Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 9, No. 3, 2024

How is Educational Equity Possible: The Evolutionary Logic of Compulsory Education Enrollment Policies from the Perspective of Historical Institutionalism

Hongxin Luo

School of Public Administration, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610041, China

Abstract: The enrollment policy for compulsory education concerns the right of school-age children and adolescents to receive equal education, as well as the realization of educational equity. Based on the analytical framework of historical institutionalism, this paper examines the evolutionary logic of the enrollment policy for compulsory education. Since the founding of New China, China's enrollment policy for compulsory education has undergone four periods: efficiency priority, balancing efficiency and fairness, emphasizing fairness, and implementing fairness, reflecting a shift in policy value orientation from efficiency to fairness. Economic system reform, uneven regional development, and the concept of educational equity are the underlying structural factors influencing policy changes. Rational choices made by actors such as the government, schools, and parents have led to path dependence in policy changes. Reform and opening up, initial education reform, and comprehensive reform in the field of education have become three critical junctures in promoting policy changes. We should always adhere to educational equity as the policy value goal, seek to break through path dependence at critical junctures, and focus on the coordination of multiple subjects in the gradual development of policies, in order to better achieve educational equity.

Keywords: Enrollment Policy for Compulsory Education; Educational Equity; Historical Institutionalism.

1. Introduction

The enrollment policy for compulsory education concerns the starting point for school-age children and teenagers to receive equal access to compulsory education, as well as the allocation of compulsory education resources. It serves as the foundation for promoting balanced development and achieving educational equity in compulsory education. The key points of the Ministry of Education's work in 2022 explicitly stated the need to actively promote the balanced and quality development of compulsory education, "fully implement the universal coverage of non-examination-based nearby enrollment and 'equal recruitment for both public and private schools,' and guide localities to improve the school zoning policy." The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized "accelerating the balanced and quality development of compulsory education." Research on the enrollment policy for compulsory education is conducive to addressing, from the institutional level, how to better safeguard the right of school-age children and teenagers to receive education, and how to promote the balanced and quality development of compulsory education and achieve educational equity through policy optimization.

Currently, academic research on the enrollment policy for compulsory education mainly focuses on theoretical assessments[1][2], empirical studies[3], and textual analyses[4][5] of the single policy of "nearby enrollment," or conducts sociological analyses of issues such as "school-choosing chaos" and "overpriced school district housing" in combination with the enrollment policy for compulsory education[6][7][8]. The tracing time of such research is often limited to the past 20 years. In general, there is a paucity of research that traces the historical evolution and logical progression of the enrollment policy for compulsory education from an institutional perspective. This paper, using historical institutionalism as the analytical framework, summarizes the phased characteristics and evolution of the enrollment policy for compulsory education, deeply analyzes the underlying structures, path dependencies, and critical junctures that influence the changes in the enrollment policy, and provides answers to the two questions: "How has the enrollment policy for compulsory education evolved to its current state?" and "How does the enrollment policy for compulsory education promote the realization of educational equity?" It aims to provide insights for the improvement and perfection of the enrollment policy for compulsory education and reflection on how to achieve educational equity.

2. Analysis Framework: Historical Institutionalism

The emergence of neo-institutionalism in Western political science in the 1980s revolves around the study of the interactive processes between institutions and individuals, focusing primarily on the genesis and change of institutions as well as their impact on individuals. Historical institutionalism defines institutions broadly as "formal or informal procedures, rules, norms, and conventions embedded in the polity or politico-economic organizational structures."[9] Derived from yet transcending group theory and structural functionalism in political science, historical institutionalism recognizes the complementary relationship between micro-level rational "actors" and macro-level structuralist "deep structures,"[10] connecting macro-level socio-economic structures with micro-level political actors through the medium of institutions.[11] This approach establishes a mid-level institutional analysis method, becoming a new theoretical orientation for studying national politics and public policies.[12]

The analytical framework of historical institutionalism can be summarized in three dimensions: Firstly, the analysis of the deep structures that influence institutions. Institutions are political products, and the emergence and evolution of any

institution are deeply embedded in the socio-political and economic background. The processes of institutional genesis, evolution, fine-tuning, replacement, and rupture are all constrained and influenced by deep structures. Explaining institutional phenomena requires identifying various universal deep structural factors that influence institutions, such as political systems, economic systems, social culture, technological backgrounds, and further exploring how these deep structural factors shape the starting points and directions of institutional change. Secondly, the analysis of path dependence in institutional change. Historical institutionalism emphasizes the continuity and inheritance of institutions, i.e., the "inertia" of institutions. [13] After their formation, institutions tend to continue developing along established paths, regardless of their effectiveness, making it difficult to abandon or choose other institutions.[14] The analysis of path dependence focuses on the rational choices of micro-level actors, where the expected rate of return from maintaining or breaking with the current system incentives rational choices among actors. [15][16] North argues that rational actors are more likely to maintain the original system due to factors such as learning effects, adaptive expectations, and increasing returns.[17] Thirdly, the analysis of critical junctures in institutional change. Although institutions tend to maintain their original state and resist change, they may also undergo rupture or evolution based on the original system when the institutional environment is squeezed by internal or external factors. In the process of institutional change, there exist one or several critical junctures that significantly influence the emergence of new institutions and the evolution of old ones. Critical junctures, the starting points of path dependence in institutions, can be understood as historical turning points that often have a significant impact on the subsequent trajectory of institutional change. Common types include conflict outbreak points, structural divergence points, and active choice points.[18]

