

Master Thesis U.S.E.

# Mechanisms by which socio-economic status (SES) influences access to high-quality education: A case study of educational inequality in China

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## Abstract

This paper analyses educational inequality in China using the case of key schools and school districts in China. Based on Sen's capability approach and Bourdieu's theory of educational reproduction, it is concluded that educational inequality is generated and deepened by capital cycles such as economic and social status.

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## Keywords

Educational inequality; SES; Reproduction; Policy

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## *Introduction*

As living standard rises and society progresses, people are placing an increasing value on education. Since the last century, there has been rapid population growth in developing countries, but educational resources have sometimes failed to meet the increase in demand for education (UNDP, 1990). Unequal distribution of educational resources and disparities in the quality of education hinder equality of access to education, hence the focus of this paper is on the creation and exacerbation of educational inequalities.

Human development is about providing people with more choices, of which access to education is an important factor. China ranks low on the HDI compared to other regions and countries in East Asia. According to the United Nations in 2021 (UNDP, 2022), China ranks 79th with an HDI of 0.768. Therefore, China still needs to work on its human development and there is much room for progress. Education can help develop the potential for people to acquire knowledge and skills, and it is the mean by which people find jobs and earn income. People with professional skills and good education have more opportunities and choices than others, are more likely to get a job and have higher wages (UNDP, 1990), and thus lead a better and more desirable life. The development of education can contribute to society as well. Educated people can give back to society by contributing to cultural and scientific development and promoting economic growth. Thus, the development of education can lead to the simultaneous progress of the country and the world. However, in the

process of developing education, factors such as policies and social and economic status, make education uneven and create inequalities.

Inequality in education is part of the inequality of opportunity. Inequality of opportunity refers to the unequal access to basic rights and services that individuals need to maintain and improve their livelihoods, such as education and healthcare (ESCAP, 2018). Educational inequality is when students or children are not properly allocated academic resources such as teaching equipment, books, and experienced teachers. Educational inequality includes inequality caused by factors such as gender, geographical differences, and family background. Research has shown that the consequences of educational inequality produce both individual and group differences and are also reflected in the stratification of a generation, even generations before and after (Guo, 2019). Thus, reducing inequality in education will contribute to the steady long-term development of society. If educational inequality is left undisturbed, it may lead to increasingly serious inequalities.

Previous studies have included theoretical analyses and empirical articles from many fields such as education and economics, which generally consider educational inequality in China from one aspect or perspective. This paper will summarise the analysis of these articles and will attempt to understand the underlying mechanisms. Therefore, the research question based on a case study of China is whether and how the insufficient and unequal distribution of educational resources affects educational inequalities in public systems and what the underlying causes are. As compulsory education in China is nine years (China operates a nine-year compulsory education

system, which is compulsory for children and young people between the ages of 6 and 15. (Wang, n.d.)), including primary and middle schools, schools and students in this paper are public primary and middle schools and their corresponding students. This paper will use a case-study approach and analyse it in the context of Amartya Sen's capability approach theory (1979) and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction (1973). There will be two cases that have existed in China for a long time, key schools and classes, and school district housing, both of which are direct pathways to better education. SES in this paper therefore mainly refers to the ability to pay for additional resources, such as houses in a top-ranked school district, which refers to economic condition, and social network, which is used to determine how well-connected a student's parents are and whether they are privileged people.

The focus of this paper is to find out whether and in what sense SES is an effective means of accessing better education and jeopardizes equality of access to public education, and how government programs and policies need to be adjusted to address this. The findings of this paper will help politicians and policymakers to understand the impact of education-related policies on educational inequality so that they can optimise education and economic policies to promote social equality and stability. This paper will analyse the research problem through an overview of the historical educational policies in China and a literature review, followed by a case study, and conclude with alternatives and feasible solutions.

