

Educational Equity in the Context of China's Economic Development: Implementation and Practice of Educational Policies

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Abstract: Educational equity has consistently ranked among the fundamental principles aspired to by human societies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization emphasizes that providing equal educational opportunities is a universally recognized and paramount ethical and social imperative within both society and the education system. Therefore, this paper assesses the influence of compulsory education and the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) on educational equity in the context of China. The paper explores the policies adopted by the Chinese government to ensure that economic disparities do not affect educational equity. The paper finds that the urban-rural divide creates significant barriers to education for rural students, who often do not have access to quality education, and that the household registration system significantly contributes to fostering inequality. The NCEE system, while designed to promote meritocracy, also contributes to educational inequality by favoring students from urban areas and those who can afford private tutoring. By analyzing China's "Double Reduction" policy, posits that attaining educational equity demands a multifaceted strategy. This entails equitable resource allocation, robust economic support, the promotion of differentiated education, and the fortification of the admission system. The paper contends that mitigating the excessive dependence on a single test score and incorporating diverse assessment methods, like comprehensive quality assessment, can facilitate a more holistic assessment of students' overall capabilities and potential. Consequently, this has the potential to reduce disparities in university admissions. The paper underscores that achieving educational equity hinges on the collective commitment and concerted efforts of the entire society.

Keywords: Compulsory education law, double reduction policy, household registration system, national college entrance examination, the urban-rural gap

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, China has achieved strong economic growth, but reforms and the economic market have not been effective in narrowing the gap in educational resources, which in turn has affected the universalization of education. To address this phenomenon, China enacted the Compulsory Education Law in 1986, a law that recognizes the right of all children in China to receive nine years of compulsory education, expanding the size of the educated population and reducing the

education gap through the mandatory nine-year education measure. On the other hand, China's National College Entrance Examination, which was restored in 1977, is widely recognized as the most important selection mechanism in China's education system and is widely regarded as having played a key role in addressing educational inequalities caused by economic issues. Often referred to as the "single wooden pole bridge", the NCEE is the main pathway to higher education in China, allowing millions of secondary school students to attend universities in metropolitan areas and potentially have a better life after college [1]. Unlike other countries that rely on standardized tests and other factors, such as high school GPA, extracurricular activities, and letters of recommendation, to determine college admissions, China employs a uniform national test as the sole determinant for university admissions. Consequently, there is a prevailing belief that this uniform testing system provides a level playing field for all test-takers, as all aspiring students appear to be equal in terms of preparedness and talent, both procedurally and substantively. To better promote the implementation of compulsory education and the NCEE, on 24 July 2021, the "Double Reduction" policy was released, aimed at reducing the curriculum burden in compulsory education, alleviating the financial strain on families, and improving access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students. This policy also helps control family education expenses and off-campus training efforts. It offers a comprehensive solution to challenges related to education volume, social inequalities, parental concerns, and high education costs [2]. Additionally, the "Double Reduction" policy emphasizes the role of schools in subject teaching and quality education, while reaffirming the state's responsibility in resource allocation and reducing market interventions in education [3]. Within this context, this study aims to shed light on the roles of compulsory education and the NCEE in promoting educational equality, while also scrutinizing the constraints encountered in their implementation. Additionally, the study will delve into the 'Double Reduction' policy, which is designed to link these two fundamental policies, ultimately offering a more comprehensive perspective on the subject.

2. Problem on Implementation Process

2.1. Problems in the Urban-Rural Gap

However, both policies have coincidentally encountered the same resistance--the urban-rural gap in the course of their implementation. At the compulsory education stage, the exogenous shock of demand for education has not been accompanied by a proportional increase in the supply of education, and due to the severe underfunding of basic education, compulsory education has not fully resolved the problem of inequality in educational resources between urban and rural areas and regions caused by economic inequality. While economically developed regions and cities have made primary and secondary schools universal in one step, implementing educational expansion in poorer rural areas remains a more difficult task. According to research, the proportion of rural students gaining university entrance is also much lower than that of urban students, and this gap seems to be widening, which suggests that China's NCEE system has not eliminated the problem of educational inequality [4]. The system is affected by the economic gap between urban and rural areas, a step that will directly affect university admissions under the NCEE. Owing to the substantial income disparity between urban and rural regions in China, there can be significant disparities in the educational opportunities available to students based on their geographical origin or family background. As an illustration, students hailing from urban households reap a multitude of advantages. These encompass access to superior schools, educators, textbooks, and educational resources. Furthermore, they benefit from stronger parental support and possess opportunities for private tutoring and college preparatory programs [5]. Rural children may be affected by the lack of teacher resources due to poor economic conditions [6]. Not only that, but the policy to award extra points also provides additional opportunities for students from high economic-status families to enter elite higher education, with