Utilizing the historical institutionalism approach to study the enrollment policy in compulsory education, focusing on institutional analysis in historical processes, helps to grasp the evolutionary mechanisms and profound implications of the enrollment policy in compulsory education from a mid-level perspective, further understanding the shaping process of institutions on policies. By sorting out the staged characteristics of the development of the enrollment policy in compulsory education, paying attention to the changes resulting from the deep structural factors, path dependence analysis, and critical junctures in policy changes, dissecting the interactive process between institutions and policies, and reflecting on the contradictions and conflicts in the policy-making process, we can further improve the level of policy-making and pursue a more reasonable institutional design.[19]

3. Evolutionary Process: A Policy Shift from Efficiency to Equity

Since the founding of New China, with the change in political background, economic and social development, and advances in culture and technology, the enrollment policy for compulsory education has exhibited various staged characteristics, including the adoption of examinations for student selection, the concentration of resources to build key schools, the frequent occurrence of school choice chaos, the comprehensive implementation of non-examination-based enrollment policies, and the use of computer-based allocation systems for school zoning. Based on the critical junctures and staged characteristics of policy changes, this article divides the evolutionary process of China's compulsory education enrollment policy into four main periods: efficiency-first, balancing equity, emphasizing equity, and implementing equity.

3.1. Efficiency-First Period: Examinations for Promotion and Establishment of Key Schools (1949-1977)

In the early days of New China, with everything in ruins and in need of reconstruction, society urgently needed to popularize education and cultivate a large number of talents to "meet the extensive needs of revolutionary work and national construction." However, the extreme scarcity of educational resources necessitated the adoption of an entrance examination system to select and admit students based on merit, while concentrating national resources to build a batch of key schools. The enrollment policy during this period reflected a value orientation of prioritizing efficiency.

Examinations and merit-based admissions were the primary means of promoting students to secondary education, with special considerations and exemptions also existing. In 1951, the State Council announced and implemented the "Decision on the Reform of the Educational System," which clearly stated that students in the primary education stage could be promoted to secondary schools or other secondary schools through examinations. The "Interim Regulations for Secondary Schools" in 1952 stipulated that any student passing the entrance examination could enroll in junior high school. The Ministry of Education's "Instructions on the Enrollment Work of National Secondary Schools in 1954" provided detailed regulations on the age of admission, examination subjects, and other aspects, and first mentioned "special considerations" for the children of martyrs beyond the examination selection. The "Regulations on the Enrollment Work of Secondary Schools and Normal Schools" in 1955 clearly stipulated that comprehensive and careful enrollment examinations should be organized uniformly at the provincial and municipal levels, and that some outstanding students with good moral character and physical health could be exempted from the entrance examination based on conditions and procedures set by each province and city.

Against the backdrop of a ruined society and a nation in need of reconstruction, the policy of key schools became a convenient way to concentrate on cultivating talents necessary for national construction. In May 1953, at a meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee chaired by Mao Zedong, it was formally decided to "establish key secondary schools." In the same year, the Ministry of Education issued the "Opinions on the Establishment of Some Secondary Schools and Normal Schools with a Focus," identifying 194 key secondary schools nationwide, gradually forming a tendency of "focusing on the top students and neglecting the foundation." In 1962, the Ministry of Education issued the "Notice on Establishing a Batch of Full-time Secondary and Primary Schools with a Focus," emphasizing the quality of key primary and secondary schools and further expanding their numbers. These key schools have provided a large number of urgently needed talents for national and social construction, playing a role of "key schools driving the general," and improving the quality of compulsory education to a certain extent.

The enrollment policy of "selecting students through examinations and promoting them, and concentrating resources to build key schools" during this period was a strategic choice made by the country under the principle of "efficiency first."

3.2. Balancing Equity Period: Canceling Examinations and Enrolling Nearby Students (1978-1992)

After the reform and opening-up, the economy and society underwent rapid development, leading to the replenishment and enrichment of educational resources. The scope of compulsory education gradually expanded and began to be popularized nationwide. The policy of "exempting examinations and enrolling nearby" replaced the traditional exam-based admission system as the dominant policy for compulsory education enrollment, signifying a shift towards balancing equity alongside the original efficiency-oriented approach.