## *Provision of Background – Historical Policies*

The education system is a long-standing legacy of tradition, and this paper suggests that this legacy can include previous educational systems, educational aims, and educational customs. The present education system is a result of that legacy. Before the 20th century, China's education system aimed to train imperial officials. When the People's Republic of China (New China) was founded in 1949, the education system in New China was reformed with an initial focus on developing an education suitable for a socialist society (Qian, 2000). To examine the research questions in this paper, a review of the history of the education system in China can begin with the modern era.

After the end of the Second World War and the civil war, China lags far behind the West in the education industry due to years of war and colonisation (Qian, 2000). In 1951, the Council of State issued the Decision on School System Reform, which formally incorporated private schools into the school system to achieve the goal of universal primary education (Wang, 2019). One year later, the government issued the Provisional Regulations for Primary Schools (Draft) and the Provisional Regulations for Middle Schools (Draft), which regulated the teaching and learning of primary and secondary education in China (Wang, 2019). In 1953, the authorities believed that universal access to primary and middle education was in significant progress and that the focus should be on improving the quality of education, hence the emergence of an 'elitist' style of education (Mi, 2022) and “key schools” (Guo, 2019) in the Chinese

education system. In line with the historical context of that time, China needed a large number of skilled workers and scholars to develop its economy, production and infrastructure. However, educational resources were limited at the time, hence a system of "key school system" (KSS) was introduced (Guo, 2019; You, 2007), which concentrated high-quality educational resources and produced the greatest possible number of professional and technical people (Mi, 2022). The differentiation of public schools into "key" and "non-key" schools first appeared in 1962 (Guo, 2019). The "elitist" approach to education served China well at that time, with several outstanding key schools providing quality talent for a wide range of industries. After the resumption of the college entrance examination system in 1977 and the reform and opening up of the country in 1978, "efficiency first" was adopted (Mi, 2022). "Key schools" were still popular, and "key classes" began to appear in some schools, which were the type of classes that brought together all the quality educational resources and experienced teachers in a school, to give some students access to quality education (Lu, 2008). However, the "elitist" education system strengthened by the establishment of "key schools" and "key classes" unfairly distributes educational resources and opportunities, creating a stratified education system that leaves most students at a developmental disadvantage (Jin, 2000).

In 1986, the government enacted the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China to develop basic education and guarantee school-age children's right to receive nine years of compulsory education including primary and middle school. The law enshrined the principle of "schooling in close districts", which led to

the concept of school districts (Mi, 2022). However, this law has not brought about a change in the inequality situation, as the previous development of key schools has created a gradual increase in the gap between schools and has created an imbalance in the distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas and between schools.

In the 1990s, the "marketisation of education" was introduced, education has become a commodity and there was competition between schools. It allowed schools to charge fees and alleviated the shortage of financial resources for education (Mi, 2022). The marketisation of education has turned the socio-economic status of families into an effective means of accessing quality education and has given rise to unequal access practices such as non-compliant school fees. As a result, children of privilege and students with high financial capacity had a significant advantage in access to quality education.

In 1993, 1995 and 1997, the State issued regulations that key schools (classes) should not be implemented in compulsory education and that students should not select schools but be enrolled in the nearest ones (Wang, 2008). The purpose of this change in law was to let children attend schools close to them, to reduce overcrowding in prestigious schools, and to allow "non-key" and lower-quality schools to get more students. To get into those previous "key schools", buying a house in a quality school district became a solution, so school district houses became popular.

In 2006, the Compulsory Education Law abolished "key schools" and "key



classes” (Guo, 2019), and confirmed the exemption of tuition and other fees (Xiang et al., 2020). The “key school system” and “elite education” were ended. Although schools were no longer clearly divided into "key" and "non-key" schools, the original educational resources and standards of schools did not change, nor did the inter-school gap decrease. The former "key schools" were renamed "model schools" or "special schools" and were even still able to receive additional financial and policy support from the local government and the Education Bureau (Mi, 2022). As a result, inequalities in the education system continued to grow. In recent years, the Education Bureau has issued notices prohibiting the establishment of "key classes", but "key classes", "special classes" and "experimental classes" are still popular in all middle schools.

