

Educational Inequality in the Context of China's Educational Expansion

Yipeng Liu^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Education, University of York, York, United Kingdom*

a. YL6517@york.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Since the conclusion of World War II, the topic of educational growth has garnered global interest, including in China. While the education expansion program has given several benefits and advantages to China, there are still many faults in the strategy. This paper examines the issue of educational inequality within the framework of educational growth in China. The paper examines educational inequity in China within the framework of educational growth, focusing on four key areas: educational inequity stemming from socio-economic factors, urban-rural disparities, insufficient secondary education, and gender disparities. After examining the aforementioned factors, this study asserts that the issue of educational inequality persists and proves to be particularly challenging to eradicate in certain areas, such as socio-economic disparity. Based on this, this paper puts forward the following suggestions. First, the government needs to increase spending on education. Second, attention should be paid to improving the balance of educational distribution. Finally, there is a need to close the gender gap in higher education. These guidelines are the best alternative to achieving equality in education.

Keywords: Educational Inequality, Educational Expansion, Teaching

1. Introduction

Educational expansion, denoting the enlargement of the education system and the augmentation of educational resources, reached its zenith in the twentieth century, particularly following World War II, when the allocation of resources for education continued to escalate [1]. The enrollment rates for upper secondary and tertiary education have experienced a substantial increase among the various forms of education. UNESCO reports that in the 21st century, around 85% of pupils in leading economies have attained secondary education [2]. Enrollment rates for postsecondary education have experienced substantial growth and expansion in the last 150 years. The data collected from 15 distinct emerging nations indicates that the average rate of new student enrollment has increased fourfold in each country [3]. Regarding China, the development of education has led to a remarkable surge in enrollment.

Consequently, as schooling has progressed, the quality of education and its available resources have significantly improved. Therefore, it seems that the educational reforms that broadened access to education had a highly advantageous impact on the general population. For instance, there was a rise in the availability of education and an enhancement in the position of women. Conversely, there is an opposing viewpoint that suggests that despite the rise in education levels, there is still a pervasive

presence of educational inequality in everyday experiences. Research has demonstrated that although there have been advancements in educational growth, the issue of educational unfairness persists and has not been eradicated.

This paper analyzed the educational disparities arising from various challenges that China's educational expansion is currently confronting, considering the contentious nature of the issue. This paper will comprehensively examine the issue of educational disparity in China across four distinct domains. It will also seek the most suitable remedies to mitigate and eradicate issues such as educational disparity.

2. Education Expansion In China

2.1. Trends in Education Expansion in China

China's higher education system had significant expansion in the late twentieth century, following international trends. The growth continued into the twenty-first century. As China's economy grows quickly, there is an increasing need for skilled workers. In today's competitive work market, having a higher education degree is essential for those seeking employment. This has led to a greater demand for more opportunities in higher education. To address the significant disparity between the amount of supply and demand, the Chinese government decided in 1998 to raise the gross enrolment ratio of university students to 15 percent by 2010 [4]. In 2020, the number of students enrolled in Chinese universities has exceeded 14 million [5]. The data further demonstrates the immense influence of China's rapid expansion of higher education. Most children are gaining access to college life through this highly desirable educational expansion.

2.2. Benefits of Education Expansion in China

The benefits of expanding education are apparent. Educational growth has undoubtedly supported the implementation of China's compulsory education policy. It has elevated the nation's educational standards and enhanced the quality of human resources for the country's modernization. This program has helped reduce the difficulties experienced by many rural and impoverished families, particularly those with children unable to go to school because of financial limitations. After almost twenty years of work, elementary school attendance has nearly reached universal levels, save for certain ethnic minorities and impoverished rural regions. In 2019, China had 125 million primary school students enrolled [6].

