

What Barriers Does China's System of Education Create to Social Mobility?

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Abstract

This paper analyses the barriers to social mobility created by China's education system from the perspectives of China's education history and current situation, education purpose and activities, urban-rural education gap, family economic and cultural capital, and the possibility of social mobility, and puts forward some thoughts on improving the possibility of social mobility from the perspective of education.

Keywords: social mobility, exam-oriented education, barriers, gap

1. Introduction

Education has long been recognized as an important mechanism for promoting social mobility. Through education, students can acquire knowledge and many resources in higher education, so as to obtain a better career, that is, have a rich educational return, and then enter a higher class. Thus, it can be taken as a basic tenet that when educational systems and institutions are more equitable, students from a less privileged or influential background may have more opportunities and are more likely to achieve upward social mobility. But when the education system is not so fair, a family's economic level and status is liable be passed on to the next generation, thus a social phenomenon of class solidification. In this case, such a system can be viewed as a mechanism and means to consolidate class inequality, because students with wealthy family backgrounds can access greater educational resources and consolidate the social norms and behaviour patterns of a higher or dominant class, which also actively excludes most of those already excluded from that class.

China's education system mainly consists of four sectors, namely basic education, vocational and technical education, higher education as in a college or university sector, and adult education as in ongoing educational provision for those who have largely left the education sector. In basic education, the nine-year compulsory education is to achieve the universalization of education in the whole country, and the ensuing senior high school entrance examination will distinguish those entering high school basic education or vocational and technical education. After three years in high school, the Gaokao determines whether a student can continue into general higher education. As a national examination system, the college entrance examination is considered to give every student a fair chance because as long as you work hard, only the score of the college entrance examination will decide your final destination, which is directly linked to social mobility. In addition, the higher the score the greater the opportunity, to enter the top-ranked universities which are considered to have better quality resources and reputation and are also likely to give students a competitive advantage in gaining subsequent employment. Chen et al. (2019) found through an empirical analysis of the China General Social Survey from 2008 to 2015 that education level has a significant impact on the intergenerational mobility of social classes, that an increase in an individual's level of education facilitates intergenerational upward mobility and inhibits intergenerational downward mobility of his or her social class.

On the other hand, however, the official education system in China seems increasingly difficult to perform its

expected function. “Chicken baby” is one of the top ten online buzzwords in China in 2021. It refers to parents who “give chicken blood” for their children. In order for their children to get good grades especially in the Gaokao, parents with expendable income or capital can arrange various extracurricular tutoring and activities for their children. Such a social phenomenon and the anxiety manifested behind it are especially prominent in middle-class families (Tang, 2021). In the context of social competition, all families have educational expectations for their children, and families of different classes have different resources for their children. In the overall education system, students from families with high economic levels can better adapt to or even ‘play’ the current educational system through enhanced cramming and learning exam tactics. They are also more likely to succeed in the end. From this perspective, education has become, despite or even because of the ‘good intentions’ of a universal system of education, a means for class solidification that discourages or blocks social mobility for those not so privileged.

Then, what kind of obstacles does China’s education system cause to social mobility? This essay will first briefly introduce the history and current situation of China’s education system, and then mainly focus on the urban-rural gap at the social level, economic capital and cultural capital at the family level, and the purpose and activities of education itself to discuss the impact of education on social mobility, and finally, on this basis, discuss the possibility of enhancing social mobility through education in contemporary Chinese society.

2. History and Current Situation of the Education System

Before China’s reform and opening up, the education system experienced many setbacks and changes, and higher education was not extensively developed. With the reform and opening up, university enrollment has resumed and entered a normal track. However, in the 20 years before the expansion of college enrollment in 1999, the proportion of students admitted to college was very low. During this period, Chinese education experienced a transition from typical elite education to mass education. In the context of rural population moving into cities and increased urbanization, education and the urban-rural household registration system are combined, and the university entrance examination provides a channel for rural household registration students to transfer from an agricultural household registration to non-agricultural household registration (Chen & Dong, 2020). Around 2000, the history of Chinese education has experienced unprecedented changes. First, the expansion of college enrollment in 1999 gave more young people the opportunity to go to college (Bai, 2016). After the resumption of the college entrance examination, the admission rate was 5% in 1977 and 34% in 1998. The enrollment expansion in 1999 suddenly raised the admission rate to 55%, which means that for the first time in China’s thousands of years of history, more than half of candidates had the opportunity to receive higher education. Secondly, China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 promoted China’s technological progress and industrial upgrading and also expanded the demand for higher education talents. In response to the needs of economic restructuring, the admission rate for the college entrance examination has continued to rise, reaching 81% in 2018 (Ministry of Education Development Planning Division, 2020).