In 1980, the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Several Issues Concerning the Popularization of Primary Education proposed the comprehensive popularization of primary education nationwide and stipulated requirements for school layout and educational forms, emphasizing "convenience for students to attend nearby schools." In 1983, the Ministry of Education issued the Several Opinions on Further Improving the Quality of General Secondary Education, and in 1986, the Notice on Reforming the Enrollment Methods for Junior High Schools in Places Where Junior High Schools Are Universalized, both explicitly stated the need to actively and steadily phase out junior high school entrance examinations, adopting the policy of nearby enrollment for primary school graduates to attend junior high schools. It was further stipulated that "this policy shall be implemented from the summer enrollment in 1986." In the same year, the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China was promulgated, clearly stipulating that "local people's governments at all levels shall reasonably establish primary schools and junior secondary schools to enable children and teenagers to enroll nearby," making nearby enrollment a legal right for school-age children and teenagers to receive compulsory education. Subsequently, in 1992, the Detailed Rules for the Implementation of the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China reiterated the requirements for school layout and educational forms of primary and secondary schools, emphasizing the convenience for students to enroll nearby.

During this period, China's compulsory education enrollment policy showed a tendency to balance equity alongside the original efficiency-oriented approach focused on key school construction. On one hand, the continuation of the key school policy led to the continuous accumulation of quality educational resources in key primary and secondary schools, resulting in an ever-widening gap in teaching quality and school management between key schools and ordinary schools, thereby spurring parents' school-choosing behaviors. These behaviors escalated, leading to various school-choosing phenomena such as "choosing schools with money" and "choosing schools with grades," highlighting the issue of educational inequity caused by the key school system.

3.3. Balancing Equity Period: Canceling Examinations and Enrolling Nearby Students (1978-1992)

As the 1990s dawned, people's material living standards gradually improved, leading to an increasing emphasis on their children's education. The phenomenon of irregular school fees triggered by school selection in primary and secondary schools drew significant attention from educational authorities. In 1993, the State Council issued the "Outline of China's Education Reform and Development," initiating a new era of educational reform and development in China. The enrollment policy for compulsory education took promoting balanced educational development and safeguarding educational equity as its value orientation, focusing on rectifying the disorder of school selection and supporting the construction of weak schools, while comprehensively implementing the policy of non-examination enrollment and enrollment based on proximity.

On one hand, relevant departments issued multiple implementation details and departmental notices to focus on rectifying the disorder of school selection. In 1993, the State Council issued the "Notice on Strengthening the Management of School Fees in Primary and Secondary Schools," strictly prohibiting primary and secondary schools from recruiting "high-priced students" and using the amount of fees paid as an admission criterion. Additionally, no additional fees could be charged for recruiting students outside the enrollment plan, resolutely curbing the phenomenon of "choosing schools based on money." In 1995, the State Education Commission and the State Anti-Corruption Office conducted a special rectification of irregular school fees in the compulsory education stage. The "Implementation Opinions on the Nationwide Rectification of Irregular School Fees in Primary and Secondary Schools in 1996" emphasized that public primary and junior high schools in the compulsory education stage should not recruit "school-choosing students," adhering to the principle of enrollment based on proximity and preventing the rebound of the "school-choosing students" issue in large and medium-sized cities. In 2010, the "Guiding Opinions on Rectifying Irregular School Fees in the Compulsory Education Stage" mentioned that rectifying irregular school fees must address both the symptoms and the root causes, standardizing enrollment order while supporting weak schools, narrowing the quality gap between junior high schools, and vigorously promoting balanced development in compulsory education.

On the other hand, to ensure equal opportunities and rights for school-age children to receive education, relevant departments continuously issued documents to comprehensively implement the policy of non-examination enrollment and enrollment based on proximity, stopping the construction of key schools, supporting weak schools, and reducing the inter-school disparity in educational resources. In 1993, the "Instructions on Reducing the Excessive Academic Burden of Students in the Compulsory Education Stage and Improving the Overall Quality of Education" explicitly prohibited the establishment of key schools and classes and stipulated that students should enter junior high schools based on proximity after completing primary school, without additional junior high school entrance examinations. In 1995, the Ministry of Education issued the "Notice on Further Promoting and Perfecting the Reform of Junior High School Admission Methods," affirming the achievements of

the reform of non-examination enrollment and enrollment based on proximity, and supplementing the requirements for improving the quality and level of education in weak primary and secondary schools in batches and stages. In 1996, the reform of non-examination enrollment and enrollment based on proximity in compulsory education was officially included in the "Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Education and the 2010 Development Plan." In 2006, the newly revised "Compulsory Education Law" stipulated that "school-age children and adolescents shall be admitted without examination, and local people's governments at all levels shall ensure that school-age children and adolescents are admitted to schools near their registered residence." This provided a legal basis for the principle of non-examination enrollment and enrollment based on proximity for school-age children and adolescents in the compulsory education stage.

