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The Impact of Unequal Educational Resources on Youth Development and Social Mobility

Yumeng Liu *

Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

*** Corresponding author Email:** liuyumengdtc12345@student.usm.com

Abstract: In today's world, educational inequality remains one of the obstacles hindering the development of young people and social mobility globally; and this issue is particularly prominent, especially in countries with significant regional and economic disparities. This article explores the phenomenon of uneven distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas, as well as between high- and low-income families, and its impact on the development trajectory, employment prospects, and social outcomes of young people. This study adopts a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative data from national education statistics and international assessments with original surveys of 45 respondents. The survey results show that 71% of respondents believe there is a significant gap between the schools they attend and those in well-funded cities, and most participants believe that family investment in education has a significant impact on academic performance. The research findings indicate that the perceived resource gap in rural schools is closely related to the concept of intergenerational transmission, which also suggests that structural funding shortages are an area worthy of attention.

Keywords: Educational Inequality; Youth Development; Social Mobility.

1. Introduction

Education is frequently viewed as the principal force for social mobility, as it is the instrument through which people, irrespective of their origins, can be given similar chances and work toward the achievement of social development. Equal access to education is a basic human right that is acknowledged by many, and education itself has been regarded as a vital platform for economic growth and social equity [1].

However, the quality and availability of schooling almost always depend on such factors as people's place of birth, as well as parental background and family economic conditions. Education in theory can be regarded as an instrument for equalization, but in practice it is frequently to reproduce and demonstrate the existing social caste.

The article, therefore, poses the following question: What is the effect of unequal distribution of school resources for youths? In this article, the inequalities in educational funding, quality of teaching, access to technological resources, and education of the parents will be examined in terms of compatibility with some measurable academic success, career goals, and, as a result, a social position. Youth development is not exactly a paper debate; instead, it is the segment of future financial efficiency of society and the community united by it. If most of the population of a generation does not have access to the needed education, then it is not just a problem for those who do not get the needed education but for the whole society.

Rapid development in the past decades has enlarged China education system as a whole, but there are evident discrepancies in distributions of education resources between urban and rural areas. File China Statistical Yearbook 2023 contains information that China has, in 2022, 6,629,421 full-time teachers in primary education across the country. Among them, 2,629,557 full-time teachers are in urban primary schools (39.7%); there are 2,423,093 in township primary schools (36.6%); and there are 1,576,771 in rural primary schools (23.8%) [2]. In terms of students in primary schools, there are 46,943,898 in urban primary schools, 40,079,874 in township primary schools, and there are 20,296,822 in rural primary schools. Therefore, we can conclude that there are about 5.60 full-time teachers per 100 students in urban primary schools, there are 6.05 in township primary schools, and there are 7.77 in rural primary schools.

These findings showed that the gap between urban and rural areas in education differs from being a mere problem of rural teachers' shortfall, but instead, it presents itself as a spatial puzzle in distribution of rural primary schools, teachers, and students in cities, townships, and rural areas. Indeed, it can be also deemed not only the number of teachers that counts when totalizing the quality of educational resources, but also the qualifications structure of the teachers. According to the 2021 Education Statistics, it was reported that teachers with a bachelor's degree and above comprised of 2,216,541 full-time teachers in urban primary schools, which was equal to 84.29% of the total number of such teachers in urban areas. The corresponding number in township areas was 1,734,309, with 71.57%, and then, in the rural zones, it was 989,749, with 62.77%. Hence, this precisely indicates that the gap in education between urban and rural areas is not about how many teachers there are in rural areas, but it is more concerned with the quality and organization of teachers throughout the whole education system.

Accordingly, the disparity in urban-rural educational inequality can be observed through the presence of teachers as well as their level of qualification, school condition, access to digital resources, and additional learning opportunities. Rural students, by the nature of being more geographically distributed, might encounter even additional problems apart from those stated above, e.g. smaller school size, longer commuting distance, less teacher stability, and limited availability of extra learning materials. Furthermore, these factors can affect the teachers' ability to provide quality instruction and the students' capacity to learn, which can have a ripple effect and limit their future education options.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Educational Expansion and Persistent Stratification

In the past few decades, global higher education has rapidly expanded, which was initially seen as a force that could promote democratization and equality, as more and more students from different backgrounds were able to enter the higher education stage. However, this expectation has not been fully realized. Educational expansion is often more utilized by already advantaged populations[3]. In other words, educational expansion has not eliminated resource inequality, but may instead be accompanied by further widening of resource allocation gaps between schools, regions, and social groups.

