

Educational Inequality in China: Contributing Factors and Equalizing Efforts

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Min Zou, Ed.D
Southeast Missouri State University

Abstract

The enormous economic growth China has achieved over the past four decades is accompanied by a widening educational inequality. While multiple types of educational inequality exist, this article focuses on the urban-rural inequality, which is considered the fundamental source of overall educational inequality in China. The dualistic social structure is examined in exploring the institutional root of the nation's educational inequality. Recent top-down reform initiatives and mandates are highlighted to show how the Chinese government has experimented with different policy interventions to remedy educational inequality.

Educational Inequality in China: Contributing Factors and Equalizing Efforts

China has achieved enormous economic growth and development over the past four decades since its launch of economic reform in 1978. The latest World Bank statistics placed China the second in 2015 world gross domestic product (GDP) ranking (The World Bank, 2016). China's economic growth, however, has been accompanied by a widening educational inequality, a challenge faced the nation for decades. The country's new wealth and new inequalities constitute the new China story.

Since the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government has made tremendous efforts to improve education, attempting to "mobilize the entire population to achieve universal literacy ... and ... to expand and deliver all levels of schooling to its citizenry" (Rong & Shi, 2001, p. 112), making education a social equalizer. The most ambitious effort was the passage of the Law of Compulsory Education in 1986, mandating nine years of compulsory schooling throughout the whole nation. The law requires that all Chinese citizens attend schools for at least nine years, including six years of primary school plus three years junior middle school, or five years primary school plus four years junior middle school.

Despite the Chinese government's efforts, large educational inequality persists. While there are multiple types of educational inequality in China, the urban-rural inequality is considered the fundamental source of overall educational inequality in China (Cheng, 2009). In fact, urban-rural disparities are seen as significant structural elements of educational inequality in many countries, and spatial dimensions of inequality in human development, including urban-rural dimensions, are commonplace in developing and transitional economies (Hannum, Wang, Adams, 2008). As a developing country, China is no exception to this. In their article examining the education of Chinese rural migrant workers' children, Fan & Peng (2008)

attributed China's urban-rural inequality to its dualistic structure of the urban-rural society and considered it the institutional root of the nation's educational inequality.

To fully appreciate the complexity of China's dualistic societal structure, one needs to understand China's unique household registration system called *hukou*, which has been the economic and social institutional basis of the urban-rural divide (Shi, Sato, & Sicular, 2013). Promulgated in 1958, the *hukou* system was used by the Chinese government to control the population movement between urban and rural areas. Under this system, every Chinese citizen is required to register and obtain either urban or rural permanent household status. Once a resident is registered in one place, it would be very difficult for him/her to transfer permanent residence to another place. Anyone seeking to move one registration status to another must apply through relevant bureaucracies and such move is tightly controlled by the government. Moving from rural household registration status to gain a permanent residence status in cities is extremely difficult due to the large disparity in income, social welfare and living standards between urban and rural areas.

Besides the dualistic social structure, the educational financing system has been another important contributing factor to China's educational inequality, especially to the urban-rural educational disparities. In the mid-1980s, the Chinese government decentralized its educational financing system. Under the decentralized financing structure, local governments were asked to take a greater responsibility for funding for education. In urban areas, district and city governments were responsible for primary and middle schools, and in rural areas, county governments responsible for senior middle schools, townships were responsible for junior middle schools, and villages were responsible for primary schools (Knight, Sicular, & Yue, 2013). Given the wide disparity in economic development between urban and rural areas, this fiscal

decentralization exacerbated urban-rural educational inequality. While urban areas were better able to generate financial resources for education, poor rural areas lagged. The implementation of the Law of Compulsory Education in the rural areas was thus hampered by ongoing fiscal constraints at county- and lower-level government (Knight, Sicular, & Yue, 2013). Under the dualistic educational system, “rural education has been short of resources, which leads to a great lag behind its urban counterpart in both teacher qualifications and teaching facilities” (Fan & Peng, 2008, p. 325). The budgeted operating expenditures per student in urban areas were significantly higher than those in rural areas. The average years spent in schoolings for those who hold *hukou* status in an urban area is 10.3 years compared to just 6 for those of rural *hukou* status. While 67% of citizens with urban *hukou* status go to high school, only 29.9% of rural *hukou* make it there (Choi, 2012).

