

Educational Disparity in China: An Analysis and Comparison of Education Policies in a Global Context

Beibei Xu*

School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, United States

* Corresponding Author Email: bxu105@syr.edu

Abstract. The educational disparity is a serious concern in the world. This paper will focus on the current situation of educational inequality in China, analyzing the causes and consequences of inequality in terms of both geography and gender, and how it affects social development at a macro level. Immediately after, the paper will present the measures that China has taken to address educational inequality, such as the Rural School Mapping Adjustment policy and the Double Reduction policy. These two policies have improved the treatment of geographical disparity and gender inequality respectively, but their effects are still insufficient. While going into the advantages and disadvantages of these strategies, this paper will compare them with the policies of other countries in order to give critical suggestions to reduce educational disparity, from the perspective of region and gender. The paper will demonstrate that policymaking has a significant impact on social norms and inequality problems. The paper suggests that China follows the example of other countries in dividing the distribution of power within the education system, such as involving non-profit organizations and promoting sex education in K-12. In conclusion, the government has a major responsibility to design policies that are fair and effective to address educational disparities.

Keywords: k-12 education, educational disparity, geographical disparity, gender inequality, policy analysis.

1. Introduction

The education system of the People's Republic of China followed the Soviet model, which "devised and hierarchically executed plans to achieve rapid industrialization and capital accumulation." [1]. In this development model, pupils are divided into academic and vocational domains, and as a result, individuals with intellectual and scientific aptitudes receive a disproportionate amount of the educational investment [1]. The education system is also highly centralized. Yet by the 1960s, when hyper-egalitarianism and the Cultural Revolution had taken hold, "redness" and right ideology had displaced "professionalism" as the dominant values. Instead of spending a considerable amount of money on training technical elites who might not be motivated to assist the poor, laboring masses, the education system was reformed and educational resources were reallocated to put science and technology in the hands of peasants and workers. Political suggestions and class backgrounds-controlled advancement, school years were cut short, exams were eliminated, and educational standards declined [1]. The evolution of demand, which is at the heart of inequality, is revealed through the history of the Chinese educational system. The economic model and emphasis of the People's Republic of China have been evolving, and this has caused the government's approach to elite education to continuously shift. During the reform and Opening-up period, the government's strategy for the education system was to train according to demand, and the allocation of educational resources was controlled by the central government, which better promote national development [1]. In the modern era, the government's share in the education system has gradually become less and less, and capitalism has taken over the educational market in China. After-class tutoring became mainstream, and wealthy families invested greatly in their children's education, while middle-class and even poor families had to contribute a large part of their income to their children's education as well in order to bridge the gap, which led to inequality. By definition, the disparity is a noticeable and usually significant difference or dissimilarity [2]. In the educational context, disparity refers to the unequal distribution of recourses, which limits the opportunities of accessing quality education. Under this circumstance, it is important to understand the root causes of educational inequality in

China and explore potential solutions to address this challenge. Therefore, an analysis that addresses educational differences is crucial. This paper will focus on two major disparities in China, geographical disparity and gender inequality. China's hukou system is a major cause of regional disparities, and an in-depth analysis discussing the impact of the hukou system on education leads to the conclusion that more efforts are needed by the Chinese government. In addition, the lack of systematic sex education is determined by gender inequality in China. Gender stereotypes are constantly reinforced in educational materials, making it difficult to eradicate inequality at its source. Furthermore, by comparing policies from China and other countries, this paper aims to improve the issue of educational disparity in China, and also consider recent efforts to promote education equity and the challenges that remain in achieving this goal.

2. Educational Disparity

2.1. Geographical Disparity

The disparity is one of the major concerns within the educational system in China. Despite the rapid growth of China's economy, the gap between rural and urban areas has become significant. The pursuit of a better life attracts people from rural areas to move to cities seeking more opportunities, which is also known as internal migration [3]. The transition of labor constitutes a huge part of economic growth, but the unexpected large-scale immigration because of the reform and opening-up policy released in 1978 arose problems [4]. To address the issues, the hukou (household registration) system is an attempt by the Chinese government to control the large population movement [3]. Rather than a direct restriction on immigration movement, the hukou system classified every Chinese citizen into either "rural" or "urban" classes, and separated two statuses from different policies and benefits [5]. Rural migrants without hukou are excluded from the urban welfare system, inducing public education for their children [6]. In metropolitan such as Beijing, the enrollment criteria for public schools are extremely restricted. Parents must have five documents: Proof of Employment; Proof of House Renting/Ownership; Proof of No Guardian in the Hometown; Temporary Residential Permit; Household registration (hukou) card in order to get admitted [7]. The Hukou system prevents migrant children who place hope in education from cross-class division, and compared with hukou children, non-hukou children have fewer educational opportunities and resources. Additionally, research shows that public-school enrollment is unfavorable for migrant children, and the local government legitimizes it by proclaiming statements that "recruiting migrant children leads to declining educational quality [7]."

