

Inequality in Senior High School Education in China: Key School System

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Abstract

The compulsory education law guarantees relatively equal rights for primary and middle school children in China to receive education yet retains the key high school system that undermines educational equality. This paper investigates the benefits and challenges of the system considering Chinese circumstance. The analysis shows the current efforts that have been made to reduce the impact of key schools have not achieved satisfactory effects. Finally, this paper puts forward some methods that require long-term efforts, mainly including the central government should strengthen the supervision of education investment; change the way to measure the quality of public schools; change the public attitude towards education and share educational resources as possible.

Keywords

Key school system; Inequality; Senior high school education.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has implemented policies that provide nine years of compulsory education, offered free by the state. The policy aims to balance development and narrow the performance gap between different regions, between urban and rural areas, and between individual schools, thereby safeguarding the educational rights and opportunities of children. Compulsory school education has been an essential step toward greater educational equality. Equality of access to higher education is now attracting attention, and many measures are being put in place to facilitate access for more vulnerable groups. However, the equity of high school education, the gap between compulsory education and higher education, has not yet received the required attention, neither in terms of theoretical research nor policy-making. Addressing the problem of access to quality high school education is a prerequisite for dealing with the issue of fair access to higher education. As such, high school is becoming a bottleneck that undermines the equality of China's education system as a whole.

This essay will take a deeper look at the inequality of access to quality education at the senior high school level in China, focusing primarily on the significant differences between individual schools. It will begin with the introduction of the issue, describing its historical development and background; and then talk about its current problems and challenges in detail, explaining the rationale why it is a significant issue at present; what follows are the current responses and finally ends up with the possible recommended forward ways.

2. The Background and History of Key School System in China

Initially, this concept embraces three levels of education: primary school, junior high school, and senior high school. However, when the compulsory education law was promulgated in 1986, the Ministry of education made regulation of canceling key primary schools and junior high schools, only keeping key senior high schools. It is due to the consideration that running key schools in the stage of compulsory education is contrary to the principle of "education

equality". At this time, the state tries to change from the unbalanced development strategy of priority in the early high school education to the balanced development as Wu (2010) indicated. In particular, after entering the 1990s, the school selection competition around key senior high schools has become increasingly fierce, and the impact on education equity has become increasingly pernicious. Relevant departments have begun to gradually weaken the key school system and even explicitly proposed not to use it.

3. The Rationale of the Importance of Key School System from the Perspective of Educational Equality

Many observers firmly believe that the key school system was an effective approach for using limited educational resources to promote the improvement of school conditions and the quality of education in some primary and secondary schools and for accelerating the cultivation of elite talents. It helped to meet the national and social demand for high-quality talent. However, once key schools had fulfilled their specific mission, it was not simple to decouple the ideas and institutions from Chinese education. Even though the key school system and the allocation of public education resources for key schools have been canceled at the national level, many key schools continue to thrive with local support.

Today, key schools continue in a different guise as they have become entangled with various economic and social interests, especially at the local government level. School enrolment rate is a direct measure of the achievement of school leaders and local education authorities. The survival of certain schools has also become an issue for vested interest groups, such as teachers who receive better wages and more prestige from being associated with these schools. Some key schools have even become "embedded" in the local economic development. For example, often it is possible to see a correlation between the presence of a key school and a rise of house prices. Driven by local interests, local governments are often still inclined to focus educational resources on key schools. Therefore, even while compulsory education laws have technically eliminated key schools, it is difficult to fundamentally change the existing interest patterns around key schools. As long as society as a whole still sees places value on "elite education", government policy to remove key schools will struggle to be effective (Tang, 2011).