During this period, the comprehensive implementation of the policy of non-examination enrollment and enrollment based on proximity was the main line, supplemented by various regulations and detailed rules focusing on rectifying the disorder of school selection. This further emphasized the policy value orientation of educational equity. The complete abolition of the key school system and the examination-based enrollment system in the compulsory education stage marked a shift in China's compulsory education enrollment policy from efficiency priority to a greater emphasis on equity. The comprehensive implementation of the policy of non-examination enrollment and enrollment based on proximity reflected a further emphasis on the pursuit of educational equity.

3.4. Implementing the Era of Equity: Zone-based Enrollment and Computerized Random Allocation (2013 to present)

Following the convening of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2013, which emphasized deepening comprehensive reforms in the education sector and upholding the principle of non-examination-based enrollment and nearby placement for compulsory education, this period has witnessed further technological support and scientific implementation of such policies. Measures such as "single-school zoning," "multi-school zoning," computerized random allocation, and the concurrent enrollment of public and private schools have been implemented in tandem to promote educational equity.

To implement the spirit of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee and fulfill the requirements for non-examination-based enrollment and nearby placement for compulsory education, the Ministry of Education issued the "Implementation Opinions on Further Improving Non-examination-based Enrollment and Nearby Placement for Primary School Graduates Entering Junior High Schools" in 2014. This document first introduced the requirements for "single-school zoning" and "multi-school zoning," which involve comprehensively considering factors such as the number of graduates, school district locations, and transportation conditions to designate corresponding primary schools for each junior high school. Graduates from these primary schools can directly enter the designated junior high schools. For older urban areas where single-school zoning is difficult to implement, multi-school zoning can be adopted, allowing multiple junior high schools to recruit students within the same area, with high-quality junior high schools included in the zoning range. "Single-school zoning" and "multi-school zoning" represent further improvement and innovative reforms to the enrollment system for compulsory education, achieving basic fairness in the allocation of educational resources based on geographical space. These measures can maximize the protection of the equal educational rights of school-age children and adolescents, and are significant steps in promoting the balanced development of quality compulsory education and achieving educational equity.

Subsequently, the Ministry of Education has issued consecutive documents to refine the zoning enrollment policies, further promoting educational equity through the implementation of computerized random allocation and the concurrent enrollment of public and private schools. Since 2016, the Ministry of Education has annually issued relevant notices on the enrollment work for compulsory education, focusing on three aspects: first, improving the zoning mechanism, scientifically determining zoning methods, and reasonably defining the scope of zoning areas, with more scientific and detailed implementation requirements for "single-school zoning" and "multi-school zoning"; second, innovating solutions to the allocation of enrollment quotas for popular schools, indicating that school-age children and adolescents can obtain enrollment quotas for popular schools through computerized random allocation, and orderly expanding the application of this enrollment method nationwide; third, proposing the concurrent enrollment of public and private schools, with private schools and public schools being managed and enrolling students under the unified supervision of education departments, achieving balanced allocation of educational resources and ensuring equal opportunities for school-age children and adolescents to enter compulsory education and enjoy all educational resources within their residential areas.

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, reforms in the enrollment policies for compulsory education have been continuously deepened, with a strong emphasis on "equal opportunities" and "fair admissions." The comprehensive implementation of policies such as zone-based enrollment, computerized random allocation, and concurrent enrollment of public and private schools has fully guaranteed the educational rights of school-age children and adolescents, resolutely upholding educational equity.

4. Logical Interpretation: Deep Structure, Path Dependency, and Critical Junctures

4.1. The Deep Structure of the Changes in Compulsory Education Enrollment Policies

Historical institutionalism interprets the changes in systems or policies by integrating them into the macro social structure, exploring the coupling relationship between systems and the changes in deep structure. The transition from the planned economy system to the socialist market economy system in China has influenced the shift in the value orientation of compulsory education enrollment policies from efficiency to fairness. The long-term reality of unbalanced educational development among regions requires reasonable enrollment policies to promote the balanced and high-quality development of compulsory education. The concept of educational equity has catalyzed the evolution and

development of compulsory education enrollment policies.