2.2. Gender Inequality

Gender inequality has also caused disparity within China's educational system. The gender gap in education has narrowed in recent years, with women now accounting for a higher proportion of university graduates than men. However, women are still underrepresented in STEM fields and other high-paying professions. The gender stereotypes constructed a social expectation that male students are more advantaged than female students learning STEM courses [8]. Moreover, researchers also found gender bias in textbooks, which is a significant source for students to learn [8]. According to the statistic, the frequency of introducing outstanding male figures is higher than female figures in the current version of the junior middle school English textbook [8]. The textbooks also reflect the social norms and values based on gender, in which male students are encouraged to be energetic, while female students are more obedient [8]. The academic performance of kids is significantly impacted by these social standards. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an evaluation of 15-year-old students' acquisition of information and abilities both within and outside of the classroom. According to the PISA 2018 data, boys outperform girls in mathematics by 11 non-statistically significant points. Around one in seven boys and one in ten girls in China who receive excellent marks in mathematics or science aspire to work as engineers or scientists when they are 30 years old [9]. Solely on the performance of a group of pupils, it is inappropriate to draw conclusions

about the mathematical aptitude of females or males, but rather It's important to take into account any social or cultural aspects that could play a role in gender inequalities in math achievement. Girls' self-perceptions and enthusiasm in arithmetic, for instance, may be influenced by cultural norms and prejudices, which might impair performance.

3. Different Policies the Chinese Government Has Taken

Using a variety of programs, the Chinese government has also tried to address the issue of educational inequality. To end the disparity between rural and urban regions, the central government made a big reform, and educational spending has been steadily rising [10]. Public schools in rural regions have received free textbooks and tuition miscellaneous fee exemptions since 2001 [10]. Statistics show that the budgeted allocation for rural basic education in 2004 was RMB132.6 billion, an increase of RMB 79.3 billion from the previous year and 76.6% of the country's total rural basic education expenditures of RMB 164.5 billion, an increase of 18.8% [11].

3.1. The Rural School Mapping Adjustment Policy (RSMA)

In order to effectively increase the quality of rural basic education, The RSMA, which moved primary schools from the village to the township and secondary schools from the township to the county, started to be implemented in 2006 [10]. Yet, research has revealed that the RSMA strategy is ineffective through analysis and a case study of a community in North China. Due to the distances students must travel to school, accidents involving rural school transportations occur more frequently [10]. The RSMA policy also imposes financial and mental burdens on rural families, and the separation between students from their local community exacerbates the educational disparity in these areas [10]. The RSMA policy also needs the retention of qualified teachers, but attracting and retaining qualified teachers in rural areas remains a major challenge, as many prefer to work in urban areas where the standard of living is higher. Take a look at one case study, a small village, Li village, located in Hebei Province, the interview with villagers elaborates a clearer view of the impact of RSMA policy. When the RSMA policy was first implemented in Li village, villages were opposed to the instruction to withdraw all village primary schools, only maintaining only the central primary school in the township. After the principal of the township central primary schools discussed with the committee, the County Education Bureau postponed the original plan for one year but directly informed the teacher of the decision to withdraw the merger without further discussing with villagers in the year 2007, which is only one year later. One villager said that “the decision is already made by the superior. Even the village officials have no way out, let alone us” [10]. The failure of RSMA was due to “urban priority and urban-oriented”, which neglects the regional disparity and even undermines the original educational system in rural areas [10].

3.2. Double Reduction Policy

The Double Reduction policy is one of the major educational policies implemented by the central government. The policy was first introduced in the late 1990s and has since been a major priority for the Chinese government. This policy aims to “reduce the burden of excessive homework and off-campus training for Chinese students to reduce their academic stress and promote mental health [12].” From the perspective of addressing disparity, the Double Reduction policy reduces the gap between rural and urban areas. The policy has led to a significant increase in income and improved living standards for rural residents, particularly those living in poverty because families cut the spending on sending their children to after-class tutoring agencies [12]. Studies also show a significant release of stress from parents and students and relieving adolescents’ mental health after the implementation of the Double Reduction policy.

