

Promoting Sustainable Development in Education: Narratives, Challenges and Reflections on Educational Equity in China from a Media Perspective

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Abstract: Sustainable development in education is one of the goals promoted by United Nations in relation to human development. It is also a great challenge for most countries, including China. Achieving educational equity is one of the keys to the success of the sustainable development in education. Faced with the complex challenges of regional, urban-rural and inter-school disparities in education, China's central and local governments have been working in order to promote sustainable development in education and improve educational equity. A variety of solutions have been proposed to address inequities and achieve significant results. In the process of practice, some reflections on encountered and potential problems have also been made, accompanied by discussions.

Key words: sustainable development, educational equity, China, challenges and reflections, media perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Development is the eternal theme of human society and the key to achieving human happiness. In 2016, the United Nations officially launched the Agenda: Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, calling on all countries to make efforts to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals in the next 15 years. Among them, SDG 4 is “quality education”, which means, “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education”. In 2019, UNESCO's 40th session set an agenda: “Education for Sustainable Development: Towards Achieving the SDGS”. The agenda emphasizes sustainability in education as fundamental to quality education and a key enabler of all SDGS. In the short term, education in sustainability should enable everyone to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes needed for sustainable development. In the end, sustainable human development, which covers all aspects of human life, including culture, economy, science and

technology cannot be achieved without education. Educational equity is one of the keys to the success in the path to sustainable development in education.

The idea of educational equity has been around for thousands of years. It has always been one of the goals and ideals in the field of education in both China and the West. Confucius, a great thinker and educator in ancient China, proposed the concept of equitable education. He claimed that in education there should not be social classes. Students should be recruited regardless their wealth, age and restriction on ethnicity, region or country of origin. In ancient Greece, Plato's Ideal State, as depicted in *The Republic*, also included this vision of equity in education. Aristotle's idea of liberal education started the theoretical precedent of the western educational equity ideal. The Enlightenment thinkers in the 18th century endowed educational equity with the meaning of human rights, based on the idea of innate human rights. Modern Chinese educators such as Zhang Taiyan, Cai Yuanpei and Tao Xingzhi also put forward the ideas of educational equity to advocate common people education, public education and to promote rural education.

The practice of promoting educational equity has been a long-standing concern of the Chinese government and many other countries. While the media has focused on China's efforts to improve educational equity by increasing the quantity and quality of public education service provision, it has also been focusing on the issue of educational inequity in China.

NARRATIVES OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN CHINA

The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development formulated by the Chinese Government in 2021 proposed building a high-quality education system setting a direction for the future development of equitable public education services in China: from quality development to high-quality development. High-quality education includes at least the following two aspects. The first is to improve the quality of education based on educational equity. The second is the basic elimination of educational inequities between regions, urban and rural areas, and schools, especially the gap between western and eastern regions of China. This not only means that the allocation of educational resources should be

balanced, but also requires enhancing the adequacy and balance of educational system supply.

Over the decades, the Chinese government has continued to increase financial input in an effort to make China's education more equitable and high quality. Between 2016 and 2020 alone, the central government invested more than 600 billion yuan in compulsory education guarantee funds, including 103 billion yuan in meal subsidies funds arranged for the Nutrition Improvement Program, with nearly 38 million students enjoying meal subsidy policy in 2020. Taking 2018 data as a reference, China's overall preschool education participation level is well above the world average and close to the average level of high-income countries.

The World Bank has noted in a 2018 report that China has made tremendous progress in reducing poverty and providing universal access to education after decades of rapid economic growth. China has also made great achievements in educational equity. Compared with statistics of the year 2010 and 2020, released by China's Ministry of Education, educational equity has been significantly improved in terms of both quantity and quality over the last decade.