families from stable economic backgrounds being able to enter their children in science fairs and olympiads at the high school level. Students from poor families cannot afford these programs [4]. The content of the NCEE also clearly favors students from urban priorities. The NCEE is administered at the provincial level and the exams are designed by each province. Several teachers selected from key high schools in provincial capitals are responsible for designing the NCEE. The urban-biased content of the NCEE favors students from urban areas, especially those in provincial capitals. Universities set requirements for different scores for candidates from different provinces; thus, students from key provinces and cities such as Beijing and Shanghai may directly benefit from greater admission opportunities [4].

2.2. Problems with Household Registration System

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the findings are closely related to important current policy issues, such as the mobility of large numbers of mobile children. Mobility and education are seen as key means for the rural poor to escape from poverty and low income. As a result, migrant workers send their children to cities to provide them with higher levels of education [7]. Nonetheless, the Chinese household registration system, with its ability to allocate public resources and services based on an individual's formal residential status, which classifies all citizens as either rural or urban and legally binds them to their birthplace [8]. This has resulted in limitations on the rights of migrant children and their access to primary education in urban settings [9]. The education administrative system associated with the household registration system has been identified as a contributing factor to inequalities in education for migrant children since its implementation [3]. The downward distribution of education funds to the education system, coupled with the policy of proximity of the education system to the nearest school, has resulted in the children of the migrant population continuing to face several barriers to the unequal distribution of education resources in their current place of residence. Building upon the aforementioned points, China has implemented specific measures, primarily focusing on incorporating migrant children into local education development plans and budgets. This approach involves allocating public funds based on actual school enrollment and attendance to ensure that migrant children can exercise their legal right to receive "equal access to schooling". Nevertheless, there remain certain constraints in achieving the overarching national objective of enhancing the educational circumstances of migrant children.

2.3. Problems with Double Reduction Policy

Despite the recent reduction in academic pressure for students and families as a result of the Double Reduction policy, parents may still employ various means to aid their children, especially when their educational anxieties remain unaltered. Consequently, the policy's effectiveness in serving the public interest hinges, to a large extent, on the extent of parental collaboration. According to a survey, although the policy curbs the unregulated proliferation of extracurricular tutoring, such tutoring has instead taken on an underground nature, chiefly in the form of private tutoring. Many households have initiated the hiring of private tutors or live-in tutors under the guise of private tutoring, often accompanied by elevated fees. Within specific cohorts of highly educated parents, particularly among teachers, the trend of tutoring one another's children has intensified. Furthermore, some student "groups" have enlisted renowned educators for instruction. Over the past summer, there has been a considerable surge in the demand for university students offering tutoring services, with a majority of tutoring businesses witnessing a 50-100 percent rise compared to the previous year. The survey also revealed that 43 percent of educators affiliated with training institutions contemplated a potential transition to "private tutoring" in the future. As the after-school tutoring market undergoes a shift

from training institutions to private tutors, the audience is transitioning from the general populace to middle- and high-income families [10].

3. Reasons Analysis: Contributing to Policy Outcomes Below Expectations

3.1. Regional Disparity

China's education system exhibits significant regional disparities, with rapid development in higher education in the eastern regions, while the western regions lag [11]. This discrepancy results in noticeable variations in the allocation of educational resources by the government across different regions. Some areas have schools endowed with more abundant funding, teaching staff, and educational facilities, while others are relatively deprived. As a consequence, students in resource-abundant areas enjoy more educational opportunities, while those in resource-scarce regions face limitations. Impoverished areas struggle to attract and retain high-quality educational professionals, leading to a shortage of teaching staff and a subsequent impact on the quality of education. Moreover, schools in remote regions often lack essential resources such as appropriate teaching materials, laboratories, and libraries, thereby restricting students' learning opportunities [6]. To address the issue of regional inequality in China's higher education sector, the government should formulate long-term, region-specific educational development plans, with a particular focus on impoverished areas in the western regions. Such plans may include the establishment of dedicated funds for educational development in impoverished regions to ensure equitable distribution of educational resources, including funding, teaching staff, teaching materials, and facilities. Additionally, the government can introduce incentive measures to attract and retain high-quality educational professionals, such as offering rewards, career development opportunities, and training. Furthermore, implementing family financial support programs to assist economically disadvantaged families in covering their children's educational expenses, including tuition, teaching materials, and transportation costs, would alleviate their financial burdens.

