

Research on Reasons of Educational Opportunity Inequality and Income Gap in China and the United States

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Abstract. With the progress of the times and the advancement of technology, the inequality of opportunities between people has gradually widened and become a social issue, leading to inequalities in opportunities, education, and employment, resulting in an uneven distribution of human resources. As inequality expands, it ultimately leads to the fragmentation of regional economic growth, making it challenging for the national economy as a whole to maintain unity and remain continuously stable and developed. This article mainly explores the causes of inequality in education opportunities in China and the United States, analyzes these viewpoints, and proposes corresponding solutions based on the analysis of countries with relatively equal opportunities. The study underscores that keeping high-quality education standards and lowering the differences in education between parts of the country are important for keeping talent output stable, which will help the economy grow more steadily. Also, China can copy some Nordic education practices, like how they handle tests and rankings, which would help get rid of the inequality.

Keywords: Education, Culture difference, Inequality

1. Introduction

Despite significant differences in historical backgrounds between China and the United States, inequality still exists in both countries in different shapes. For national economic development, human capital is a primary component of a country's progress [1]. Therefore, the skills and knowledge possessed by individuals directly impact their productivity and innovativeness; only high productivity and innovation can enhance a country's competitiveness with others. Knowledge capital accounted for three-quarters of the changes in GDP growth across countries from 1960 to 2000 [2], which further underscores the importance of education for national economic development. Racial and regional issues are the main reasons for inequality in educational opportunity in the United States. In China, the reasons lie in urban-rural differences, household registration issues, and young people carrying too many responsibilities, which create inequalities in educational opportunities.

Inequality in education leads to inequality in income; in most cases, students' family background and their parents are the main determinants of their schooling. Additionally, school reputation, teacher resources, library resources, and laboratory facilities determine the upper limit of knowledge that students can access. In today's society, the demand from businesses for students increases year by year. Students need to obtain good college diplomas, graduate degrees, and doctoral degrees to

gain a competitive edge in the talent market and secure high-paying jobs in good companies. This is closely related to the educational resources available to students. The resources provided by parents are also essential. Whether parents' funds are sufficient to support the costs of their children's education and whether they can afford the high tuition fees charged by schools have become factors in determining whether students can obtain good school diplomas. In this study, the author intends to analyze the causes of educational inequality in both countries, why it leads to inequality, whether it is controllable by human actions, and how these issues ultimately affect individuals and the economy. By analyzing these problems, referencing other countries, and using characteristics unique to each country, I aim to provide solutions to help maintain a stable economic situation, preventing an overall economic split due to certain inequalities.

2. Issues in the U.S.

2.1. Tuition

With the rapid dissemination of information, students know that receiving a good education can lead to earning more money, so there is a growing desire for better education. However, with tuition fees rising yearly, some families need to borrow money to support their children's education, which also places immense pressure on the children, especially in U.S. families. They know that after graduation, they need to find a high-paying job to repay the money borrowed during their studies. The pressure from society and family weighs heavily on students, and they must make careful choices at every step.

According to data from 2022 to 2023, more than half of American college students will still be in debt after graduation, with an average of \$29,000 per person [3]. This is a large amount of money, and students may experience anxiety or other mental health issues as a result. They need to find good jobs in the future to pay off their debts [4]. Furthermore, even if students who have started working pay off their debts, there will still be an income gap between them and their classmates who entered the company simultaneously. At the time when some are still repaying their debts, others might have already earned enough money, some might choose to switch to more promising companies, and others may have already started their own projects. However, they can only continue working for the company, accumulating wealth, and it will take a few more years before they can start their next steps. This also creates an invisible gap in time and income.

2.2. Poverty gap

As the United States is a large immigrant country, there are differences in educational levels among different races. Among them, the graduation rates of Black or Hispanic individuals are lower than those of White individuals. One of the main reasons for this phenomenon is that the areas they live in are relatively economically disadvantaged, preventing students from gaining access to high-quality education or abundant educational resources. In a poverty rate report conducted in the U.S., 23.7% of Black individuals earn less than \$25,000 annually, 16% of Hispanics fall into this category, while only 11.9% of Whites do [5]. Therefore, it can be seen that due to economic reasons, the majority of Black individuals live in impoverished areas, which also contributes to their lower educational levels and graduation rates compared to other races. According to Figure 1, coupled with educational attainment, the proportion of Black individuals entering college is lower than that of Whites by about 10%, with only 22.1% of Blacks entering college, and even fewer obtaining advanced degrees, only 8.4% [5]. Since this data is from two years ago, there have still been

significant disparities in education levels among different races in recent years. This difference in educational attainment and living conditions further exacerbates inequality of opportunity, leading to an expansion of the income gap.

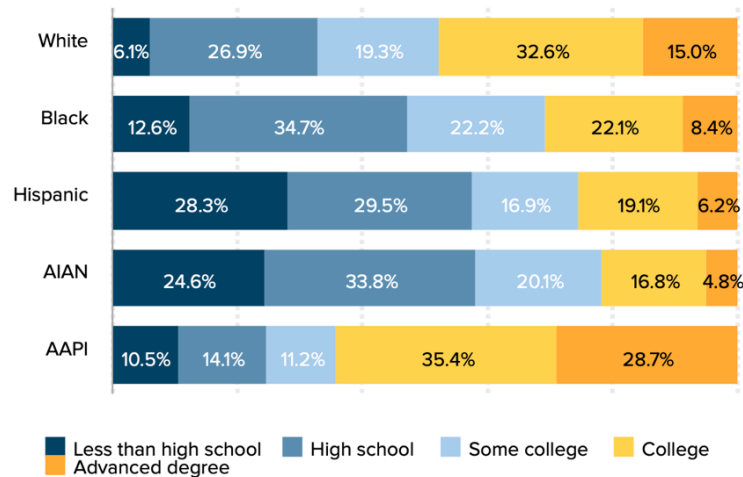


Figure 1. Academic degree distribution through races [5]

2.3. Solutions

In the United States, the primary solution to these problems is to reduce tuition fees, reduce the pressure on student loans, or provide educational aid. In addition, economic policies, such as raising the minimum wage, expanding income tax, making tax changes, and giving greater economic subsidies to poor areas to help local schools upgrade their teaching resources, are some choices to increase family income. Those moves can help students avoid suffering when choosing a school.