Another benefit of educational expansion is that it enhances diversity in the development of talent and human capital. Since 1998 the growth rate of specialized institutions outpaced that of undergraduate institutions by a factor of 2.15 due to the expansion of higher education [7]. This altered the conventional structure of higher education in China, where undergraduate education had held the most sway. Private and independent colleges and universities expanding quickly have helped create a more varied and complex higher education system. Talent development is now more focused on nurturing a variety of skills and abilities. Universities are graduating students with diverse talents and abilities, encompassing political, leadership, and various other professions and social sectors. This supports a cohesive structure for cultivating talent in China and effectively meets the demand for a diverse range of qualified individuals to drive economic and social advancement. Moreover, a larger number of students will enhance labor productivity and human capital, hence bolstering China's economic growth and raising GDP per capita.

3. Problems Behind Expansion

The proliferation of education has granted more children the opportunity to receive an education, but it has also resulted in unequal educational opportunities as a result of several social, economic, rural-urban, and gender-related issues. This paper aims to present empirical evidence highlighting the intricate nature of educational disparities resulting from the growth of education and identify the most suitable remedies to address these issues. This paper will analyze four distinct factors.

3.1. China's Economic and Social Factors Affect Educational Equity

The pace of growth in higher education in China has been remarkably swift. Hence, it is reasonable for the general public to infer that students belonging to underprivileged demographics can now avail themselves of the advantages brought about by this swift expansion, thereby fostering an equitable dissemination of educational prospects. But the truth is the influence of family background on students' performance in college admission exams is becoming more significant and perhaps essential [8]. Therefore, despite the substantial rise in educational options, the influence of family background remains crucial in determining access to higher education. The study findings on educational stratification indicate that the privileged social class tends to dominate the additional educational opportunities [9]. They possess the ability to cleverly navigate the limitations imposed by different systems, resulting in the government's efforts to promote educational fairness having minimal impact. Simultaneously, the privileged class maintains strict control over superior educational resources and environments. Hence, in the present era, education necessitates not only the student's aptitude but also the familial context supporting the student.

Students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, together with their familial and social contexts, encounter varying situations and disparities in schooling [10]. In many other nations, the broadening of education opportunities often leads to decreased college expenses and a more lenient selection process. Nevertheless, the situation in China is distinctly dissimilar. Students' eligibility for university admission is largely determined by their academic performance in high school and their results on the final college entrance exams. An intensified selection process increases the probability that children will require additional support and instruction, potentially impacting less privileged children negatively. Parents frequently register their children in remedial classes and tutoring programs to enhance their chances of gaining admission to prestigious colleges. In 2019, high-income households paid an average of 7,447 yuan per year on extracurricular tutoring, whilst low-income families spent only 209 yuan [11]. Children from wealthy households can enhance their exam coping skills through additional tuition outside of school, which further widens the achievement gap with children from low-income homes. Despite regulations aiming to sever the link between student enrollment and family wealth, investigations by Reardon indicate that the system has not succeeded in doing so [12]. Poor children typically have unequal access to school compared to richer pupils, mostly because they lack excellent educational resources like remedial education.

3.2. China's Urban-Rural Divide Affects Education Equity

The education disparity between urban and rural areas is the second prominent educational inequality issue in China, alongside the inequalities arising from economic and social standing. Primarily, the hukou system restricts the ability of rural students to pursue education in urban areas, so limiting their access to high-quality educational resources and impeding their freedom to enter cities [13]. Focus schools surpass other schools in terms of both facilities and the caliber of their professors and students. Nevertheless, the majority of focus schools are situated in metropolitan regions. However, as stated in the article, rural children face the obstacle of being unable to access urban areas for educational purposes, resulting in a significant disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts in terms of

school selection. Moreover, students are experiencing a disadvantage in the competition for future higher education opportunities. Hence, the hukou system is the primary factor contributing to the disparity in the availability of high-quality education between urban and rural regions.

Similarly, there is a huge imbalance in the allocation of educational resources between urban and rural areas. This widens the disparity in educational access between urban and rural pupils more than the disparity between students from various socio-economic backgrounds. The urban-rural education divide is primarily caused by the uneven allocation of resources, which predominantly favors urban areas, as acknowledged by the United Nations Development Programme [14]. Urban residents enjoy improved living conditions compared to rural residents. They also have better economic opportunities and social benefits, allowing them to invest more in their children's education. Urban students who get greater educational investment likely to obtain superior educational achievements and gain more knowledge compared to their rural peers. In rural areas, there is a shortage of full-time teachers for compulsory education, and these teachers tend to have lower levels of education compared to their metropolitan counterparts. Because teachers have diverse levels of expertise, pupils' educational experiences will vary greatly. Therefore, the distribution of educational resources is the primary element that influences the disparity between urban and rural education.