4.1.1. Value Shift: Economic System Reform

During the early years of New China, the planned economy system was established, and the direct goal of developing education was to cultivate talents for national construction.[20] The compulsory education enrollment policies during this period were oriented by economic values, exhibiting a distinct efficiency-first characteristic. The method of resource allocation was controlled by unified national planning, and policies such as selective admission through examinations and concentrating resources on key schools were manifestations of efficiently utilizing limited educational resources to cultivate high-quality talents to meet national development needs. These policies were inevitable choices under the background of "limited resources, priority to efficiency, and seeking development," which could maximize resource utilization efficiency and rapidly cultivate a large number of high-quality talents to serve economic construction. After the reform and opening up, with the establishment of the socialist market economy system in China, the state-led resource allocation method has shifted to market regulation, and various resource elements have flowed fully in the market, providing prerequisites for economic individuals to pursue school selection behaviors for high-quality educational resources. The previous key school policy led to uneven distribution of educational resources, with high-quality educational resources continuously converging on key primary and secondary schools, resulting in an expansion of the gap in school quality between regions and within regions. Parents' chaotic school selection phenomena to pursue high-quality compulsory education resources disrupted the market economic order and were not conducive to achieving equity in compulsory education. To address the chaos of school selection and ensure that every school-age child and teenager can enjoy quality and equal education, while strongly supporting the development of compulsory education, the government has established the basic principle of non-examination-based enrollment and nearby placement through legislative means and continuously refined it, promoting a fair and reasonable allocation of compulsory education resources.

4.1.2. Practical Dilemma: Uneven Regional Development

For a long time, influenced by the uneven level of regional economic and social development, there are significant regional and school-to-school differences in the quality and teaching level of compulsory education. The key school policy in the early years of New China further exacerbated the concentration of high-quality educational resources in key schools. Selective admission of students based on merit continued to gather high-quality students into key primary and secondary schools, leading to unbalanced development of compulsory education. In 1986, the Ministry of Education issued the "Notice on Reforming the Junior High School Enrollment Methods in Places with Universal Junior High Education," gradually eliminating entrance examinations for compulsory education, marking the promotion of balanced development of compulsory education as one of the important tasks of educational reform. After the promulgation of the "National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)," the balanced development of compulsory education has been comprehensively promoted, but due to the uneven regional development level, the phenomenon of uneven compulsory education between regions has not been completely eliminated,[21] and regional and school-to-school differences in the quality of compulsory education still exist objectively. Throughout the evolution and development of compulsory education enrollment policies since the founding of New China, a series of gradually changing enrollment policies for compulsory education, from non-examination-based enrollment and nearby placement, abolishing the key school system, prohibiting school selection, supporting weak schools, to zoning enrollment, computerized lottery selection, and concurrent enrollment of public and private schools, are exploring how to enable school-age children and teenagers to equally enjoy enrollment opportunities, how to enable the largest number of school-age children and teenagers to enjoy quality and balanced education as much as possible,[22] and how to break through the practical dilemma of uneven regional development to promote the balanced and high-quality development of compulsory education.

4.1.3. Conceptual Elements: Achieving Educational Equity

The Party and the government have always attached great importance to and safeguarded the right to education for school-age children and adolescents. Since the reform and opening up, compulsory education has been widely popularized nationwide. In 1980, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the "Decision on Several Issues Concerning the Popularization of Primary Education," proposing the comprehensive popularization of primary education nationwide and the popularization of junior high school education in areas where conditions permit. After the 18th CPC National Congress, the Party and the government have comprehensively deepened comprehensive reforms in the field of education, vigorously promoted the balanced and quality development of compulsory education under the guidance of the educational theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, and fully guaranteed the right of school-age children and adolescents to equally enjoy quality and balanced educational resources. The establishment of an educational equity security system has been deemed as an essential component in building a socialist harmonious society, and the concept of educational equity has been deeply rooted in people's hearts. In the early stages of New China's founding, the compulsory education enrollment policy was oriented towards efficiency, aiming to rapidly cultivate a large number of outstanding talents to serve national and social construction. After the reform and opening up, the trend towards fairness in the compulsory education enrollment policy has become increasingly prominent, with the principle of exemption from entrance examinations and enrollment in nearby schools consistently upheld. This fully reflects the direct policy goals of ensuring equal enrollment opportunities and equal access to educational resources for school-age children and adolescents, embodying the concept of educational equity.[23] Although absolute educational equity is difficult to achieve due to objective factors such as the level of economic and social development, differences in the standards of primary and secondary schools, and differences in the quality of the educated population, the compulsory education enrollment policy promotes the achievement of relative fairness in a scientific and reasonable manner.[24] The gradual evolution of the compulsory education enrollment policy reflects the efforts of the Party and the government in pursuing educational equity under different social backgrounds in different periods.

4.2. Path Dependency in the Evolution of Compulsory Education Enrollment Policies

Path dependency refers to the phenomenon where early-developed institutions gain an advantageous position in the process of change. Due to factors such as increasing returns from these institutions, improved learning effects of new systems, synergistic effects resulting from the large number of users of old systems, and the adaptive expectations of system users, it becomes difficult for people to abandon old systems and actively choose new ones, leading to a reliance on the old systems and path lock-in.[25] This paper analyzes the phenomenon of path dependency in the evolution of compulsory education enrollment policies from the perspective of the rational choices made by three key actors: the government, schools, and parents.