However, around 2010, there were more voices being raised in the discussion of class solidification. “Impoverished families can hardly nurture rich sons” was on the list of hot words in education in 2011. Li (2014) found that the media paid more and more attention to the issue of educational inequity, reflecting the public’s growing perception and dissatisfaction with unequal educational opportunities. The Chinese people’s focus on social inequity has gradually expanded from unequal outcomes (such as income disparity) to unequal opportunities (such as unequal employment opportunities). Unequal educational opportunities are even considered to be the root cause of a series of subsequent inequalities, such as the urban-rural income gap. Until today, the uneven distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas and between different regions is still a very hot topic. Large cities tend to concentrate the best resources, while many rural students in remote areas choose to drop out of school to work after completing nine years of compulsory education. People of the same age in different regions often face completely different fates, which also highlights the current difficulties of class mobility and exposes a built-in inequality to the system itself.

3. The Urban-Rural Gap in Education

In China, the urban-rural binary analysis framework has always been an important entry point for understanding social issues. The rapid development of urbanization has brought about a rupture in resources and development between cities and villages. Compared with rural areas, cities give rise to more powerful families, and their children enjoy high-quality education, a wide variety of teaching and auxiliary institutions and abundant public resources. As a result, their descendants are better than the children of disadvantaged classes at the starting point. This is the framework that produces an objective gap between rural and urban students in sharing educational resources and clearly affects the proportion of rural students admitted to key universities and colleges (Xu & Mei, 2020). In addition, the difference between the two is widening in the basic and higher education sectors, and the disparity in employment opportunities is even more marked. In addition, Goodburn (2009) found that administrative and financial barriers and discrimination prevent migrant children from entering public schools,

and resource constraints on migrants also stem from urban-rural antagonisms.

Li et al. (2015) found that the disparity in college enrollment is mainly caused by urban-rural differences rather than differences between poor and non-poor. Li (2014), drawing on the data of three national sample surveys (2006, 2008 & 2011) analyzed the inequality of educational opportunities of the “post-80s” population (born between 1980-1989). According to the analysis of distribution of educational provision, it was found that although the state has taken many measures to alleviate the disparity, the inequality of educational opportunities has not decreased significantly, that the urban-rural education gap was obvious and increasing, and it was predicted that the inequality of educational opportunities would increase. Huang (2017) discussed the status of class segmentation in China’s junior high schools and its impact on students’ educational expectations and found that the current junior high schools have obvious class segmentation, and there are regional and urban-rural differences that in part determine that segmentation.

Thus, it can be seen that the current urban-rural gap, and the seeming inability to address it, is a major determinant of the unequal distribution of educational resources, and this systemic failure negatively affects the social mobility of rural students.

4. Economic and Cultural Capital of the Family

As a key factor in the educational process, the family has an important influence on the educational development of students. In addition to regional and urban-rural differences at the social level, differences in household economic and cultural capital also make social mobility more difficult for those who possess less of them. In the current marketization of education, high-quality education often needs to be obtained through fierce competition. And because socioeconomic status is the main source of class competitiveness, children from middle-and upper-class families tend to have more advantages than children from other classes, and thus are more likely to achieve educational success. The advantaged families with more economic and cultural capital, with their abundant resources, enable their children to have a distinct advantage at the ‘starting line’, largely determining who will win the race.

Economic capital is reflected in school district housing, educational counselling, and access to extracurricular activities. School district housing refers to the real estate in the scarce school area, which is a derivative of the real estate market. Due to the rules of enrolling in a designated area, parents need to buy a house near the school in order for their children to enter a better school. Their children usually have higher college admission rates and key college admission rates than students in ordinary schools, and the high-quality resources concentrated in key colleges give them more advantages in the job search process. On the contrary, children from less resourced families cannot provide such expensive educational mobility, so they can only study in nearby schools with relatively common resources such as teachers. This is the most typical example of the allocation of educational capital dominated by economic resources. In this educational ‘ecology’, wealthy parents can hire various tutors for their students, and get them to participate in activities and projects such as overseas study tours, scientific research, etc., so that they acquire greater cultural capital which can help them in college entrance examinations or interviews. In the higher education level, family capital also plays a pivotal role. Children of well-resourced families, even if they fail the college entrance examination, can seek various channels to receive higher education, such as going abroad (Xiang & Shen, 2009).

Cultural capital is a concept developed by Bourdieu. The connotation of family cultural capital includes cultural ideas, cultural inheritance, and the promotion of cultural investment. Intangible cultural capital has a great impact on cultivating children’s own comprehensive quality and ability to ‘cross’ class boundaries, which may be invisible barriers to others nor possessing school capital (Zhang, 2018). The family’s own educational or professional status and ‘worldview’ is the first place for children to acquire cultural capital, and the cultural capital that children inherit and accumulate may have a key impact on their future growth and ability to achieve in an ‘cultural economy’ in particular. For example, highly educated parents will pay more attention to their children’s learning and also have more educational expectations of them and beyond outdated or rigid notions of the professions that achieve wealth and success. In their usual interactions, they also influence their children in words and deeds, so that their behaviour and language are more in line with the model of high social status and taste. In addition, differences in family cultural capital are also reflected in the frequency and quality of parental interactions with schooling. The higher the socioeconomic status and education level of parents, the more inclined they are to actively participate in their children’s school education (Liu, 2021). On the contrary, families with low cultural capital often lack the ability to conduct communication with schools and teachers or are socially handicapped from being able to do so. They leave the responsibility for cultivating students entirely to the school, which ultimately widens the gap with families with high-class status.