Educational competition in the context of globalisation has not automatically promoted equity: advantaged families are better positioned to access high-quality educational environments or participate in international education, further widening the gap between social classes[4]. On the contrary, advantageous families are more capable of creating high-quality educational environments or participating in international education competition to obtain more valuable degrees. This competition may further widen the gap between different social classes.

In China, large-scale data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) enable researchers to track educational pathways across generations. Family background significantly affects the academic achievement of Chinese children: even after controlling for province, grade, ethnicity, urban-rural identity, and family income, parents' education level remained positively correlated with children's test scores[5]. This indicates that educational inequality is transmitted across generations through multiple channels — cultural capital, social networks, and direct financial investment in extracurricular tutoring and enrichment.

2.2. International Evidence on Resource Disparities and Academic Outcomes

Cross-national evidence from the OECD's PISA 2018 assessment shows that disadvantaged students — those in the lowest quartile of the socioeconomic index — scored on average 88 points lower in reading than advantaged peers, a gap roughly equivalent to three years of schooling[6]. In addition, the OECD also points out that socioeconomic status can affect students' access to home learning resources, such as books, the internet, computers, and quiet learning spaces. Therefore, this achievement gap should not be understood solely as a result of a single factor, but should be seen as a result of the accumulation of long-term unequal learning conditions. From this perspective, inequality has already been written into the personal development trajectory of young people before they enter the job market.

2.3. Social Mobility, Employment, and the Urban-Rural Divide

In China, the urban-rural divide remains an important dimension of educational inequality and social mobility. Educational opportunities are not determined only by individual effort, but are also shaped by institutional and regional factors, such as hukou status, provincial admission quotas in the college entrance examination, and access to key schools. Hukou status is closely associated with educational inequality. Compared with people holding urban hukou, those with rural hukou tend to have lower levels of educational attainment, even after other socioeconomic factors are taken into account[7]. This suggests that hukou is not merely a personal background characteristic, but also an institutional factor that affects access to educational opportunities.

The provincial admission quota system in higher education further reinforces regional differences. Since university admission quotas are allocated by province, students with similar academic ability may face different levels of competition depending on where their hukou is registered[8]. In addition, the long-standing key-school system may deepen inequality at the basic education level. Migrants and students with rural hukou are disproportionately sorted into low-quality schools in urban areas, which contributes to a sizeable achievement gap and further limits their chances of entering higher education[9].

Therefore, China's urban-rural gap in social mobility is closely connected with unequal access to educational resources. Compared with many urban schools, rural schools often face more challenges in teacher quality, school funding, digital resources, and supplementary learning opportunities. These disadvantages may limit students' academic development, career aspirations, and future opportunities for upward social mobility.

2.4. Research Gap

In previous studies, although the existence of educational inequality has been proven from macro data, socio-economic backgrounds, and regional differences, it is still necessary to further focus on the growth trajectory of young people and how they perceive and understand this inequality themselves. Many studies can clearly demonstrate the relationship between educational opportunities, academic performance, and social mobility to a certain extent; However, more individual perspectives from students are still needed to supplement the specific impact of resource differences on students' confidence, career expectations, and future plans in daily learning.

Therefore, this article does not attempt to fully track the long-term development process of individuals from early education to employment. Instead, through questionnaire surveys and open-ended responses, it analyzes how young people perceive the gap in educational resources and how they understand the impact of this gap on academic performance, career aspirations, and social mobility motivation. Through this approach, this article aims to provide a more student-centered perspective for research on educational inequality.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed research method, combining publicly available educational statistics with first-hand questionnaire survey data. Public statistical data is mainly used to present the macro background of educational resource inequality, such as regional differences, distribution of educational resources, and other differences[10]. The questionnaire survey is used to further understand how young people perceive and understand the phenomenon of educational inequality, as well as the impact it has caused. Due to the small sample size of the questionnaire in this study, this article does not attempt to establish strict causal

relationships or conduct complex statistical model analysis. On the contrary, this article mainly adopts descriptive statistical methods to integrate the proportion, average score, and main trends in the questionnaire results; At the same time, combined with open-ended responses, summarize and analyze the common themes mentioned by the respondents. Through this approach, this article aims to supplement some personal experiential evidence of young people on the basis of macro data.

3.2. Survey Instrument and Sample

The first-hand data comes from an online questionnaire containing ten questions, with a total of 50 respondents participating. The questionnaire is divided into four parts: The first section collected respondents' basic background information, including their place of upbringing, current or highest level of education, and parents' highest education level. The second section examined respondents' perceptions of educational resource gaps, especially by asking them to compare the resources of their own schools with those of key schools in major cities. The third section used 1-to-5 scale questions to measure the perceived impact of family educational investment on academic performance and the perceived influence of educational inequality on career aspirations. The fourth section asked respondents about their views on social mobility, intergenerational transmission, and possible policy measures for reducing educational inequality. The questionnaire ended with an open-ended question inviting respondents to share a personal experience or observation related to educational inequality.