4.2.1. Government: High Costs of Policy Change

The Party and the government are the leading forces in the development of national education, playing a macro-regulatory role in the advancement of compulsory education. Correspondingly, the enrollment policy for compulsory education reflects the will of the state.[26] The government optimizes the allocation of compulsory education resources through various enrollment policies, adjusts the interests between primary and secondary schools, society, and student families, gains support to consolidate its political position,[27] and achieves specific policy intentions to ensure that compulsory education achieves the goal of educational equity. For the government, adhering to the original enrollment policy for compulsory education is predictable, allowing the government to better ensure that its own and the behaviors of various social actors remain within a controllable range. However, reforms to the enrollment policy for compulsory education may disrupt expectations, affect the government's macro-control of educational development and social operations, and potentially lead to unpredictable reform outcomes. Additionally, the high-quality educational outcomes brought by key schools can reflect local governments' "political achievements" in the field of education. Therefore, some local governments choose to implement the principle of non-exam enrollment and nearby placement policies nominally, while granting "privileges" to high-quality key schools in various ways. This results in a situation where key schools continue to concentrate resources while weaker schools remain deprived.[28] Moreover, once the existing key school system is established, corresponding supportive and complementary systems emerge to ensure its smooth implementation. These systems are intricately interconnected and intertwined, making it difficult to completely prohibit or abolish them in the short term after banning the construction of key schools and fully implementing non-exam enrollment and nearby placement policies. The high cost of changing the original system easily leads to a phenomenon of returning to path lock-in.[29]

4.2.2. Schools: Concentrating Quality Educational Resources

On one hand, compared to education at other stages, compulsory education possesses characteristics such as foundation, public welfare, compulsion, and specificity. Policies related to compulsory education must be led and mandatorily constrained by the state, leaving primary and secondary schools in a passive state of responding to enrollment policies. These schools lack the motivation and ability to actively break out of path dependency. On the other hand, schools have become accustomed to the existing enrollment policies for compulsory education and obtain their own benefits under the established system, making them unwilling to accept changes in the existing system. This is reflected in the numerous difficulties in eliminating the key school system. As beneficiaries of the existing system, key schools enjoy priority access to quality educational resources, attracting and concentrating high-quality students, further enhancing and strengthening their excellent educational quality. This continues to attract high-quality students and educational resources, forming a virtuous cycle for key schools and gradually widening the educational gap with ordinary schools. Conversely, weaker schools, lacking advantages in terms of student quality, social reputation, educational quality, and teacher strength, possess the subjective motivation for change but lack the necessary objective conditions. They can only accept change with the assistance of higher-level organizations. When objective conditions are lacking, they have no choice but to passively accept the original system and cannot actively create a new one.[30]

4.2.3. Parents: Accessing Quality Educational Resources

Parents and the government share the common interest of providing students with quality educational resources, but the government also aims to achieve the policy goal of educational equity. Therefore, during the booming period of the socialist market economy, the key school policy has gradually declined, replaced by policies aimed at improving the conditions of weaker schools. For parents who value education and have the ability, obtaining quality educational resources through school selection or accepting secondary-level resources through fair means, the former has become the optimal choice. Parents' desire for their children to enjoy quality educational resources surpasses the demand for non-exam enrollment and nearby placement. School selection continues despite repeated bans, and the implementation of the non-exam enrollment and nearby placement policy has been hindered by parents. Until the introduction of measures explicitly targeting and regulating various forms of school selection, the implementation of computer-based random placement and the reform of unified enrollment for both public and private schools significantly compressed the living space of "test preparation classes" and "school selection exams." School selection activities focused on accessing quality educational resources were then restricted. The path dependency of the original enrollment policies for compulsory education has prevented parents' pursuit of quality educational resources from cooling down quickly. Parents still flock to key schools, and the impact of policy changes in compulsory education enrollment on parents' school selection actions exhibits a delayed effect.

4.3. Critical Junctures in the Evolution of Compulsory Education Enrollment Policies

Examining the evolution of compulsory education enrollment policies since the founding of New China, three critical junctures have emerged, breaking institutional inertia and leading to institutional changes and innovations.[31]