4. Strategies for Dealing with Educational Disparity in Other Countries

Undoubtedly, the central government makes effort to promote educational equality, but the outcome remains a challenge. Therefore, it is important to import possible solutions from other countries.

4.1. Strategies for Geographical Disparity

Several developing nations, such India and Bangladesh, permit commercial marketplaces and not-for-profit Organisations (NGOs) to help migrant children, occasionally with state financial assistance or tax incentives. Low-cost information education may be available in "drop-in" schools operating in India's slum areas for low-income children who are unable to attend traditional public schools. In the meantime, remedial education programs and after-school "bridge classes" are also offered by public schools, with state teachers identifying students. These programs aim to improve fundamental numeracy and reading. NGOs get financial assistance from the federal government as well as external contributors [5]. By building nurseries and schools near construction sites, where the majority of newly arrived migrant workers are engaged in manual labor. The only emphasis of another Charity that supports government-run child development initiatives in India is on migrant children from rural areas. A significant network of for-profit "private schools for the poor" also provides educational opportunities to persons who are excluded from or unsatisfied with the public education system at a cost that is affordable even for many low-income families [13]. At industries and workplaces in Bangladesh with a large concentration of migrant and other low-paid employees, whose children would not normally attend school, and where basic health and education are under-provided for by the state, NGOs establish childcare facilities and schools [14]. The Chinese government, on the other hand, has taken considerable measures to suppress the private sector in migrant schools, leaving migrant children with little educational opportunities and resources.

4.2. Strategies for Gender Inequality: Sex Education

To promote gender equality, sex education plays a key role to protect both male and female students. Sex education is an approach used to teach and learn about the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical elements of sexuality, according to the United Nations [15]. Sex education in China is a topic that has been traditionally considered taboo and has not been widely taught in schools. In recent years, however, there has been a growing appreciation of the significance of sex education in promoting sexual health and halting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. As a result, some schools in China have begun to incorporate sex education into their curricula, typically teaching topics such as anatomy, puberty, and reproductive health. However, the extent and quality of sex education in China still vary widely, and there is a lack of comprehensive, accurate, and scientifically based sex education in many areas of the country. Feminist studies in the U.S. provide a possible solution for promoting gender equality: the U.S. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) policy, which aims to promote students' well-being and help them free from sexual violence [16]. Traditional sex education using gender-neutral framing programming fails to center the concerns of women and girls, so the women-centered model presented by SEL policy is crucial in schools. To combat gender-based discrimination in the educational system, the educational Amendments of Title IX were created. The U.S. Department of Education mandated educational institutions to create and make accessible policies opposing sex discrimination, grievance procedures for complainants, and procedures to ensure effective and equitable complaint resolution as part of Title IX compliance in order to address sexual violence in schools [16]. Moreover, there are policies designed to address adolescent bullying and harassment based on gender. Along with Title IX protection, teachers are mandatory to complete training on safe and supportive school environments [16].

5. Suggestion

China is on the first path to reducing educational disparity. To address the regional disparity, one possible solution is to relax restrictions on the hukou system. In fact, the hukou system has undergone reform during the 1980s, which shift the power of making hukou-related policies from the central government to the local government [17]. City governments regulate hukou requirements, but they tend to grant local hukou to people who are either rich or have higher skills, especially in metropolitans like Beijing and Shanghai, which implicitly strengthen the disparity [17]. It is clear that more considerations are needed by the Chinese government, such as the reason for migration. Cities have more opportunities and educational resources which stimulate internal migration, thus the action government can take is reforming the education system. by putting more investment into the development of rural schools, such as enhancing the teaching quality by preparing better teacher training. Bridging the resource gap between cities with more inputs can curb the tendency to migrate internally at its source, as families need not spend an additional cost to go to another city with average resources. For gender inequality, the central government has the responsibility to review and remove the stereotype of gender that are concealed under the educational context. Textbooks are socially constructed as they represent a legitimate truth of knowledge, culture, belief, and morality, which can contribute to biased and hegemonic knowledge for students [18]. Therefore, portraying more positive and diverse characters in textbooks, school curriculums, and materials can also improve gender inequality, as well as establish mentorship and role model of female figures to inspire girls to pursue their education and career goal. In addition, the government can increase support for girls' education through targeted policies and programs, such as scholarships and financial assistance for families that prioritize girls' education to reduce inequality between men and women. Another prior task for the Chinese government is to address sexual violence in schools, which can be achieved by implementing policies and laws aimed at preventing and punishing perpetrators. These measures include increasing the accountability of educators and institutions, providing education and training programs for students and teachers, and setting up reporting mechanisms for victims.

