other unique traits, is undeniably pivotal. These individualistic traits invariably influence one's performance in in-school education. The caliber of a student's performance is inextricably linked to the distribution of educational resources, with specific indicators to be elucidated subsequently. It becomes evident from this analysis that the variable of out-school education is of paramount importance. However, examining this variable poses challenges, primarily because out-school education is entwined with the socio-cultural milieu, which is undeniably a vast and intricate construct. Hence, this discussion seeks to analyze the socio-cultural environment, which is closely tied to out-school education, from a specific vantage point. This approach aims to control the multifaceted variable of the socio-cultural environment, ultimately achieving the goal of controlling the variable of the level of out-school education.

3.2. Analysis of Cultural Openness

A crucial concept introduced here is "Cultural Openness." Cultural Openness refers to the extent to which social norms control individuals. The lesser the control, the higher the cultural openness, and vice versa. The impact of cultural openness on individuals is manifested in a person's inclination to conform to the local societal expectations to better assimilate into the local group, as well as the degree of tolerance that societal norms have towards deviance. If the social norms of a place are relatively conservative, then the expectations placed on individuals by these norms will also be conservative, leading to a greater number of expectations that individuals have to adhere to. If a community in a particular location is less tolerant of deviant behavior by individuals, then the societal pressure faced by someone who deviates will be greater, making them more inclined to adhere to local societal expectations. Here, deviance mainly refers to departure from societal norms, rather than criminal acts. For example, in a setting where women are not allowed to dine at the same table during a family meal - indicating gender inequality - if a woman becomes exposed to the idea that "all are born equal," a few potential scenarios might emerge. She might engage in deviant behavior, challenging local norms. If she succeeds, it would validate her externally acquired viewpoint, further motivating her to seek new perspectives from outside; if she fails, she might either reject the idea she learned or feel less attached to her current group, possibly seeking another that aligns with her views.

Consider another example: in a place where parents and teachers hold conservative views about learning, emphasizing study duration and attitude over capability and genuine understanding. Here, when asked about studying, one might equate it to sitting upright in class, attentively listening, diligently completing assignments post-class, spending more time reading and reviewing, and allowing minimal or no time for leisure. This perfectly caters to the elders' (parents, teachers, etc.) expectations of "studiousness" (study time, attitude) even if the individual is merely sitting with

unrelated thoughts. However, if someone can excel academically with minimal effort and is playful or interested in learning outside the school curriculum, they might not be seen as a model student in such an environment, potentially stifling their creativity and natural inclinations. A higher degree of cultural openness directly corresponds to quality out-school education. It can also be observed that places with quality out-school education tend to have societal norms that are more open to new information and trends, aligning with global developments. Such tendencies can reshape societal norms to be more in sync with the times. For instance, in the broader Chinese context, the influence of the government's ideological propaganda on local society is profound. Rulers might not wish for the educated population to be free thinkers; they hope those emerging from Chinese education can seamlessly fit into Chinese society, contributing to economic growth while overlooking personal growth and realization, whose evident example is gaokao which even can alleviate Chinese education inequality to some extent [8,9]. This often results in individuals appearing uniformly molded, a phenomenon this paper refers to as the cultivation of the "unenlightened" by Chinese education. The level of cultural openness in a society can resist such influences effectively. This issue is intricately linked with China's economic situation and its recent developments, a topic this paper will not delve into here. It's precisely this information disparity caused by societal norms that results in areas with quality out-school education having societal norms that make individuals more inclined to perceive events around them from a more objective, scientific viewpoint [5]. This paper describes this as individuals in regions with quality out-school education having a higher "enlightenment level." The concept of enlightenment level is used to describe individuals whose understanding of events around them aligns more closely with objective facts from a scientific perspective.

3.3. Analysis of Individual Enlightenment and Social Reproduction

The higher an individual's enlightenment level, the greater their understanding of the world. Individuals with a lower enlightenment level tend to be less aware of why they engage in learning activities within in-school education. They are often unfamiliar with the broader implications of what they learn and lack insight into how to better and more quickly grasp the knowledge they are currently acquiring. As a result, their motivation to learn tends to be lower compared to individuals with higher enlightenment levels, leading to poorer performance in in-school education. This often results in attitudes like "just wanting to play" or feeling that they "can't absorb the knowledge" [6]. They may find the knowledge they acquire and their life within in-school education "boring" and often display a lackadaisical attitude in class. They lack future planning and some even avoid being asked about it [6, 7]. Some studies suggest they severely disrupt classroom order, engaging in bizarre and irrational behaviors, either for entertainment or purely out of defiance. In general, no one seems to care about what the teacher is saying [7]. These manifestations of a low enlightenment level are one of the significant reasons for the inferior quality of student intake in regions where out-school education is less developed compared to areas where out-school education is more advanced. This perspective is the primary reason this paper believes that cultural openness leads to inequality in in-school education.