5. The Purpose and Activities of Education Itself

In China, education has historically been considered a powerful way to achieve social mobility. Despite the

discussion and reality of class solidification and unequal educational resources, the high school entrance examination, college entrance examination, and other systems are still the only way out for many poor families. However, with China's market-oriented reforms and the market-oriented transformation of education formed by the entry of commercial capital into the public education market, the channels for upward mobility in society have tightened (Mok & et al., 2019). It is against this backdrop that middle-class anxieties and lower-class complaints arise.

At the same time, considering the purpose and behaviour of education itself, there has always been a critique of exam-oriented education, because the large institutional background is based on fractional theory, so extracurricular tutoring is very common. It also acts as an intermediary to build greater inequality, as rich people find more and better teachers for tutoring, which is ultimately reflected in students' academic achievement. In this regard, in response to the heavy burden on primary and secondary school students, short-sighted and utilitarian, in July 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing Students' Homework Burdens and Off-campus Training Burdens in Compulsory Education", proposing to reduce students' excessive homework load and off-campus training load. This is first to oppose the utilitarianism of education, and the second is to try to manage the source of education in order to prevent substantial injustice in education. However, there are also many critics who say that such a policy will not prevent the wealthy from finding good off-campus tutoring, but it will reduce the chances of upward mobility for poor students through hard work.

The diversion of high schools and vocational high schools, as the first division of my country's education system, also has the typical characteristics of diversion in exam-oriented education. Starting from the logic of development, vocational education has provided a large number of skilled talents for social modernization and industrialization transformation. Under the basic law of the integration of production and education, the layout of vocational education plays a key role in local industrial and economic development. However, starting from the logic of family needs, individuals rely more on the passive screening of high school entrance examination scores in the education diversion system. On the surface, the diversion of general vocational education has completed the diversion of vocational education and academic education, but in fact, it is more manifested in the differentiation of different classes (Cao & Tang, 2021). Because there are huge differences in the capital and ability of different classes to obtain resources and opportunities in the early education process, those students from poor families often lack sufficient support in junior high school, so they can only go to vocational high school. However, in China's environment, vocational high school is considered to be an abandoned life path. After they come out, they often can only engage in some low-level service industries and then suffer invisible discrimination in society. In the final analysis, the utilitarian nature of education in China makes people often not aim at careers, but aim at maintaining or improving their social class, and when social mobility is blocked, the contradictions in the education system will become more and more obvious.

6. The Possibility of Social Mobility?

China's education system is identified in the above analysis as having many barriers to social mobility at present. How, then, can social mobility through education continue to be possible? It is undeniable that in principle education is an important driving force for breaking the intergenerational transmission of class and promoting intergenerational mobility. Although rigid and committed to a strict examination format it is generally agreed that college entrance examination is strictly and fairly regulated. Although there have been scandals such as swapping scores or cases of corruption, they have all been strongly criticized and condemned by society. It can be seen that people value the fairness of the college entrance examination, although its means or form is also subject to analysis as to whether in itself it has some kind of in-built inequity to it. However, for the system, it is necessary to build an education system with more transparent rules and fairer opportunities overall, especially to enhance the equality of educational opportunities among different social strata groups and the balance of the allocation of high-quality educational resources. Whether it is to increase and give priority to rural resources, or to open up school opportunities for migrant children in urban and rural areas, children from disadvantaged families should be guaranteed access to educational resources. At the same time, attention should be paid to adjusting the rationality of the distribution of social resources among different social strata structures, narrowing the stratum gap, and enhancing the mutual integration and development among social strata.

Secondly, from the perspective of the utilitarian characteristics of education itself, more vocational education should be added, and each student's strengths and advantages should be explored so that students at different levels can benefit from education. Only by focusing on the cultivation of comprehensive quality, whether it is an ordinary high school or a vocational high school, can students be allowed to continue to grow, and constantly improve their expertise and ability, so that it is possible to maintain or indeed enhance social mobility in the future.

7. Conclusion

China's education system has long been considered to provide a fair opportunity for social mobility especially due to the existence of the high school entrance examination and the Gaokao system. However, in the context of market-oriented reforms and social stratification, this function of education has been weakened, that is to say, it has even become an intermediary for class solidification, and class mobility has become more difficult at present. In this regard, from a social perspective, the urban-rural gap in educational resources is important institutional background. On the family level, family economic and cultural capital have widened the gap between students of different classes. At the same time, the characteristics of exam-oriented education and utilitarianism ultimately lead to the lack of upward mobility of students in vocational high schools, who are often children of lower-class families. Finally, in order to increase the possibility of social mobility, a more equitable education system should be rethought and reformed, the differences in educational resources between different classes and regions should be reduced, and the comprehensive quality of students and the cultivation of vocational education should be emphasized.

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