In general, the current educational environment in China is still influenced by the “elitism” of the historical education system and the inequalities that exist today are a result of historical accumulation. In the early days, when China was weaker and poorer after the wars, the government chose efficiency over equality, and this choice did help China to develop rapidly. Currently, development in China does not need to rely on allocating limited resources only to minority elites, so the government has begun to promote equality over efficiency. Even though the government and the Education Bureau are aware of the dangers of “key schools” and “key classes” and have issued many circulars and policies, the inequities still exist because of the deep historical influences.

## ***Methodology***

This paper explored the mechanisms that generated and sustained educational inequality by examining the educational situation in China and used two education-related cases in China for the case study method. Multiple research methods can be used in a case study (Morgan, 2012). In conducting the case studies, this paper used the qualitative research method to summarise and analyse the findings of the previous empirical articles. As mentioned earlier the Chinese education system is influenced by historical educational policies, and there may be complex social factors. Therefore, to obtain as comprehensive a mechanism as possible, this paper used a multidisciplinary research approach, combining economic policy, historical research and sociological and philosophical theories. A comparative research approach was also used in the analysis to compare the differences in educational access between high- and low-SES families and to compare the overlaps and differences between theories and practical cases.

### **Research scope and research object**

The focus of the study is on the entirety of China. This is because while education levels vary across China, depending on the local economic development level, 'key schools' exist in every city. There are significant inter-school disparities in educational quality and wealth gaps across cities, so this study is valid for the entire country. The objects of this study include public primary and middle schools in China, housing

within government-planned school districts, and families of students. These public primary and middle schools fall under the government's nine-year compulsory education and are supposed to provide equal access and quality of education to all students. In the 1960s, the Education Bureau classified schools as "key schools" and "non-key schools". Although such terminology has now been abolished, as educational resources are still concentrated in "key schools", they were still used as labels to distinguish schools of different levels of educational quality in this paper. Since these key schools are not evenly distributed throughout the district, the district also varies considerably depending on the school. The school districts where the "key schools" are located are known as good school districts, where properties are commonly expensive school district housing and serve as a means for families to access quality education. Families were classified as high-SES or low-SES households. "High" and "low" were not clearly defined in this paper but were used to identify whether these families have access to good schools for their children. Therefore, families that can be considered to have at least one socio-economic means of access to high-quality education are referred to as high-SES families.

### **Case Study**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the mechanisms of educational inequality in Chinese society. A case study is the exploration of a real-life phenomenon (Tasci et al., 2020), the process of which is to reconstruct a coherent and academically credible

picture by putting pieces together (Morgan, 2012). Case studies can be conducted with families or groups as objects to achieve the goal of understanding or description (Tasci et al., 2020). Therefore, case studies are applicable to the research question of this paper to understand the underlying causes and mechanisms of educational inequality in the historical and social context of China through analysis of selected cases. To comply with the rules of case studies (Tasci et al., 2020), this paper comprehensively observed and investigated the selected cases from the perspectives of individuals, families and the government, mixed research methods to integrate information from different sources, and finally applied theories to explore the mechanisms in the context of real-life events.

### **Qualitative research**

In case studies, qualitative research addresses the research question related to human life and society (Fossey et al., 2002). Qualitative research methods are often used to examine experiences, meanings and perspectives and can involve analysing texts to understand distributed information (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This paper collected quantitative findings from previous empirical articles. These analyses using data from different time periods, scales of research, and regions on the same or similar issues were summarised in a quantitative study. In conducting the qualitative study, the paper applied a critical approach by examining the social and historical origins and contexts (Fossey et al., 2002) to analyse the structure and transformation of

mechanisms in the research questions.

### **Interdisciplinarity study**

Interdisciplinary study is the process of complementing and correcting a single discipline to solve an overly complex or broad problem (Klein & Newell, 1997). This approach usually includes knowledge from two or more disciplines and combines multiple disciplines to find or create new knowledge systems or expressions (Nissani, 1995). This paper analysed the research questions based on previous analysis of China's modern educational history, combined with classical theories from sociology and philosophy, and concluded with policy recommendations for the current educational problems from an economic perspective.