China’s phenomenal economic development and growth have driven large-scale rural-to-urban migration for decades and generated millions “non-*hukou*” migrants who work and live in a locality other than where their official *hukou* are registered at. It is estimated that over 20 million migrant children follow their parents to cities for a better life (Chen & Feng, 2012). Since funding for primary and middle school education is allocated by the number of students with *hukou*, local authorities in cities lack the financial resources and incentives to accommodate the educational needs of these migrant children who do not have the required *hukou*. Therefore, although all school-aged children are entitled to a free public education under the Law of Compulsory Education, non-*hukou* rural students are excluded from the public education system in the cities where they reside. Many of them have to go to private schools that charge higher tuition, or “migrant schools” that started as informal schools by migrants themselves and offered subpar education.

Educational inequality in China has been the focus in many researchers' studies (Chen & Feng, 2012; Cheng, 2009; Choi, 2012; Fan & Peng, 2008; Knight, Sicular, & Yue, 2013; Rong & Shi, 2001). Among the recent literature exploring the reasons behind China's education inequality, Hannum's findings and arguments provide a perceptive and insightful understanding of China's unique social condition. Contextualizing the empirical evidence of urban-rural educational differences in China's political context from 1949 to 1999, Hannum (1999) argued that Chinese government's political priorities underlying education policy have exerted a direct impact on the educational opportunities for urban and rural children, were thus directly responsible for urban-rural educational inequality.

As a socialist nation, the Chinese government has the goal of establishing an equitable society to achieve. At the same time, the government has to grow and develop economically in order to gain and sustain a great power status internationally and consolidate its one-party rule at home. A review of the political priorities for education in China in the years between 1949 and 1990 led Hannum (1990) to conclude that the educational agenda in China has vacillated between two models: a socialist egalitarian model and a liberal competitive model. The socialist egalitarian model emphasizes reducing class inequalities and endorses the socialist ideal of establishing an equitable society in which equal opportunities and equal participation are advocated and supported. The liberal competitive model, on the other hand, adopts the meritocratic approach which "legitimizes the values of student rivalry and personal advancement" (p. 202) and justifies unequal access to education and diverse curricula.

More than six decades' history of the People's Republic China has shown that, when the socialist egalitarian model was chosen, reducing class differences, including urban-rural differences, was an essential goal of China's educational system. Equal opportunities for students

from all social groups, including children in rural areas, were the centerpiece of educational policies. The ten-year Cultural Revolution epitomized this model. During the Cultural Revolution, the educational system was unified and all students studied the same ideology-intensive curriculum. With the full implementation of the revolutionary educational agenda, the Cultural Revolution produced the data characterized by high primary school enrollments and a remarkable expansion of senior middle school education, especially in the rural areas: primary school net enrollments reached 90%, and rural progression rates to junior and senior middle schools rose as high as 90% and 70% respectively in 1976-1977 (Knight, Sicular, & Yue, 2013).

With the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, China embarked on economic reform and began to transform its economy from a socialist economy to a market economy. Economic growth became the overriding goal. The educational policies were moved in an economically pragmatic direction that supported and reflected marketization (Hannum, Behrman, Wang & Liu, 2007). The liberal competitive model thus took the place of the socialist egalitarian model. This model “relinquished excessive concerns with the social functions of education, prioritizing instead the goal of producing expert knowledge” (Hannum, 1999, p.209). Educational policies emphasized quality and academic content, and pursued educational efficiency. The exam-based system of progression was reinstated. Well-funded key schools and universities, primarily located in urban areas, were reopened in 1977-1978 with admission based solely on academic achievements. Concerns about the quality of education prompted the shutting down of many rural middle schools (cited in Knight, Sicular, & Yue, 2013). According to Knight, Sicular, and Yue (2013), national progression rates to junior middle school dropped from about 90% to below 70%, mainly reflecting changes in rural areas. Progression rates to senior middle school declined

by half, from 70% to 35%. Again, the decline was most severe in the rural areas, where the senior middle-school progression rate fell from 65% to about 10%.