More importantly, those that gain social advantage through education are not only the beneficiaries of this priority education strategy, the implementers and executors of the strategy also had a lot to gain. It is precisely because of this that, despite central government efforts to weaken the key school system, it cannot change local government investment in these key schools. To some extent, for members of the public, key schools have not only continued but become more prominent as competition for places at these schools increases. Parents who have seen the benefits associated with attending a key school place an extremely high value on gaining access to these schools for their children. The emphasis that they place on getting their children into good schools further boosts the key school system. Thus, it can also be said that as a government policy the key school system actively widened the education and attainment gap between free compulsory schools and quality key schools, resulting in the inequality of education seen in China today.

Before the 1990s, the leading qualitative analysis of the key middle school system in China was that it was the result of a government will to modernize. However, the key high school system seems to be one less driven by the state, and more driven by society. The government supported the key middle school system as part of a lofty mission to modernize China. The key high school system is supported by a society that believes that education is the key to better opportunities and greater social status. For the students and parents "left behind", who are unable to enter key middle schools, the key school system not only empties the other schools of high-quality students, but also monopolizes government resources and absorbs the best teachers. This

results in the marginalization and hollowing-out of the general middle schools. For those students and their parents who have access to key middle schools, the existence of key middle school system provides them with an opportunity to receive quality education, and also opens doors that will enable them to establish themselves among the social elite.

As well as creating winners, the key school system has produced a large number of relative losers, showing the failure of this system as a tool for educational equality (Guo, 2019). When ranking criteria are strictly applied, those few in the top percentile receive significant benefits while the rest, the vast majority, lose out. When compared with the selected elite, most students become the losers, so it could be said that the key school system produces more loser than winners. While it is relatively easy to measure the contribution of the “winners” to society, it is relatively difficult to quantify the “cost” of producing a large group of losers. The existence of key schools creates the idea that other schools are for failures and have in some way “lost” the competition, which does serious damage to the educational ecology of the country. In a society and system that prioritizes high academic performance, key school have a captive market. The existence of key schools in turn reinforces the importance placed on academic performance and the need to compete for the best educational resources. Key schools not only attract the best students, but also the best teachers. Thus, it can be said that key schools have a kind of predatory existence which destroys the country’s educational ecology as a whole (Yang, 2005). Key senior high schools in China take level of academic achievement as the threshold of entrance. Although this seems like a fair measure, compared with other factors such as market mechanism and family economic status, it too encourages inequality. Reaching the required academic achievement depends greatly on access to education in the preceding years, which is highly influence by family status and economic resources. As a result, the system provides hope for lower classes that they have the potential to gain access to this resource, but the reality is much more challenging. In reality, those that don’t gain access to these key schools not only miss out on opportunities, but are also disadvantaged as resources are funneled away from their schools. In a way, key schools are both a bridge and a barrier. Thus, status and wealth are still intimately connected with educational opportunity.

4. Discussion: Possible Ways Forward

The above analysis has revealed a variety of phenomena that have resulted in key schools continuing to thrive despite the withdrawal of central government support. Most of these relate to continuing support for key schools by local governments, parents and teachers. Based on this analysis, I have identified three potential courses of action that could help create a more equitable education system. First, in order to work to unravel the system of key schools, the government needs to do more than just pass policy, but also work on changing popular opinion around key schools, and educational achievement more generally. Secondly, the government should also look at positive discrimination actions that look to positively benefit those that have been unfairly disadvantaged by the existence of the key school system. Finally, a teacher rotation system that requires the rotation of teachers between different schools would also help alleviate issues, as would invest in the training of more excellent teachers.

While the central government has taken action to unravel the key school system, there is more that can be done to promote fair access to education. First, the government could proactively work to reduce the current education gap by investing in vulnerable groups that have been disadvantaged by the key school system. The government could take compulsory measures to improve school resources in the most disadvantaged areas. This would have two effects: the first, to boost schools in traditional weak areas and improve their educational foundation; the second is to compensate vulnerable individuals, with a weak economic, social or family background. Governments need to divert the flow of investment and support from the

education advantage group to the education disadvantage group. While this measure may appear unfair on the surface, as it gives different groups different treatment, it is a reactive response designed to reduce the gap between different groups. Consequently, it is essentially fair.