### **Comparative analysis**

Comparison is one of the oldest research methods (Rose & Mackenzie, 1991) and comparative analysis is the process of including two or more objects and explaining similarities or differences (Pickvance, 2001). Comparisons usually take place between objects that are similar or different between regions or countries and are followed by the description and interpretation of observations. In addition to the comparison of similar objects, one can be used as a lens through which to view the other in comparative studies. Similarly, this paper used reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1973) as a framework to understand educational inequalities. In conjunction with the case

study, this paper compared the arguments outlined in reproduction theory with the phenomena present in real-life cases in China and studied the extent to which reproduction theory was applicable to the Chinese case by analysing the degree of overlap between them.

## **Literature Review**

Educational equity has been a topic consistently addressed and discussed by educators and scholars. Zhang (2008) divides educational equity into three levels, namely the right to education, equal access to education, and relatively equal educational outcomes. In order to achieve equality in education, scholars have suggested four principles that education should comply with (Li & Wang, 2008): firstly, equal and universal primary education; secondly, the same access to higher education and the entry criteria should be fair or favourable to the disadvantaged; they add that public education resources should be biased towards the disadvantaged; and finally, everyone should have the freedom to further enhance their education. To achieve that everyone can equally access all kinds of education, equal educational opportunities need a guarantee. Equal educational opportunities include three aspects, which are equal access to education, equal access to different educational channels and equal chances of getting success (Li & Wang, 2008). The relationship between the first two aspects can be explained by the fact that even if equality of access is

guaranteed, it is possible that everyone can attend school while some disadvantaged groups can only receive low-quality education, and therefore the right of each member of society to freely choose different educational channels has to be guaranteed. In this regard, the American scholar Hallinan (1988) highlights that the provision of high-quality educational opportunities should not take social origin and characteristics into consideration. In more detail, Darling-Hammond defines the factors that measure equity in educational opportunities as the quality of teachers, the quality of teaching and the quality of the curriculum (Shan & Gou, 2010).

Many scholars have studied the situation and causes of educational inequality in China. The urban-rural and regional differences, the household registration system, the school district system, the increased demand for education, the strain on resources and the uneven distribution of quality educational resources all contribute to deepening inequality in education (Yang et al., 2014; Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Yang et al. (2014) find out that the economic development gap between urban and rural areas and the gap in education quality are the main sources of inequality. The gap between urban and rural areas will deepen in cycle, that is, excellent teachers will be concentrated in cities for better development, so good education will also concentrate more in cities, making rural educational resources scarcer (Yang et al., 2014). Dello-Iacovo (2009) claims that teacher shortages make it difficult to expand secondary education. He also points out the differences in educational environments and class sizes between developed and less developed cities. In large cities such as provincial capitals, the number of students in a class is around 50, but in some smaller cities, due

to the lack of educational resources, each class need to accommodate 100 students (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Teacher resources and class size contribute to differences in the learning environment, Shields et al. (2023) suggest that smaller class sizes and stronger teacher resources can help students gain a greater advantage in the labour market. Large class sizes result in some students being deprived of their right to quality education (Tan, 2001). The result is that while families in urban areas can afford quality education and access more options for their children, at the same time, families in rural areas face a more difficult situation because they do not have sufficient funds (Butler, 2014). In other words, the relative development between rural and urban areas makes the quality of education for children in rural areas lag, while the severe unreasonable skewing of resources also makes the situation in rural areas worse indeed.

Compared to rural areas, the situation in cities is better, but there are also significant inequalities within cities. The entry requirements for some primary and middle schools contain additional conditions, resulting in poor families in urban areas being denied access to quality educational resources (Li & Wang, 2008). Among the factors influencing educational opportunities, Zhao (2023) finds that hukou (household registration) is one of the factors that contribute the most. In her findings for higher education, the family background factor has a major impact on access to top universities, and unfortunately, the effort is still not a key factor in access to high-quality education (Zhao, 2023). Guo (2019) finds that in some good middle schools in Shanghai, 80% of students' parents are state cadres at the division level or above, yet



in other schools, the proportion is significantly lower or even zero.