4.3.1. Significant Political Changes Brought by Reform and Opening Up (1978)

The first critical juncture was triggered by the significant

political changes brought by the reform and opening up in 1978, which shifted the planned economy system to a socialist market economy system. The profound changes in the macro background and deep structure profoundly influenced the value objectives of compulsory education enrollment policies. During the planned economy period, the state-led resource allocation method and the scarcity of compulsory education resources meant that basic education should aim to quickly cultivate a large number of talents to serve national economic construction. Accordingly, the compulsory education enrollment policy was oriented towards efficiency, which manifested in the system of selective admission based on exams and the concentration of resources to build key schools during the compulsory education stage. After the reform and opening up, the gradual shift to a socialist market economy system, significant improvements in economic levels and comprehensive national strength, and the concrete manifestation of the pursuit of social fairness and justice in the field of education have led to the increasingly strong voice for educational equity. The value goal of the compulsory education enrollment policy has shifted from efficiency to equity. The result of the first critical juncture was that the nearby enrollment policy gained a legal basis. Article 9 of the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China, adopted at the Fourth Session of the Sixth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China on April 12, 1986, clearly stipulates: "Local people's governments at all levels shall reasonably establish primary schools and junior secondary schools to enable children and adolescents to enroll nearby." The Compulsory Education Law first stipulated in legal form that students in the compulsory education stage should adopt the principle of nearby enrollment, effectively safeguarding the right to education of school-age children and adolescents. It was a crucial step forward in the field of educational equity since the founding of New China.

4.3.2. Catalyzing Educational Reform through School Choice Chaos (1993)

The second critical juncture was triggered by the rapid development of compulsory education after entering the 1990s. The original key school policy exacerbated the imbalance in the development of compulsory education, and the gap in the quality of compulsory education between schools gradually widened. Issues such as "expensive school district houses" derived from school choice have attracted widespread social attention, and the frequent occurrence of school choice chaos has attracted significant attention from the education sector, further catalyzing the initial reform of compulsory education aimed at addressing school choice issues and promoting educational equity. Marked by the Outline of China's Education Reform and Development issued by the State Council in 1993, China's compulsory education enrollment policies entered a period of vigorously promoting balanced development of compulsory education and emphasizing educational equity. The result of the second critical juncture was that relevant departments continuously issued multiple policy documents to comprehensively promote the policy of exemption from testing and enrollment nearby, taking multiple measures to address school choice chaos. For example, the 1993 "Instructions on Reducing the Excessive Academic Burden of Students in Compulsory Education and Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Education" explicitly prohibited the establishment of key classes and key schools; the 1995 "Notice on Further Promoting and Improving the Reform of Junior High School Enrollment Methods" proposed improving the quality and level of education in weak primary and secondary schools in batches and stages; the 2010 "Guiding Opinions on Addressing the Issue of Irregular School Choice Fees in Compulsory Education" mentioned that addressing irregular school choice fees must address both the symptoms and the root causes, standardizing enrollment order while supporting weak schools and narrowing the gap in the quality of junior high school education. The concept of educational equity in compulsory education enrollment policies has been continuously strengthened.

4.3.3. Comprehensive Deepening of Comprehensive Reform in the Field of Education (2013)

The origin of the third critical juncture stems from the adoption of the "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform" by the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee on November 12, 2013, which explicitly proposed to deepen comprehensive reform in the field of education. The outcome of this critical juncture is the implementation of a series of innovative reform measures for compulsory education enrollment policies. In 2014, the Ministry of Education issued the "Implementation Opinions on Further Improving the Work of Free and Proximity Admission from Primary School to Junior High School," proposing for the first time relevant requirements of "single-school zoning" and "multi-school zoning." In 2017, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued a document stipulating that "schools should be guided to adopt computer-based random placement for enrollment." In 2018, the policy guideline of "equal enrollment for public and private schools" was formally established. Over the subsequent years, these policies have been gradually implemented across the country, ushering in an era of "zoned enrollment," "universal lottery," and "equal enrollment for public and private schools," thereby promoting and developing educational equity.

5. Future Prospects: How Enrollment Policies Promote Educational Equity

Tracing the evolution of compulsory education enrollment policies since the founding of New China, it has undergone four distinct periods: prioritizing efficiency, balancing fairness, emphasizing fairness, and implementing fairness, exhibiting distinctive stage characteristics. China's compulsory education enrollment policies have achieved a shift in value goals from efficiency to fairness, and are consistently committed to achieving educational equity at the present stage. Retrospective analysis of the evolution process and policy change logic of compulsory education enrollment policies from the perspective of historical institutionalism reveals the following: Firstly, the deep structural factors of policy change include the policy value shift brought by economic system reform, the realistic dilemma of uneven regional development forcing enrollment policy reform, and the concept of achieving educational equity promoting the development of compulsory education enrollment policies. Secondly, the path dependence of policy change stems from the rational choices of actors. The high cost of government's changes to the original policies, schools' desire to continue concentrating on quality education resources, and parents' efforts to acquire quality education resources through school

choice all exacerbate the difficulty of policy change. Thirdly, the critical junctures of policy change have broken the path dependence. The significant political changes brought by the reform and opening up in 1978, the catalyzing effect of school choice chaos on educational reform in 1993, and the comprehensive deepening of comprehensive reform in the field of education in 2013 have promoted the evolution and development of enrollment policies. At the new historical juncture, summing up experience and looking forward, it is necessary to adhere to the policy value goal of educational equity, seek breakthroughs in path dependence at critical junctures, and focus on the coordination of multiple subjects in the gradual development of policies to better achieve educational equity.