Education Levels	Indicators	2010	2020
Kindergarten	kindergartens	0.15 million	0.29 million
	students	29.77 million	48.18 million
Preschool education	gross enrollment rate	56.6%	85.2%
Compulsory education	enrollment	16.92 million	34.40 million
	students	99.41 million	156 million
	net enrollment rate	99.7%	99.96%
Junior high school	gross enrollment rate	100.10%	102.50%
High school	gross enrollment rate	82.5%	91.2%
Higher education	students	31.05 million	41.83 million
	gross enrollment rate	26.5%	54.4%
	colleges and universities	2723	3003
Graduate	enrollment	0.54 million	1.11 million
	students	1.54 million	3.14 million

Table 1: Some of the progress made in Chinese education from 2010 to 2020

From the data of financial investment and various basic indicators, China has indeed made great progress in educational equity, and some indicators are even close to the level of developed countries. However, the development of educational equity in China is far from reaching an equity and high-quality state due to historical reasons. The prominence of various inequities has caused great negative impacts on the development of education, which will have a far-reaching effects on equity and sustainable development of education in China. To promote equitable development of education and enhance the ability of sustainable development has become an urgent task for the vast central and western regions, cities, villages and many schools in China. There is still a long way to go.

THE CHALLENGES

Educational equity is a relative concept, and in different social systems, countries or histories, educational equity has its own characteristics and evaluation criteria in different times. At the present stage, some of China's educational equity issues belong to international common problems, and some belong to special problems determined by China's national conditions and the actual situation of educational development (Duan2015: 36). From a macroscopic perspective, the challenges facing educational equity in China mainly originate from regional, urban-rural, and inter-school differences.

1. Regional differences

At the present stage, there are indeed significant regional differences in education in China. Educational resources are mainly concentrated in national and regional urban clusters, and the problem of inequity is very serious. The educational resources and educational level of the provinces to the east of the Hu Line¹ are significantly higher than the national average level, while the provinces northwest of this line have very scarce educational resources and significantly lower teaching level than those in the east. The resources of preschool, primary school, middle school, vocational and higher education in the east of the line respectively accounted for 95.99%, 94.14%, 94.38%, 95.22% and 96.61% of the total resources of the country. The problem of non-equalization of education

equity between East-Central-West is very serious. This has brought about a series of educational inequity problems.

In recent years, a large number of residents from the central and western regions have migrated to the relatively developed eastern regions, which has also brought serious problems of insufficient supply and inequity of public education services. These problems are highlighted in the compulsory education of the children of the migrant population. The rural population has moved into the cities in large numbers, however, because of many conditions such as household economy, environment, tight school resources, and educational capacity, it is difficult for the children of urban migrant workers to enroll in school and other problems, and some school-age students have to return to their hometowns for schooling. Another issue of great concern is the allocation of higher education places, which determines the fate of many young people. China has been facing the problem of unbalanced allocation of places across provinces, and the resulting educational inequality has been one of the focal points of the debate, and has been widely criticized.

The distribution of university resources in China is also uneven. Among the 116 best universities, 26 are located in Beijing, accounting for 22% of the total. The eastern region has 88, which is 75.9 percent of the total. In contrast, Henan, Shanxi, Hainan, Jiangxi, Guizhou, Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Ningxia and Xizang provinces in the central and western regions have only one each. At present, China's college entrance exams are mainly based on the policy of different provinces or regions setting their own questions, which was originally intended to accommodate cultural differences between regions. However, it is unfair to candidates from provinces with large population bases and insufficient higher education resources, which is the main reason for the phenomenon of 'college entrance examination migration'. Under the territorial management system, the more economically underdeveloped the region is, the less public investment in education is; the more backward the educational development is, the lower the overall level of education is.

In order to narrow regional disparities, China's education investment has gradually begun to shift significantly to the central and western regions, with the aim of redistributing resources through funding and cultural compensation, changing the living conditions of poor families in the central and western regions, and promoting the mobility of the poor

to the upper strata of society. However, even with the help of the central government's policies and funds, local financial investment in education is still inadequate in the regions where the problem of educational equity is more serious. These regions rely too much on external 'blood transfusion' and lack a strong 'blood production' function.

2. Urban and rural differences

Since the 1980s, large-scale rural-urban migration has become an important feature in China, totaling more than 600 million by 2020. The migration of farmers to the cities is not just due to economic income and opportunities for development. The huge difference in education services between urban and rural areas is also an important reason. In recent years, although urban and rural education has gradually converged in terms of school hardware construction standards, staffing requirements and benchmark per pupil funding quotas, regional financial differences have led to a widening gap in education funding between rich and poor regions in China. This is partly due to the fiscal decentralization policy implemented since 1994.