Based on the above literature, educational inequality in China can be summarised as large urban-rural differences, large differences in teaching quality and environment, and is reflected in family background and other non-effort factors. Overall, there is unequal access to education for students, large gaps in schooling conditions and teacher quality (Tan, 2001), and so there are significant disparities in per capita education resources and education funding (Lu & Xu, 2001). The following is a summary of previous analysis and empirical studies on policies that affect or indirectly contribute to educational inequality in China.

An essential policy regarding the education system in China is the school district and hukou is the concept of house registration related to this policy. The division of school districts in China started out to get all children into public schools, and schools that were close to their homes. However, the uneven development of public schools and the concentration of good teachers has led to huge differences in the teaching quality in districts. Children's access to which school in which school district affects the quality of education they received, and the differences create inequality of educational opportunities (Yang, 2020). Attending nearby schools is based on housing ownership and hukou (household registration) (Feng & Lu, 2013). Whereas both are related to SES, parents with sufficient funds will buy a house in the top-ranked school district so that their children can go to a good school in that district. Those with high SES are also more likely to move their hukou to areas with good resources. Of these two conditions, buying a house in a school district is more likely to be achieved, and

this phenomenon is common so there is much literature examining the relationship between school districts and house prices. Shanghai is a prosperous city in China with high house prices. A study by Feng and Lu (2013) finds a significant rise in house prices near top-ranked schools in Shanghai. Compulsory education in China begins at primary school and Li and Qiu (2018) argue that without access to high-quality primary and middle schools, a person has little chance of getting into a top-ranked high school. They point out that the continuity and cumulative nature of education make primary schooling already decisive for the future education path (Li & Qiu, 2018). Some scholars have studied the relationship between house prices and the quality of primary schooling in Hangzhou, near Shanghai. Peng and other scholars (2021) find that for each grade of education quality, the price of a second-hand house increases by US\$118 per square metre. They also suggest that this is a capitalisation effect of schooling. In the Chinese capital, Beijing, house price premiums around key municipal primary schools are 4-8%, and that of less prestigious schools is 2-3% (Peng et al., 2021). According to these facts found by previous research, in some places, people need to spend extra money in addition to school fees to get the education they want from primary school onwards. Based on this school district policy and the competition for quality education, people must own a certain amount of savings to cope with the uneven quality of teaching and learning environment in public schools. While it becomes time-saving and convenient for students to move to school, the policy of school districts and attending nearby-schools limits students' schooling options (Tan, 2001).

Since this paper is aimed at identifying mechanisms that contribute to and exacerbate educational inequality, the following are theories from previous literature that can explain this mechanism. Some of them are derived from previous theories and others are from the results of previous empirical analyses.

The first mechanism focuses on income inequality as the main factor. Firstly, the unequal distribution of physical and human capital is linked to income inequality (Berry, 2003). Income inequality can block the positive impact of education expansion and people's access to equal education (Yang et al., 2009). Due to the scarcity of quality education resources and income inequality, the advantaged group concentrates more than a reasonable share of quality education (Yang et al., 2014). Yang et al. (2014) also suggest that growing income inequality is deepening stratification and that educational inequality stemming from social stratification is increasing. According to institutional deficiency theories, lower socio-economic status groups are relatively disadvantaged under the system because their access to education and the opportunity to benefit from quality education are restricted (Butler, 2014). In short, the unequal distribution of initial physical and human capital leads to income inequality. Income inequality further leads to educational inequality, which at the same time deepens social stratification. Gross income inequality and social stratification together constrain the lower SES groups, leading to a monopoly of quality educational resources by the high SES groups and increasing educational inequality.