The abundance or lack of in-school education resources can generally be determined by several dimensions: student intake quality, teaching staff quality, in-school opportunities, and physical facilities. As mentioned, this paper links the cultural openness of a region with its out-school education resources. By controlling for the variable of individual enlightenment level, the paper aims to address the issue from the standpoint of student intake quality. If a school's student intake quality is poor, it's challenging, especially in the context of China's predominantly public school education system, to attract high-quality teaching staff and investment. This subsequently results in fewer in-school opportunities, such as international exchanges, and inferior physical facilities like lab equipment. The scarcity of in-school education resources, stemming from student intake issues, further prevents the school from attracting quality students. This feedback loop further exacerbates the shortage of in-school education resources in that region. This leads to a series of issues including an overemphasis on exam-oriented education, increased study burdens on adolescents, alienation in

education, and unequal opportunities, which together form the driving factors for class reproduction in that region.

A region's economic development level can influence many of its societal characteristics, especially concepts closely related to Sociocultural Modernization and Social Liberalization. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, only when an individual's physiological and safety needs are met can they pursue higher-order needs. Only then can the local population develop more inclusive social norms, cultural values, and a stronger capacity for information reception and integration, which in turn can enhance a place's cultural openness. Some studies have already shown that in economically more developed areas, the degree of cultural openness is higher [10].

4. Conclusion

This paper posits that the primary reason for educational inequality in schools is due to sociocultural environmental factors caused by regional disparities. Economic differences result in varying degrees of cultural openness among regions. The degree of cultural openness is directly linked to out-school education. Differences in out-school education can lead to disparities in the enlightenment level of local inhabitants, which subsequently influences student performance in schools, thus affecting the quality of student intake. Consequently, the quality of student intake affects the quality of teachers a school can attract and the amount of government investment it receives. This, in turn, re-influences the quality of student intake, leading to disparities in the allocation of educational resources in different regions. This paper discusses the relationship between regional economic development and educational inequality in schools from a fresh perspective. However, this cannot be claimed to be a fully comprehensive study. The primary aim of this research is to provide scholars studying educational equality with a novel viewpoint, drawing attention to this perspective and the various related issues within it. For instance, the enlightenment level of individuals mentioned in this paper, is it related to class consciousness, mobility, societal transformation, and other issues of equality? Can the degree of cultural openness be more precisely controlled using other specific variables? Can it be represented using visualized data? These are questions for future scholars to contemplate and explore.

Another significant limitation of this paper, despite addressing both tertiary and primary and secondary education, lies in the fact that, in the context of primary and secondary education, the reasons examined from this perspective have a more substantial impact. In other words, for regional disparities in tertiary education, other factors play a more considerable role, such as the gaokao under the Chinese hukou system. While the gaokao can be considered a relatively fair examination, even if resources for primary and secondary education are equal across regions, there still exist significant disparities in gaokao admission criteria and test questions between regions.

In recent years, the Chinese government has introduced numerous policies in an attempt to reduce educational resource inequality, such as university expansion, tightening independent recruitment policies, and gaokao streaming. Although these have alleviated educational inequality to some extent, they have not addressed the core issue of cultural openness mentioned in this paper or the more fundamental problem of regional economic disparities. Addressing regional economic disparities is a vast and challenging endeavor. To tackle the disparities in cultural openness, one might consider introducing Western "freedom" values, reconstructing social norms, or abolishing the Great Firewall, vigorously promoting MOOCs, expanding the scale of regional exposure to external information, conducting regular teacher exchanges or professorial tours, reducing or eliminating the influence of national ideology on the public, and actively promoting societal transformation. While these methods cannot be deemed ineffective, they remain relatively insignificant in the face of fundamental economic challenges. Advancing the cause of educational equality in China requires concerted efforts from scholars across various fields.

References

- [1] Yang, J., Huang, X., & Liu, X. An analysis of education inequality in China. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 2014, 37, 2-10.
- [2] Rong, X. L., & Shi, T. Inequality in Chinese education. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2001, 10(26), 107-124.
- [3] Xiang, L., & Stillwell, J. Rural–Urban Educational Inequalities and Their Spatial Variations in China. *Applied Spatial Analysis and Policy*, 2023, 16(2), 873-896.
- [4] Xiang, L., Stillwell, J., Burns, L., & Heppenstall, A. Measuring and assessing regional education inequalities in China under changing policy regimes. *Applied spatial analysis and policy*, 2020, 13, 91-112.
- [5] Tian, L. C. Characteristics and Construction of Cognitive Structure of Efficient Learners. *Journal of Guizhou Normal University: Social Sciences*, 2005, (1), 108-112.
- [6] Zhou, X. Rethinking the School-quitting of Rural Teenagers: A perspective of peasant migration. *Youth Studies*, 2011, (06), 43-52+93.
- [7] Zhou, X. Counter-School Culture: A Comparative Study of “Lads” and “Zidi”. *Society*, 2011, (05), 70-92.
- [8] Wei, J., Li, S., Han, Y., & Fu, W. Intergenerational Educational Inequality and Its Transmission in China’s Elite Universities. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2022, 13, 813620.
- [9] Rong, L., & Deng, F. China’s Higher Education Expansion and Its Impact on Equality in Educational Opportunity. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 2022, 31(1), 79-97.
- [10] Sun, J., & Ryder, A. G. The Chinese experience of rapid modernization: Sociocultural changes, psychological consequences?. *Frontiers in psychology*, 2016, 7, 477.