On the one hand, population migration, especially the migration of resource-rich families to developed regions, further exacerbates the imbalance between urban and rural development, disrupts the structure of social, family and educational systems in rural areas, and leads to a widening urban-rural gap in education. The constant influx of people into cities has put the limited educational resources of cities under great pressure, and cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen have already experienced a fierce conflict between the scarcity of educational resources and the expansion of educational population. On the other hand, rural schools in China face more serious educational equity issues, such as insufficient teachers, inadequate resources, incomplete curriculum, bias, and inadequate family support. The migration of the population of excellent teacher resources has resulted in a general lack of access to qualified teachers for rural students. Rural areas have the lowest percentage of teachers with advanced degrees, and severe shortages of music, art, science and English teachers. Compared to urban students, Chinese rural students receive a poorer education, as evidenced by poor student performance, high dropout rates, and low college acceptance rates.

Two structural factors are constraining the development of education in rural areas: First, in terms of teachers. Since urban residents enjoy more and better public resources and a richer spiritual and cultural life, even if the hardware standards for teaching in urban and rural areas reach the same level, with the same salary scale, quality teachers still prefer to teach in urban schools. How to attract good teachers to take root in rural areas has always been a challenge. Second, the family and social support system. Since most young and middle-aged laborers in rural areas go to cities to earn a living, the elderly and children become the left-behind group in rural areas, so rural students cannot get the emotional care, psychological support, intellectual development and cultural inculcation they deserve, which makes the problem of urban-rural education gap more prominent.

Education in many rural areas is still at the stage of test-based education that tends to be intellectual. A significant number of rural schools are unable to offer quality education courses due to the lack of teachers and equipment for music, physical education, and aesthetic education. Even if some schools do offer relevant courses, these courses are not given enough attention. In this situation, quality education becomes a major shortcoming among the other problems of rural education. Currently, the rapid movement of population from rural to urban areas has also led to the problem of large class sizes in urban education, and to the phenomenon of 'hollowing out' in rural education. Urban overcrowding has become a real problem in coordinating the integrated development of urban and rural education. The gap between urban and rural education has become an continually objective status of the new era.

3. Inter-school differences

The problem of inter-school inequity is very prominent in cities in China. The quality and conditions of different schools vary greatly, even within the same city. Although the Chinese government has taken some measures to narrow the gap between schools, such as avoiding inequitable government resource allocation and regional monopolization of educational resources by abolishing the priority school system, the inequality orientation still exists. In order to achieve better performance in education, some local governments concentrate limited high-quality educational resources in one or several schools, resulting in some schools

gathering high-quality educational resources, such as students, funds, teachers, facilities, etc., coupled with profound campus culture, such schools will form a strong brand-name effect. As a result, high-quality schools can still get more preferential policies and social support, and can even raise more funds for school development beyond government grants through more channels, which enlarges the implicit gap in inter-school education. However, ordinary schools are in a vicious circle of limited development due to the lack of excellent teachers, poor learning atmosphere and poor students.

Because of the wide disparity in the conditions and educational standards between quality schools and ordinary schools, parents are using unconventional means to get their children into better schools by, for example, buying a house to enter the school district, which also leads to educational inequity in fact. As a result, most local governments have reformed the system of school districts, which are designated by the government to correspond to a public school, regardless of the quality of the school, and students living in the school district must attend if they are enrolled. However, in the case of unequal educational resources between schools, families with better economic conditions can still bypass the policy constraints by purchasing school district housing. Although education administrative departments have repeatedly made new regulations to try to stop 'school choice' practice, no substantial improvement has been achieved.

In response to the differences, the central and local governments have provided tremendous support in terms of financial resources, human resources and technology to the underdeveloped regions in terms of funding input, resource allocation and sharing systems. On the one hand, by strengthening the infrastructure, improving, for instance the educational level of the areas and schools with weak educational resources. More than 99.9 percent of schools have an export bandwidth of 100 megabits. About three-quarters of schools have wireless Internet coverage. 99.5 percent of primary and secondary schools have multimedia classrooms. Education departments have built and integrated various public education resources service platforms and support systems at all levels. The functions of learning, teaching, school governance and educational innovation are integrated, so that students in central and western regions and rural schools can also obtain the same teaching

resources as eastern and urban students. Through the implementation of the teacher exchange and rotation system, the flow of excellent backbone teachers to rural and weak schools is being promoted; the "special post program", publicly funded teacher training students, retired teaching support and other channels have also replenished a large number of high-quality teachers for the central and western rural areas. On the other hand, in terms of policy guarantee and supervision, many solutions oriented to educational equity have been introduced. For example, information such as admission procedures and operational procedures are published online to further enhance the transparency of the admissions process. In order to realize the docking of the students with the school education and prevent the occurrence of dropping out, the school information management system is used to provide convenience for the children with the school transfer and monitor the flow situation through the school registration system. A number of similar approaches have been used to reduce inequities in education.

REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN CHINA

In addition to finding corresponding countermeasures to improve educational inequity from the macro perspective, the government and scholars have also conducted in-depth researches and reflections on the influence of factors such as market, family and educational equity.

1. Influence of educational marketization

With the development of China's market economy, the market mechanism has also been used in the field of education, which has a great impact on educational equity. On the one hand, the addition of market mechanism improves the efficiency of schools, and the market provides more choices for promoting educational equity. Diversified services and multiple channels can promote the competition between schools and the effective management in the internal management, expand the independent choice of educated individuals, and attract a variety of private capital into the field of education, greatly easing the burden of state funds. On the other hand, the market mechanism produces a new social relationship with competition, choice, and decentralization as the main content. Under the

action of market mechanism, educational resources are scarce, which leads to the unequal competitive position between advantaged and disadvantaged groups in the competition for educational resources. The market shows preference for the advantaged groups, which will widen the gap between groups and lead to the strengthening of social stratification. Moreover, the disadvantaged groups caused by external reasons such as social and geographical environment should be excluded from the educational resources dominated by the market mechanism, to further expand the problem of educational inequity.

2. Influence of the family

The educational opportunities provided by families are also crucial to the realization of educational equity. Children's education is provided and guaranteed by their parents. Family background factors represented by parents' educational level and occupational status have a strong influence on children's education. When making the decision of offspring education, the differences of the expected rate of return on education, educational preferences and resource constraints of different individual families affect the educational opportunities provided by families, and then affect the educational equity.

In China, an individual's educational level is connected with social mobility and social class, thus directly stimulating the attention of families to the education of their children. The social class and place of residence of the family have significant influence on the higher education opportunities of the children. The social class and place of residence of the family have significant influence on the higher education opportunities of the children. When parents are more educated, their children have a better chance of getting quality higher education. Better educated parents have higher expectations of expected return on education and are more likely to provide more financial support and participate in their children's educational activities to promote their children's academic achievement. Therefore, the excessive influence and intervention of families on children's education also hinder the realization of the goal of educational equity. China's longstanding one-child policy is also an important reason why families pay more attention to the education of their only child. One-child families are more willing to exhaust their resources to obtain quality

education services for their children. Most of the existing studies believe that the only child can get more educational resources under the same conditions. Therefore, the governments and media are now focusing on disadvantaged groups and weakening the influence of family capital on the allocation of educational resources. Through "compensatory education" such as preschools, after-school classes, and summer classes, different educational programs are designed for families from disadvantaged groups to reduce learning difficulties, enhance learning abilities, and promote educational equity. By giving play to the government's leading role in the supply of public educational resources in terms of quantity, structure and quality, the efficiency and level of public educational resources can be improved.

3. Influence of informatization

In recent years, in order to change the traditional mode of teaching management and the allocation of educational resources, China's educational informatization policies and measures have made great achievements. However, in the pursuit of formal and substantive equity in education, it also reflects the limitations and even some problems of informatization. Therefore, it has aroused media to think about the theoretical and practical aspects of "the action of educational informatization and educational equity", "implementation effect", "ethical and technical safety issues" and so on.

According to a report released by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the spread of the Internet has not narrowed the educational gap between individuals. Especially for students from disadvantaged families, the unequal access to technological resources further widens the gap in educational achievement and digital ability between urban and rural students, influenced by the economic, social and cultural status of families and their preference for Internet use. Moreover, the "digital divide" may also cause some issues such as data privacy leakage and technical and educational ethics.

Notes

¹ Chinese geographer Hu Huanyong (1901-1998) proposed a line of contrast in 1935 to divide the population density in China. To some extent, it also becomes the dividing line of urbanization level.

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