3.3. Shortage of Secondary Education in China

Education in China is expanding overall, although there exists a significant disparity between secondary and tertiary education. This phenomenon is widespread in multiple places throughout the country and is not restrictive. One significant challenge in the transition from primary to higher education is the lack of junior high schools for elementary school graduates and a paucity of senior high schools. The limited availability of middle schools, particularly those of high quality, has increased the rivalry among students. This has led to significant and unnoticed stress on the typical middle school student, who is required to study from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily, six to seven days a week, and attend additional tutoring sessions outside of regular school hours [15]. Students often dedicate approximately four to six hours daily to homework, and their free time outside of school is restricted even during summer and winter breaks. This problem has significantly threatened pupils' well-being and diminished their self-assurance.

In 2019, over 1.4 million middle school graduates in Henan Province, but only 740,000 opted to pursue the high school baccalaureate [16]. Approximately half of the graduating class had to abandon their pursuit of further education. These middle school pupils are unable to progress to high school and must either seek employment or wait for job chances at home when they reach the ages of 15-16. Due to the strict educational requirements in China's labor market, these students are typically limited to lower places on the social ladder to secure well-paying work prospects. A similar issue has emerged in Zhejiang province. In 2020, there will be 530,000 middle school graduates and high schools will only have an enrollment capacity of 280,000, which is less than half of the total number of graduates [16]. Thus, the shortage of secondary schools is undoubtedly one of the reasons preventing these children from entering higher education and is also responsible for causing young people to drop out of school prematurely to enter the world of work.

3.4. Gender Issues Affecting Educational Equity in China

At last, this paper investigates the subject of educational disparities based on gender inequalities. Increased education levels are frequently connected with a decline in the proportion of women in higher education [17]. In 2018, male college students in China outnumbered female college students by 1.2 times. Also, in higher education, female graduate students accounted for 48% of the total graduate students, indicating a considerable disparity [18]. Less than half of women are unable to

pursue advanced education or research. As a result, gender inequalities are contributing to the growing educational disparity between men and women.

Studies have indicated that numerous rural Chinese families perceive daughters as less competent or unworthy of investment [19]. Rural families emphasize investing in their sons' education over their daughters due to the belief that educating boys will lead to greater economic benefits and security in the future. These rural families treat their daughters differently, leading to a lack of educational opportunities from a young age or early dropout from school. For instance, managing the family's daily schedule or starting work early to provide a sufficient income for the family. The disparity in schooling resulting from gender inequality is severe and alarming. Many girls are deprived of their right to education and their opportunity to gain knowledge.

4. Recommendations on Educational Inequalities

Educational disparity has long been a persistent issue in China. Although the Chinese Government has made attempts to promote universal basic education, there is still a significant problem of educational disparity at the primary and middle school levels. Significant disparities in schooling persist at the senior high school level. This paper presents four distinct solutions to address the issue of educational inequality in China, based on a comprehensive literature review of the four dimensions of inequality mentioned earlier. Additionally, suggestions are provided to mitigate or eradicate the inequality in China's secondary and higher education.

4.1. Advice for China's Economic and Social Factors Affect Educational Equity

The challenge of addressing educational disparity, which stems from both economic and social disparities, is unquestionably one of the most complex among the various forms of educational inequalities. To address the disparity in education resulting from economic and social inequality, this article contends that the primary and paramount measure is for the government to enhance the allocation of resources to education. It should ensure that impoverished and rural families receive guaranteed funding for school expenses, while simultaneously enhancing the quality of education and providing scholarships and subsidies through the enhancement of education funds. Both rural and urban youngsters should be afforded equal opportunities from the beginning. Enhancements in finance necessitate the implementation of a range of social and educational programs [20]. These policies may involve a reconsideration of enrollment policies. Policy ideas and procedures for expanding the enrollment of disadvantaged populations can be derived from other countries, such as the United States. It is imperative to enhance the enrollment of marginalized populations and protect their access to education. The ramifications of disregarding equality of opportunity and granting entry to higher education based solely on familial wealth are substantial and enduring [21]. Hence, to foster balanced progress, it is imperative to enhance educational accessibility for marginalized demographics, as the disparity between them is crucial.