3.2. The Disconnect between Locals and Migrant Workers

In 2013, the Shanghai Government implemented a new Population Residence Points System. Under this system, migrant children are required to furnish various documents for enrollment in the city's public schools, including temporary residence certificates, house ownership certificates, and evidence of parental employment, all of which are notoriously challenging for the majority of migrant populations engaged in precarious or seasonal employment [12]. Furthermore, these requirements vary for different programs, and migrant children encounter a strict quota system during the enrollment process. The prospect of changing one's household registration status remains a formidable challenge for most migrant laborers, who seldom have the opportunity to shift to a nearby metropolis to register their household or enroll their children in public schools [3]. One might anticipate that these issues would be resolved if the offspring of rural migrant laborers could indeed secure enrollment in urban public schools, as outlined by the system's articulated goals. Regrettably, this is often not the practice case. The public school system itself is marked by internal disparities. Even when migrant children successfully gain entry into public schools, they might face educational disparities compared to their local counterparts. Experiencing emotional distance between migrant workers and residents, as displayed by teachers, classmates, and urban parents, can hinder their educational progress. Moreover, certain school practices perpetuate these inequalities, such as the separation of migrant and urban children into different curricula, classrooms, and even school entrances, as observed in Shanghai [8]. To comprehensively address and ameliorate the situation, a multifaceted approach is required. Firstly, the simplification of school entry requirements is imperative to mitigate the entry barriers faced by migrant children. Secondly, there is a pressing need

to curtail internal disparities within educational institutions to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities. Within the context of urban public schools, it is essential to fortify education about local culture and society, thereby enabling migrant children to acquire a more profound understanding of the historical and traditional facets of their urban locales. Furthermore, the utilization of diversified teaching materials, encompassing narratives and resources that exemplify a wide array of cultures and backgrounds, serves as an instrumental mechanism for fostering the cultivation of respect for and comprehension of diversity, both within the migrant population and among their urban counterparts.

3.3. Economics

While aimed at alleviating the educational burden, the "Double Reduction" policy, during its implementation, will bolster the educational advantages already held by upper-middle-class families. This results in their children assuming a dominant position concerning school academic performance and test-taking skills. To put it differently, upper-middle-income families now become the focal market for the shift from external subject training institutions to private tutors, a shift that extends or heightens the academic edge of this privileged class. Even though profit-driven and utilitarian examinations further increase the financial and academic loads for most households, the widespread prevalence of external subject training does offer the majority the opportunity to partake in academic competitions and access competitive avenues. In contrast, the chance to engage in extracurricular training is increasingly tied to private tutoring, which is accompanied by a prohibitive cost, acting as an unseen barrier that excludes low- and middle-income households [10]. This phenomenon largely stems from the educational anxiety of parents, originating in the screening and assignment mechanisms of educational exams. To address these problems, the Chinese Government should reform and improve the national education examination system and reduce its reliance on a single examination result. Comprehensive quality assessment and multiple evaluation methods should be introduced to reduce educational inequality. In addition, policies should also focus on educational support for low- and middle-income families to ensure that they have access to equal educational opportunities. These reforms are vital for the "double reduction" policy to effectively fulfill its original purpose--alleviating the financial burden of education and improving equity in education.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article analyses China's household registration system and national college entrance examination policy to explore the policies adopted by the Government to ensure that economic disparities do not affect the equity of education. However, changing just one aspect of the policy has proven ineffective, as demonstrated by the current "Double Reduction" policy. To pursue the core value of equity in education, comprehensive measures are needed, including a balanced distribution of resources, comprehensive economic support, promotion of differentiated education, and optimization of the admission system. These measures require the concerted attention and efforts of the whole society before the goal of equity in education can be achieved. It is only through the joint efforts of the whole society that the equitable distribution of educational resources can be ensured so that everyone can enjoy fair educational opportunities.

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