The second mechanism focuses on the insufficient and unequal distribution of

educational resources. The prevailing view is that China does not spend enough on public education and the lack of investment in education generally leads to an imbalance in educational development. (Yang et al., 2014). Unequal distribution of educational resources leads to educational inequality, where educational resources are related to educational opportunities and educational quality (Guo, 2019). Thus, it can be summarised that the government's insufficient investment in education has resulted in limited educational resources that cannot provide all students and schools with equal quality education. On this basis, unequal distribution of limited educational resources leads to educational inequality.

In summary, scholars have concluded that there are two mechanisms that contribute to educational inequality. The first is individual or family-based, where differences in human capital and socio-economic status lead to differences in household income that affect educational opportunities for the next generation. The second mechanism is that the government's unequal distribution of educational resources leads to differences in the quality of education between public schools, resulting in large differences between schools providing compulsory primary and secondary basic education. This difference, coupled with China's school district system, has resulted in premium and excessive property prices in some school districts, severely limiting access for low-income families (for students not originally in a good school district). High-income families can purchase expensive school district housing to provide their children with good educational opportunities. Thus, school district housing links these two mechanisms, which together contribute to

educational inequality. To get closer to the mechanism of education in Chinese society, the later section further focuses on the formation and flow of human capital in the first mechanism, with evidence of how this process specifically affects people's access to education.

### **Factors Affecting Accessibility to Education**

The main idea of this paper agrees that the level of education one can receive is mainly determined by his/her starting point (Nash, 2004; Yin, 2018). In this paper, one's starting point is primarily represented by family status, as in the Chinese education system, parents can determine the starting point of their children in a large sense. In the school district system, household registration also affects access to education, as it determines the level of schools that students can attend.

### **Parental background - Education**

Numerous scholars have shown that higher parental education levels are associated with better outcomes for children. The reason for this is that parents' education level influences their expectations of their children's education, their knowledge of the education system and their plans for their children's educational arrangements. Parents with higher levels of education always have higher educational expectations for their children (Gao, 2020), and higher educational expectations imply that children tend to perform better academically (Zhu, 2018). Parents with high

levels of education place a higher value on education (Gao, 2020). This is because they focus on the explicit and implicit income that education brings to their children. For example, in addition to great grades, a better university and a job, they consider the social status that comes with education. Therefore, parents with high levels of education are more motivated and capable of providing their children with a better education.

### **Parental background – SES**

As mentioned earlier in this paper when emphasising the importance of education, education tends to give people better jobs, higher wages, and higher social status. Higher levels of parental education are more likely to result in a higher socio-economic status for the family and a better education for their children. Higher family socio-economic status increases the possibility that children attend better schools (Wu & Wang, 2008). The socio-economic status of a family includes the family's income, wealth, position, social connections, and social status.

In the early 21st century, there was a significant correlation between students' family background and the level of education they received in the context of using economic capital to select schools (Liang et al., 2006). With higher family incomes, children are more likely to attend quality schools (Wu & Wang, 2008). One reason is that higher incomes allow parents to cater to the needs of educational institutions when they need to expand their funding and secure good educational resources for

their children (Ji, 2011). Under the "school district" system, families with high incomes can buy homes in school districts with a high concentration of educational resources and afford the high prices of school districts to gain access to good schools for their children (Ji, 2011). In recent years, despite the abolition of "key schools", housing prices around these schools have remained high, cutting off access to these schools for the majority of children from poorer families (Li, 2019).

In addition to choosing schools based on economic capital, the social capital of high socio-economic status families also facilitates their children's access to schools. Parents who have advantages in terms of power and social connections are more likely to select better schools for their children (Wu & Wang, 2008). Parents with high social status can use their position of convenience and power to help schools gain more opportunities for development and higher visibility. In addition, there is the problem of a few teachers giving special attention to the children of the powerful (Tan, 2001). In general, parents use the benefits of their social status to exchange for access to better education, more outstanding educational outcomes, degrees and careers for their children (Qiao, 2006).

### **Location of registry (hukou)**

Local households that live and are enrolled near a school district have significantly lower education expenditures (Zhou, 2022). They are already registered in a better school district and do not have to pay the additional costs of school

selection, nor rent or buy a house near the school, as other households need to use their financial capital for school selection.