Among the 50 respondents, 26 respondents, or 52%, reported growing up in an urban area or major city; 18 respondents, or 36%, grew up in a town or small city; and 6 respondents, or 12%, grew up in a rural area or village. In terms of education level, 40 respondents, or 80%, were currently enrolled in or had graduated from a college or undergraduate programme; 4 respondents, or 8%, were enrolled in or had graduated from a master's degree programme; 4 respondents, or 8%, had a high school or vocational school background; and 2 respondents, or 4%, had a middle school or below education level.

With respect to parents' highest education level, 24 respondents, or 48%, reported that their parents had a college or undergraduate education; 16 respondents, or 32%, reported high school or vocational school; 6 respondents, or 12%, reported middle school or below; and 4 respondents, or 8%, reported postgraduate education or above. Overall, the sample is relatively concentrated among urban and college-educated respondents. Therefore, the findings should be understood as exploratory rather than fully representative of all young people. However, the sample is still useful for examining how young people perceive educational inequality and how they connect it with academic performance, career aspirations, and social mobility.

4. Findings

4.1. Perceived Resource Gap and Family Investment

In response to the question on comparing schools resources with that of key schools in big cites, 8 (16%) respondents rated the gap as large and 14 (28%) rated the gap as significant. This means that a total of 44% of the respondents saw their schools as being significantly under-resourced compared to key schools in big cites. If we include the respondents that rated the when comparing School A's resources with key schools in big cites the answers reveal a gap of gap as moderate, the figure rises to 80% with a total of 40 out of 50 respondents indicating at least a moderate gap in resources. Only 10 (20%) respondents indicated that they had good resources with little or no gap at all.

The average score of 3.30 points out of 5 is related to the impact that family educational investment has on academic performance. In this case, 25 respondents (50%) gave a score of 4 or 5: 50% of the subjects that contained the sample believed family investment in private activities like tutoring, books, extracurricular activities, and learning materials had a powerful impact on academic performance. Such patterns imply that school-level resource differences as well as household-level educational investment are generally considered by respondents, despite the fact that the sample is composed mainly of college-educated people.

4.2. Career Aspirations and Intergenerational Transmission

Also, participants rated how much they felt that educational inequalities constrained their career expectations, scoring 3.56 (out of 5), which was slightly higher than the score for family educational investment limitation. A total of 54% of participants (n = 27) scored 4–5 for educational inequality; therefore, half of the respondents indicated that educational inequality strongly influenced their career expectations. These results are fully in line with the sociological literature about social reproduction and the limits of meritocracy (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

On social class, 14 (28%) strongly agreed, 22 (44%) agreed that family and level of education largely determine an individual's social class, amounting to 72%. On inter-generation, 15 (30%) said that inequity in education greatly affects generations, while 26 (52%) said inequalities affect generations but some things can change when an individual exerts effort. In general, 82% said there is at least some intergenerationally effect.

4.3. Policy Preferences

For policy solutions, expanding access to quality online education resources was the most selected category, with 33 selections (66%); reform college entrance exam to provide more opportunities for disadvantaged students was the second with 31 selections (62%); followed by increase the teacher salaries in rural poor areas and increase government funding for rural and poor developing schools, both with 27 selections (54%); hukou reform with 23 selections (46%); and provide scholarships or subsidies to low-income families with 19 selections (38%).

The results indicated that for respondents, educational inequality was not just one-dimensional. Digital access, exam reform, teacher resources, school infrastructure, and financial aid were all policy options that the respondents thought would serve to close the educational inequality gap—implying that one method is not enough to tackle this issue.

4.4. Qualitative Accounts

The open-ended responses were coded thematically using a simplistic approach[10]. This article covered all 50 questionnaire responses, and after excluding 3 empty responses without meaningful content, there were 47 valid open-end responses used for the analysis. As one response

could relate to more than one theme, they are not mutually exclusive.

The topic that received most mentions in the responses was the unequal access to extra learning support and family educational investment; 23 respondents mentioned that. In reply, an ample number of respondents drew a comparison between learners who were able to hire private tutors, attend extra classes, buy learning materials, or get prepared for study abroad programs and those who had to solely depend on school lessons. One such person stated that there are learners who have the privilege of getting private tutoring, high-speed internet, laptops, and quite a study environment, while there are others who are only dependent on school teaching. It is evident that the majority of the interviewees considered educational inequality as the deprivation of opportunities related to an individual's educational pursuit.