6. Conclusion

Although this paper focuses on geographical disparity and gender inequality in China, there are many other problems in society, such as ethnic minority disparities. China has 56 recognized ethnic groups, with Han Chinese being the majority. In terms of having access to political representation, career opportunities, and education, ethnic minority groups frequently encounter obstacles and limitations. In response, the government has implemented policies to protect the rights of minorities, such as providing bilingual education and promoting cultural diversity. In conclusion, education inequality remains a major challenge for China, despite government efforts to address it. Disparities between urban and rural areas, and between affluent and low-income families, continue to hinder students' access to quality education and limit their opportunities for upward social mobility. Factors such as the hukou system, underfunding of rural schools, and the pressure of high-stakes exams also contribute indirectly to inequality. The neglect of sex education fails to provide students with a healthy platform for growth, thus exacerbating gender inequality. There is an urgent need for comprehensive reform of education policy and funding and efforts to address social and economic inequalities. Greater support should be given to rural schools and students from low-income families, and new educational technologies and teaching methods should be introduced to promote innovation and efficiency in the education system. Addressing educational disparity requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including the government, educators, families, and the wider society, to create a safe and supportive environment for all students in China. Therefore, adopting policies from other countries would be beneficial, especially the cooperation model of government working with NGOs to stimulate diverse educational forms, and sex education policies from developed countries. The problem of educational disparity can be addressed and improved by comparing examples of

successful educational policies and considering the positive effects of introducing these policies into the context of the Chinese educational system.

References

- [1] Murphy, R. & Johnson, D. Education and Development in China: Institutions, Curriculum and Society. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 2009, 29(5), 447-453.
- [2] Merriam-Webster. Disparity. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary, n.d. Retrieved October 24, 2019, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/introvert>.
- [3] Zhao, C., & Qu, X. Social networks and internal migration in China: A spatial autoregressive model. *Review of Development Economics*, 2022, 26(2), 1132-1163.
- [4] Cai, F., Wang, D., & Du, Y. The effect of labor market distortions on regional disparities. *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, 2001, 2(4)-14.
- [5] Goodburn, C. Learning from migrant education: A case study of the schooling of rural migrant children in Beijing. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 2009, 29(5), 495-504.
- [6] Chen, J. Self-abandonment or seeking an alternative way out: understanding Chinese rural migrant children's resistance to schooling. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2020, 41(2), 253-268.
- [7] Yu, H. Making restrictive schooling policies for rural migrants: discourse, power, and policy cycle in the Chinese context. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 2021, 41(3), 440-453.
- [8] Xue, R. Gender Equality in K-12 Education of Contemporary China. Atlantis Press, 2023, 425-432.
- [9] PISA 2018 Database. (n.d.). OECD.
- [10] Rao, J., & Ye, J. From a virtuous cycle of rural-urban education to urban-oriented rural basic education in China: An explanation of the failure of China's Rural School Mapping Adjustment policy. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2016, 47, 601-611.
- [11] Ding, X. The development of compulsory education finance in rural China. *Chin Educ Soc*, 2008, 41(1), pp. 51-57.
- [12] Wang, Dongfang., Chen, Xiao-yan., Ma, Zijuan., Liu, Xianchen., & Fan, Fang. Has the "Double Reduction" policy relieved stress? A follow-up study on Chinese adolescents. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 2022, 241, 87-111.
- [13] Tooley, J., & Dixon, P. An inspector calls: the regulation of 'budget' private schools in Hyderabad, India. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 2005, 25, 269-285.
- [14] Khan, F. Non-government organisations: public or private sector? *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*, 2005, 8, 52-54.
- [15] Santelli, John., Bell, David., Trent, Maria., Klein, D Jonathan., Grubb, Laura., Barondeau, Jesse., Stager, Margaret., & North, Steve. School-based Sex Education in the U.S. at a Crossroads: Taking the Right Path. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2021, 69(6), 886-890.
- [16] Lemke, Melinda., & Rogers, Kate. A feminist critical heuristic for educational policy analysis: U.S. social emotional learning policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 2022.
- [17] Cola, M., & Ge, S. Transformations in China's Internal Labor Migration and Hukou System. *Journal of Labor Research*, 2019, 40, 296-331.
- [18] Xu, S. The legitimization of textbook reform: Strategies and challenges in China. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 2021, 53(6), 749-764.