### **Social value**

The current social concern for education is more about outcomes and achievements.

The assessment of teachers in schools mainly consists of grades and promotion rates (Yin, 2018), rather than the behavioural performance of teachers (Song & Zhao, 2015). Under this assessment and evaluation system, teachers' career pressure forces them to allocate educational resources to students with good academic performance (Yin, 2018). In a competitive and success-oriented society, there is a huge demand to differentiate between "key" and "non-key", and this demand will not disappear because of legal prohibitions (Chen, 2015). Thus, the value of pursuing outcomes rather than processes leads schools and teachers to practice unequal education to be competitive.

In response to the current state of educational inequality, scholars have proposed relevant trends and their explanations in addition to the two mechanisms described in the previous section. Household registration systems and income inequality are deepening institutional barriers and social stratification (Yang et al., 2014). As long as social stratification exists, people are likely to attempt to jump up the hierarchy through education, hence the quest for quality education, competition (Mi, 2022) and



congestion. This competition and the importance society places on education causes prestigious schools to attract quality teachers, which attracts quality students, and the academic achievement of these students in turn enhances the school and its reputation. This cycle leads to an agglomeration of quality educational resources (Mi, 2022), and an imbalance in educational development.

### **Difficulties and Challenges**

Several scholars have raised difficulties and challenges in promoting equality in education. One of the arguments is discomfort with change, as people will face more uncertainty in the competition process, as they will no longer be able to secure their future development by entering a key school at an early age but will have to keep working hard and competing. As a result, many people are dissatisfied with the equalisation of educational resources (Guo, 2019). This is mostly the case with advantaged groups who are already benefiting, and it is normal for them to want to maintain policies that are favourable to them. Another view comes from structural functionalism, a sociological concept which argues that any mechanism in society has a positive effect on the functioning of the social system and helps it to exist and develop (Li, 2013). Concentrating educational resources significantly affected the development of Chinese society in the last century, but it is no longer applicable. According to the circular effects and trends proposed by scholars, if the government does not intervene, existing inequalities will continue to grow as social stratification

deepens. In this regard, many scholars support the necessity of the government promoting rationalisation and equalisation of education allocation (Li & Wang, 2008; Ji, 2011; Yang & Liu, 2016).

## *Introduction to Theories and Cases*

### **Theories**

In this paper, two cases will be analysed mainly with Bourdieu's theory of reproduction (1973), but before introducing the theory of reproduction, it is necessary to introduce Sen's capability approach (1979).

### **Capability approach**

Sen is an economist and philosopher. The mainstream economic theory focuses on market stability, equilibrium and preference and utility maximisation (Bowman, 2010). Sen's capability approach was designed to supplement utilitarianism and welfare economics. The capability approach focuses on what people actually can do (Walker, 2005) and their being (Robeyns, 2005). The capability approach is often used to measure well-being and it considers development, justice, society, economics, politics and culture. (Robeyns, 2005). The capability approach includes the concepts of "functioning" and "capabilities". Functioning is anything that a person wants to

achieve and might value doing or being (Sen, 1999). Capability refers to having the freedom to achieve these functionings and is a combination or collection of functionings (Walker, 2005). A further interpretation of capability is that true freedom means that a person has all the necessary means to achieve the being he or she wants (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). According to the capability approach, the policy goal of human development should be the expansion of capability, which is the freedom of people to achieve anything of value and thus develop humanity and prosperity (Alkire, 2005). In this context, the basic objectives of economic policy should include improving living conditions and quality of life (Sen, 1988) and removing as many barriers as possible in people's lives to achieve greater freedom (Robeyns, 2005).

The capabilities approach concerns whether people have access to quality educational resources (Robeyns, 2005). Education as one of the core capabilities implies that people should have the freedom to choose the education they want and have the adequate means to achieve it. In fact, people with the same level of capability are likely to achieve different ways and levels of living. People may choose to function differently, and the capability approach agrees with different definitions of a good life (Robeyns, 2005). The point is to ensure that people have at least the same ability to access quality education, whether they ultimately choose to do so or not (given that there may be some people who do not intend to follow an academic path but want to acquire applied occupational skills as early as possible).