3. Issues in China

3.1. Social separation

The issue of urban-rural separation is an essential factor contributing to the inequality of educational opportunities in China. Due to the national focus on developing urban areas and allocating all good resources to major cities, rural development is neglected, leading to inadequate resource allocation and an imbalance in proportions. This results in a scarcity of educational resources in rural areas, limiting the educational resources available to students and making it difficult for them to realize their dreams.

A report from UNESCO in 2021 shows that 60% of rural schools lack reliable sanitation facilities, and 40% of schools have electricity issues. Additionally, regarding teachers, the poor living quality and geographical location of rural areas hinder the recruitment of teachers. The basic cultural level of teachers in rural areas is not high [6], which is fundamentally different from the basic cultural level of teachers in urban areas. At the same time, due to the limited number of teachers in rural areas, each teacher is responsible for more students, with the number of students they handle being twice that of urban teachers. This also leads to rural students not receiving more detailed guidance from teachers, ultimately resulting in students being unable to grasp knowledge well. Data shows that only 45% of rural students are proficient in mathematics. In contrast, 75% of urban students are skilled in mathematics [6]. This draws attention to educational inequality and

gaps between students in rural and urban areas. This difference cannot be blamed on kids, but can easily lead to future lifestyle and income differences among these children.

3.2. Household registration

Despite the educational disparities between urban and rural areas, another reason for the differences in the education levels of Chinese students is their household registration, which determines the medical benefits and housing rights available to individuals, but also limits students' choices of schools [7]. Students usually can only attend schools in the area where their household registration is located, except for private schools, which are generally expensive. One of the admission requirements for public schools is that the household registration must be in the same location. For example, residents with non-Beijing household registration cannot attend schools in Beijing, while schools in Beijing, which have more higher education resources, can provide students with more learning resources. However, non-Beijing residents are unable to attend these schools. Therefore, due to regional factors, household registration also creates an inequality in educational resources.

3.3. Solutions

Methods to eliminate educational disparities in China could include more government investment in rural education and providing special incentives for teachers. This would help attract more high-quality teachers to rural areas. Additionally, encouraging talent that emerges from rural areas to continue developing in their hometowns would stimulate the rural economy, and as rural areas prosper, the education system will gradually improve. Furthermore, appropriately adjusting household registration restrictions to allow students to attend schools in first-tier cities can provide better educational opportunities for non-local students. However, the household registration issue also needs careful and rigorous adjustments, as an excessive migration of people to other cities could lead to economic problems in the original cities, such as school closures and a loss of talent.

4. Issues in other country

When referencing some Nordic countries, it is found that their educational opportunities are often more equal. The reasons for this relative equality compared to the United States and China include: a greater prioritization of welfare and inclusivity; teachers' main task is to foster a love of learning in students, and competition among students is not encouraged, thus reducing systems such as exams and rankings; in addition, just as workers have relatively shorter working hours, students also have less study time, focusing on encouraging students to explore their own interests [8]. Furthermore, the economic stability and wealth per capita in Nordic countries allow for subsidies to the education sector, and many free schools eliminate the problem of educational inequality caused by family economic disparities. However, these advantages arise from the small size and low population of Nordic countries, which allows individual differences to be controlled. Their methods may not apply as well to larger countries like China and the United States, but they can still reference them to find policy adjustments suitable for their own circumstances, striving for more equal educational opportunities for students.

5. Comparison

The above content reveals distinct reasons for educational inequality in China and the United States. The problems in the U.S. mostly pertain to wealth, with rising tuition fees year by year and

insufficient school quality in impoverished areas leading to inconsistencies in the education received by students, ultimately resulting in varying individual incomes. Additionally, for China, aside from issues similar to those in impoverished areas of the U.S., there is also the problem of household registration, which significantly affects the high schools that students can choose to attend, thus creating disparities among students due to regional differences. Therefore, it can be observed that both countries face different issues that result in varied levels of education among students. Only by attempting to bridge the educational gaps can the overall national economy become more stable, reduce social issues, and increase per capita wealth.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, since the populations in both China and the U.S. are huge, educational inequality obviously leads to wage differences, people moving to big cities fighting for chances, making the countryside hard to develop, finally resulting in teachers' unwillingness to teach in impoverished areas, making it difficult for rural areas to develop, ultimately creating a vicious cycle that hampers rural development. If a country continues to face these educational opportunity inequalities, it will encounter bottlenecks in the future, especially in the current context of rapid global economic development, where education is an essential part of sustaining continued economic progress. Only when students can consistently receive high-quality education can the national economy continue to develop steadily. Maintaining high-quality education and reducing educational disparities among different regions of the country are essential for stabilizing talent output, allowing the country to develop its economy in a more stable manner. Besides, imitating some Nordic education policies, such as how to deal with exams and rankings, could help erase the inequality. As the gap narrows, the overall economy becomes more stable, society becomes more harmonious, and innovation will be enhanced, thereby increasing national competitiveness.

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