Hannum (1999) thus concluded that changing visions of the purpose of education have carried particularly great implications for rural-urban educational inequality. She further argued that the promotion of economic goals for education associated with market reforms in China came at the cost of an equitable distribution of opportunities across the urban-rural boundary.

For decades, China has grappled with the challenge of striking a balance between social and economic goals, seeking to create an educational system that can promote both political agenda of obliterating class inequalities and economic development. When the Chinese government launched the economic reform more than three decades ago, economic scarcity, as Hannum (1999) put it, has dictated that the government adopt and implement educational policies that promote educational quality and efficiency to maximize and guarantee the returns on its educational investments, which curtailed the opportunities available to children in the rural areas. China has been in a position that is very different than it was decades ago. With unprecedented resources at hand, the government has become more ready than ever before to engage this challenge to get more promising results. Many reform initiatives and mandates have been proposed, initiated and implemented to address and remedy the problems associated with educational inequalities.

A series of *hukou* reforms has been carried out to ease the urban-rural gap since the post-reform era and the reform is still ongoing. Initially, in the mid-1980s, those with rural *hukou* were allowed to move to nearby townships with the status of “*hukou* with own responsibility for food grain” (Shi, Sato, & Sicular, 2013, p.17). A system of resident identification cards with the regulations for controlling “temporary residents” in cities were implemented. Then, from the

mid-1990s, some coastal cities began to grant “blue stamp household registration” for eligible rural residents. Since the mid-2000s, a unified local house registration has been introduced in many cities to end the urban-rural division, though unification of *hukou* registration has not necessarily led to adequate access to social security and public services for people with rural *hukou* status.

Hannum, Wang and Adams (2008) briefly summarized the equity-oriented policy proclamations issued by the government in response to concerns about access problems under the decentralized system in the 2000s. In 2003, the State Council held the first national working conference since 1949 to formulate plans for the development of rural education, with a focus on protecting access to and improving the quality of compulsory education in rural areas. In 2004, the 2003-2007 Action Plan for Revitalizing Education, called New Action Plan, was approved by the State Council. One of the strategic priorities of this plan is the implementation of compulsory education in rural areas, including spending 218 billion Yuan to help improving education in rural areas in five years, increasing the wages of rural middle and elementary school teachers, eliminating educational tuition and fees and providing free textbooks and subsidies for needy rural students in compulsory education.

Knight, Sicular, & Yue (2013) highlighted the major measures adopted and implemented by the government in the late 1990s and 2000s to support education in rural areas. Funding from central government was increased to support rural compulsory education and reduce primary and junior middle education costs borne by rural households. Payment of teachers’ salaries was shifted from the village to the county, and the central government implemented transfer payments to help local governments cover the costs compulsory education. Under the “Two Exemptions, One Subsidy” policy in 2003, the government would pay the costs of textbooks and

school fees and provide subsidies for boarding for poor rural students. The impact of these policies on education in rural areas is substantial. The official data issued by the Ministry of Education showed favorable trends in enrollment and retention in compulsory education: five-year retention rates for primary school rose from 71% in 1990 to 95% in 2000 and 2001, to 99% in 2002 and 2003.

For over a thousand years, education has been perceived as an important channel of social mobility in China. For decades, the Chinese government has grappled with the formidable challenge of creating an educational system in which education can serve as an effective equalizer in society and an effective solution to reduce social inequality and promote social mobility. The government has experimented with different visions of purpose of education with different policy interventions and received different results. China will need to continue working on educational inequality. Decades' rapid economic development has endowed the government with the financial means it needs to address the issue more adequately, effectively and successfully.

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