Additionally, the state should increase the investment in education generally, in order to provide sufficient educational resources, avoiding limited resources being monopolized by key schools. Based on the data collected by China Education Yearbook Editorial Committee (2012), in 2012, national expenditure on education in China just reached 4% of GDP, while the world average is 4.9%, making it significantly below the world average. When the educational resources are scarce, individuals with greater social and economic power have better resources to procure high-quality education for their children. For more vulnerable groups, as resources are squeezed, access to high-quality education becomes increasingly difficult, resulting in unfair access to education. A complete system for the use and supervision of education funds should be built, in order to ensure that education funds are used fairly, and resolutely prevent education funds from being exploited and used for other purposes.

But in addition to policy, the government should also work to change public ideas around education, and promote the idea that there is more than one method to secure educational achievement. Sometimes, in order to reflect their own educational achievements, some leading cadres concentrate on the development of key schools with educational resources within their jurisdiction, reinforcing the quality of their own education. This not only reinforces the idea of key schools, but also reinforces the idea that high test marks are the most important factor in education, and ignores the all-round healthy development of students. If the government introduced measures other than enrolment rate and test scores as measures of good schools, a more diverse range of schools could have the opportunity to excel and win support.

Considering the huge gap between key schools and non-key schools in China has a long history, it will take time for this issue to be solved, but appropriate resourcing of all schools in the first necessary step. Key schools have absorbed a large number of high-quality education resources in their areas, and as a result have made brilliant achievements in education and teaching. These achievements are based on the premise of sacrificing the development of surrounding schools, which seriously undermines education equity between schools. Therefore, key schools have the responsibility and obligation to back feed the weaker schools in their areas, and share their own successful experience, valuable syllabus and exam papers. In their way, existing key schools can help drive the common progress of surrounding schools, narrow the gap between schools, and let more students receive fair and high-quality education.

In addition, giving weaker schools better access to high-quality teachers is an important means to promote education equity. Excellent teachers are the main component of high-quality education resources, and experienced teachers are at the core of the competitiveness of key schools. To achieve this, firstly, a teacher rotation system could be implemented, ensuring that talented and experienced teachers spend some time in non-key schools. At the same time, a sound correction mechanism and evaluation mechanism are also required, to promote the implementation of the rotation system and narrow the gap between schools. The flow of teachers cannot be fully dictated by the supply and demand of the market, and the government cannot allocate teachers with the utilitarian view of improving school enrolment rates. Other measures of success need to be introduced. To improve education equity, more excellent teachers shall be trained to narrow the gap between teachers at different schools. Specific measures that could help with the recruitment and training and more quality teachers include improving the social status and welfare of teachers, strengthening the training of normal colleges, and establishing teacher training institutions.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper discusses the background to the creation of the key senior high school system in China and analyses both the benefits and the problems that have been the result of the system. While several approaches have been tried to reduce the influence of key schools and encourage public confidence in free compulsory schools, to date these efforts have been largely ineffectual. This paper suggests several potential approaches to help solve the problem. First, it advocates for closer oversight of educational investment by the central government in order to limit the influence of the vested interests of local governments. Areas that have been unfairly drained of educational resources in the past due to the existence of key schools should receive preferential treatment as part of an effort to close the gap between schools.

Second, central government oversight should include direct investment, and also the assignment of teachers. Rotating teachers between schools could help ensure that experienced teachers also work within the compulsory system. This work should be combined with additional investment in education, as China currently spends a lower percentage of GDP on education than most countries.

Finally, the government should work to change public attitudes towards education. This will require changing the way that the quality of schools is measured, which should no longer be completely focussed on enrolment rates, or even exam results. Quality of life and other types of educational achievement should also be given appropriate weight.

The idea of key schools is deeply embedded in the Chinese social psyche, and any efforts to unravel this will need to be far-reaching. Whatever responses are chosen, this historic approach will take time to unravel.

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