The second theme was the urban-rural divide in school resources, mentioned in 18 entries. The respondents referred to facilities, curriculum, personnel, equipment, and extracurricular opportunities in urban versus rural schools. This included responses that mentioned that kids in rural schools had outdated textbooks, fewer qualified teachers, or inadequate classroom tools, whereas the kids in urban schools had better facilities and more learning opportunities.

The third theme was the digital divide. It occurred in 16 responses. The participants often associated it with online learning during the COVID-19 crisis. Some students had private laptops and internet access in their homes, while others had to work on the phone, share with the family, or had poor internet connection.

Another theme that came up frequently was that of financial pressure or of a home learning environment factor, which was mentioned by 18 respondents; examination and admission possibilities by 7; language barriers or self-confidence issues by 6. All in all, the qualitative demonstrations corroborate the survey results by showing that educational inequality is not only through school resources, but also through family backgrounds, digital access, tutoring opportunities, and regional differences. These statements imply that lots of the interviewees perceive educational inequality as a giant problem that impacts learners' self-confidence, school performance, and career chances.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study show that educational inequality is not a single issue of school access, but a multidimensional problem. The survey results show that many respondents perceived clear differences between their own schools and key schools in major cities, while the open-ended responses further indicate that these differences are closely related to tutoring opportunities, digital resources, family support, and regional background. Family background affects children's academic achievement in China through access to quality educational opportunities and parental support[5]. Geography and educational inequality in China, which highlights the importance of regional differences in shaping educational opportunities[11]. In addition, the frequent references to digital devices, internet conditions, and online learning resources in this study are consistent with Liu's (2021) research on the digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic, which shows that access to distance learning and educational technology can shape students' learning experiences[12]. Overall, the findings of this study support the core argument in existing literature that educational inequality is not caused by one single factor, but by the combined effects of family background, school resources, regional differences, and access to digital resources.

Another important finding is that respondents did not view educational inequality only as a short-term academic problem. More than half of the respondents believed that educational inequality strongly limited their career aspirations, and 82% acknowledged at least some degree of intergenerational transmission. This further indicates that inequality in educational resources may not only affect exam scores but also students' self-confidence and future planning. Policy preferences also reveal that respondents believe educational inequality is a structural issue. Most respondents unanimously agree that solutions to this problem could include expanding high-quality online educational resources, reforming the college entrance examination system, and increasing funding for schools. Most respondents believe that educational inequality is related to digital resources, teacher quality, examination opportunities, family income, and household registration systems. However, this study also has certain limitations. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small, with only 50 valid responses. Secondly, the sample is not sufficiently representative. It was found from the responses that most respondents are urban residents or have received university education. Thirdly, this study mainly relies on the subjective opinions of respondents, which may be influenced by personal experiences and memories. Therefore, the findings of this report should be understood as exploratory rather than conclusive. Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample; especially by interviewing more rural students and youth without university education to better understand how educational inequality affects different groups.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this article is based on existing academic research, comprehensive statistical data from both domestic and international sources, and preliminary surveys from 50 respondents; This mainly explores the relationship between unequal educational resources and youth development outcomes. Based on this study, the following conclusions have been drawn: which school people attend, the financial situation of their schools, and how much their families can invest in supplementary education. All of these factors have a significant impact on your educational trajectory, which in turn affects people's career prospects and social status. At the same time, they correspond to the broader social reproduction mechanisms recorded in literature, and inequality is believed to persist between generations. At the same time, the investigation confirmed and enriched the results of quantitative analysis. The vast majority of respondents admit that family background can affect social class outcomes (72%), and inequality can be passed down from generation to generation (82%). Open ended answers further provide qualitative details for these: inequality is not only reflected in overall statistical data, but also in daily details of educational life. For example, who has a laptop, who has a quiet study space, who can afford a private tutor, and who cannot reliably attend online courses. Therefore, the policy implications of this article are very clear: simply expanding educational opportunities without thoroughly addressing the differences in institutions and resources will not be able to narrow these gaps. An effective policy requires a combination of redistributive fiscal mechanisms, targeted incentive programs

to attract and retain qualified teachers in impoverished areas, investment in infrastructure, and reform of the examination system. This article combines statistical evidence and life experience to provide a supplementary perspective for viewing educational inequality as a core issue rather than a peripheral problem in policy and academic research.

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Appendix

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1lDAPPfsNkGCvrJIRTf0X GmADOpKOmtLm1FqVPjp0j5M/edit.