4.2. Advice for China's Urban-Rural Divide Affects Education Equity

The lack of financial resources dedicated to education is undoubtedly the main reason behind the difference in educational chances between urban and rural locations in China. Hence, this paper contends that the Government ought to augment its allocation of funds towards the upkeep of hazardous school structures in rural regions, to safeguard the well-being of rural kids while concurrently furnishing them with a conducive educational setting [22]. Furthermore, the government must strive for equitable remuneration for teachers in urban and rural areas, while also enhancing safeguards for the recruitment of instructors in rural schools. Enhanced pay can incentivize a greater

number of highly skilled instructors to be inclined toward joining the teaching workforce in rural regions.

Simultaneously, the government must prioritize the needs of exceptional pupils residing in rural regions. The increased prevalence of poverty among rural populations leads to a greater proportion of students in poverty compared to metropolitan settings [22]. An establishment of a method for sharing instructional facilities within the region is necessary. The issue of inadequate teaching facilities is resolved by collaboration among school districts in the area. For instance, students from various schools in the area can utilize shared amenities like indoor gymnasiums located within the territory by obtaining appropriate passes. Simultaneously, the establishment of a platform for teachers' teaching exchanges is of utmost importance. This platform enables rural instructors to gain exposure to the teaching concepts and current methodologies employed by urban teachers [23]. Through mutual exchanges, the teaching practices of rural teachers can be enhanced and refined.

4.3. Advice for Shortage of Secondary Education In China

This paper argues that the government should increase the number of high schools and junior high schools to address the lack of secondary education, which has resulted in educational inequalities. It is imperative to construct a facility to accommodate a greater number of students for educational purposes. Additional exclusive middle or high schools may be constructed, but, there is no assurance for children residing in rural areas or those facing financial hardship. Considering the exorbitant tuition costs associated with private secondary institutions. Additionally, it is worth contemplating the construction of additional private educational institutions, since this would also contribute to mitigating the scarcity of middle and high schools. These schools are situated within the county or local townships. They offer tuition costs that are comparatively more economical for farmers in comparison to public schools. Furthermore, these institutions have gained recognition for their strict adherence to rules and regulations, as well as their effective administration. Contrary to cities and prefectures that promote their academic achievements and extracurricular offerings, these schools strictly follow the national curriculum, comply with the requirements of the national college entrance exams, and aim to provide rural students with the highest opportunity to attend college. Therefore, it is unquestionably an excellent remedy for the deficiency in secondary education and facilitates greater access to higher education for more youngsters.

4.4. Advice for Gender Issues Affecting Educational Equity in China

This paper contends that addressing the problem of educational inequality caused by gender disparities requires a focus on access to higher education. It argues that efforts to reduce gender differences should commence with basic education, particularly by promoting fairness in this domain. This will ensure that both girls and boys have equal opportunities to receive an education [19]. Simultaneously, the government should augment its funding in fundamental education and enhance the pedagogical proficiency of primary and secondary school instructors, to mitigate the impact of familial elements on gender disparities in the academic achievement of primary and secondary school children. Regarding higher education, it is advisable for colleges and universities to enhance the acceptance rate of female students in underprivileged fields of study and augment the representation of women in their student body. Furthermore, it is imperative for the general population to actively promote the notion of gender equality and make concerted efforts to eradicate the practice of favoring male offspring over female offspring inside certain households. Regarding the training process in higher education, it is important to motivate female students to exert effort, enhance their attributes, and cultivate their abilities to find employment and engage in entrepreneurial activities. Ideally, women's capacity to perform in the job or other domains should be on par with that of males.