5.1. Adhering to the Policy Value Objective of Educational Equity

In the early days of New China's establishment, with the backward economic and social development level and scarce educational resources, it was urgent to cultivate a large number of talents to meet the needs of national construction. Therefore, the development of education was primarily oriented towards economic value, resulting in the implementation of policies such as selective admission through examinations and centralized resource allocation for key schools. The compulsory education enrollment policy, guided by the efficiency of talent cultivation, conformed to the unbalanced economic and social development strategy of that era. However, with the gradual advancement of reform and opening-up and the vigorous development of the socialist market economy, compulsory education resources have become increasingly abundant. The continuous implementation of the key school policy has widened the gap in school quality, exacerbating the uneven allocation of educational resources and the unbalanced development of compulsory education. The past compulsory education enrollment policy focused on "high efficiency" can no longer meet people's pursuit of achieving educational equity and constructing social fairness and justice. Consequently, the compulsory education enrollment policy has gradually shifted from the value logic of pursuing efficiency to the value logic of pursuing equity. Subsequently, the government has introduced a series of policies to tackle the chaos of school selection, primarily through computerized lottery, school district-based enrollment, and simultaneous enrollment for both public and private schools, aiming to achieve non-exam enrollment in nearby schools, comprehensively deepening reforms in the education sector, and promoting educational equity. The foundational, public welfare, and special nature of compulsory education further determines that the enrollment policy is the starting point for achieving educational equity. The country must consistently adhere to the policy value objective of educational equity, intensify efforts to implement reforms in the compulsory education enrollment policy, standardize the order of enrollment, improve the enrollment system, optimize the allocation of compulsory education resources, assist backward regions and weak schools in developing compulsory education, and promote the quality and balanced development of compulsory education.

5.2. Breaking Policy Path Dependency through Critical Junctures

Due to the self-reinforcing effect of the system, the relevant actors involved in the compulsory education enrollment policy lack the motivation for institutional change, thus strengthening and solidifying the original policy path. Therefore, it is necessary to weaken the reproduction and self-reinforcement of the system's "replication mechanism," seize the critical junctures of the policy changes in compulsory education enrollment, and eliminate the obstacles that hinder institutional reform.[32] The compulsory education enrollment policy has undergone three gradual " critical junctures " of change. The first critical juncture was in 1978, when the reform and opening-up and economic system reforms led to rapid social and economic development, enriched compulsory education resources, and made non-exam enrollment in nearby schools replace selective admission through examinations as the consistent government's educational philosophy, beginning to embody a policy value orientation that considers equity. The second critical juncture was in 1993, when the practical dilemma of uneven regional development and the key school policy exacerbated the inter-school gap in educational resources. The increasingly fierce school selection actions catalyzed the initial reform of compulsory education, emphasizing educational equity through tackling the chaos of school selection, abolishing the key school policy, and comprehensively promoting non-exam enrollment in nearby schools. The reform of the compulsory education enrollment policy, represented by the reform of non-exam enrollment in nearby schools, entered a critical stage, with policies such as school district-based enrollment, computerized lottery, and simultaneous enrollment for both public and private schools being successively introduced, promoting the realization of educational equity in the new era. Only by accurately grasping the historical key points, facing the context of institutional change with clarity, and breaking path dependency, can we ensure the rationality and scientificity of the compulsory education enrollment policy and promote the process of achieving educational equity.

5.3. Multi-Agent Coordination in the Gradual Development of Policies

Compulsory education is a national public welfare cause, representing the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people. The Party and the government occupy a dominant position in the formulation of enrollment policies for compulsory education. The government is the overall planner of compulsory education work and the main formulator of enrollment policies for compulsory education. However, the implementation of enrollment policies for compulsory education involves multiple stakeholders such as social organizations, schools, and families.[33] Since the comprehensive reform in the field of education has been comprehensively deepened, remarkable achievements have been made in the reform of compulsory education. The complex social environment and diverse stakeholders in the new era mean that the reform of compulsory education faces greater challenges. The implementation, implementation, and evolution of compulsory education policies depend on the collaborative cooperation based on the division of labor among multiple stakeholders. Facing complex and diverse governance tasks, the government cannot take into account all governance details alone. It is more necessary to play the role of "meta-governance" and assume the role of "supervisor". Based on decentralization, it should appropriately cede power and achieve the benign and gradual development of enrollment policies for compulsory education with a scientific

power structure, reasonable organizational arrangements, and a complementary institutional system. A policy implementation system for enrollment in compulsory education should be established with the participation and joint governance of multiple stakeholders such as the government, society, schools, and families, coordinating conflicts and balancing interests of all parties, so that the policy intention of promoting educational equity can be better implemented.

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