5. Conclusion

Over the past few decades, the focus on expanding and improving education has not given enough importance to ensuring equal opportunities for all students. Any consequence that promotes equality is only coincidental. Emerging data indicates that educational inequality is manifesting in multiple forms, including the digital gap, learning setbacks caused by pandemics, and sustainability concerns. The present difficult situation underscores the significance and immediacy of advocating for equity and inclusion. Chinese educational institutions and educators require substantial help to disrupt the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

This paper rigorously examines and confirms the various educational disparities that China is presently confronting, supported by substantial evidence collected from several situations. The expansion of education has yielded numerous advantages and endeavors to ensure universal access to education. However, it has also exposed disparities in education within the framework of this expansion, including those stemming from socioeconomic disparities, differences between urban and rural areas, the absence of secondary education, and gender-related concerns. The educational disparities in China are unquestionably the central focus of the country's future educational progress and the crucial factor in attaining educational fairness.

References

- [1] Hannum, E., Buchmann, C. (2003): *The consequences of global educational expansion*.
- [2] UNESCO, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/inequality-undermining-education-opportunities-millions-children>, last accessed 2024/2/15.
- [3] Jellenez, M., Bobek, V., Horvat, T. (2020): *Impact of education on sustainable economic development in emerging markets--The case of Namibia's tertiary education system and its economy*. *Sustainability* 12(21), 8814.
- [4] Knight, J. (2017): *China's expansion of higher education: The labor market consequences of a supply shock* 43, 127-141.
- [5] Zhang, G., Wu, J. (2020): *Performance evaluation and enrollment quota allocation for higher education institutions in China* 81, 101821.
- [6] Li, L. (2019): *Health and education reforms in rural China*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- [7] Zhang, M., Merchant, H. (2020): *A causal analysis of the role of institutions and organizational proficiencies on the innovation capability of Chinese SMEs*. *International Business Review* 29(2), 101638.
- [8] Li, J. (2020): *New directions of local higher education policy: Insights from China*. Springer Nature Singapore.
- [9] Yeung, W. J. J. (2014): *Higher education expansion and social stratification in China* 54-80.
- [10] Liu, G. X. Y. (2020): *Autonomy, social inequality, and support in Chinese urban and rural adolescents' reasoning about Chinese*. *College Entrance Examination* 37(5).
- [11] Wei, Y. (2023): *China education finance household survey report 2021*. China Education Finance 11.
- [12] Reardon, T. (2013): *Social learning and parameter uncertainty in irreversible investments: evidence from greenhouse adoption in northern China* 27, 104-120.
- [13] Hung, J. (2022): *Hukou system influencing the structural, institutional inequalities in China: The multifaceted disadvantages rural Hukou holders face*.
- [14] Simarro, R. M. (2017): *Inequality in China revisited. The effect of the functional distribution of income on urban top incomes, the urban-rural gap and the Gini index, 1978-2015* 42, 107-117.
- [15] Gong, Y., Zhang, X., Tian, D., Wang, D., Xiao, G. (2014): *Parental myopia, near work, hours of sleep and myopia in Chinese children*. *Health*
- [16] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_560/2022/, last accessed 2024/2/23.
- [17] Liu, Y. (2018): *Higher education, meritocracy and inequality in China*. Springer Nature Singapore.
- [18] Wu, L., Yan, K., Zhang, Y. (2020): *Higher education expansion and inequality in educational opportunities in China*. *Higher Education* 80, 549-570.
- [19] Liu, Y. (2022): *Gender inequality in higher education in China and solutions*. In *2021 International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2021)* 278-282.
- [20] Joo, Y. S. (2022): *What works in early childhood education programs? A meta-analysis of preschool enhancement programs* 31(1), 1-26.
- [21] Brown, P., Reay, D., Vincent, C. (Eds.). (2018): *Education and social mobility*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

- [22] Zhang, Y. (2021): *Analysis of the education inequality in China*.
- [23] Parker, F., Parker, B. J. (2019): *Education in the People's Republic of China past and present*. Taylor & Francis Group.