## **Reproduction**

There are practical obstacles to Sen's capacity approach, and one powerful challenge is Bourdieu's theory of educational reproduction. Bourdieu is a sociologist and philosopher who, like Sen, is concerned with inequality and aware of the importance of resources other than economic capital. Bourdieu wants to understand the process of inequality and make changes (Bowman, 2010).

Bourdieu develops a practical theory of culture and education in production (Bourdieu, 1977) and examined how capital and advantage are transmitted and reproduced with values. Bourdieu classifies capital in society as economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Economic and social capital refer separately to wealth and resources acquired through social relationships. Cultural capital can take the form of institutionalization and be converted into degrees by legitimate institutions. Symbolic capital includes reputation and prestige (Li, 2013). Bourdieu emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital and states that academic inequality reflects the inherent inequality of individuals.

Bourdieu argues that education is a political machine and a means of class transmission (Bourdieu, 1977). Education is a driver of people's upward mobility in society, and children of high social status parents usually have higher levels of education (Wu & Wang, 2008). In general, high social status and upper-class families wish to perpetuate and consolidate their social prestige and status, and the reproduction of education can achieve this (Bourdieu, 2000), so that the social status of children is a replication or reproduction of that of their parents (Wu & Wang,

2008).

Schools figure prominently in Bourdieu's theory of reproduction. According to Bourdieu (2000), schools transform initial inequality into inequality of ability, allowing children of families with higher social status and capital to receive better education, and acquire more skills and ability capital. Teachers' demands on student performance reflect the social and political roles that students are required to assume by default, thus perpetuating existing systems of class and domination. Schools turn students into agents of class (Bourdieu, 1977), and the implementation and transmission of power must rely on legitimising processes, which are schooling and the awarding of diplomas. After graduating from school, diplomas place people in different positions that make up the social structure, transforming academic rank into social rank (Li, 2013). The shift from the socio-economic capital of parents to the cultural capital of children legitimizes class systems and individual hierarchies and deepens inequalities. Cultural capital brings higher prestige and class power structures are reproduced through symbolic capital so that the holder maintains a privileged position (Bourdieu, 2000).

Habitus is central to the reproduction theory and represents tendencies determined by social class (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu indicates that while people develop habitus within their families and their own social spaces, habitus exhibits collective characteristics associated with social class in the process of personal capital formation. The education system is more likely to favour middle- and up-class students, thus satisfying their habitus and keeping advantaging them (Bourdieu,

1973). The habitus of the advantaged group is favoured, permeated, and perpetuated in educational policies and school rules, which are instilled in members of other classes of society. The existence of habitus allows educational resources and opportunities to remain biased in favour of the advantaged group. Education thus tends to enhance the interests of one class over those of another.

Education, through reproduction, ensures that the advantaged class continues to have access to quality education, and at the same time squeezes the disadvantaged class out of access to the same level of education. The reproduction of education under the class system thus hinders people's freedom of access to education. Sen's capability of getting a quality education is jeopardised by social stratification and the consolidation of the dominant class. The disadvantaged class is hindered from quality education because of lacking the means to access it. In this sense, therefore, educational reproduction limits people's capabilities and maintains and even deepens inequality.

## **Cases**

This paper uses two cases appearing in the Chinese education system since the twentieth century. The first example is key schools and classes, which usually imply a concentration of high-quality educational resources and an environment with a positive learning environment. The second example is school district housing. The

purchase of a school district house usually gives access to the schools in that district, so the price of housing in the school district where the key school is located is extremely high because of the excessive demand. They were chosen because they are both direct access to high-quality educational resources in today's education system and are public education-related products that arose under historical education policies and continue until today. As the means of access are often accompanied by high requirements on economic and social capital, both cases are closely related to current educational inequalities in China.

### **Case 1: Key schools and classes**

Key schools were established in 1953 to concentrate the limited educational resources in China at the time and to train professionals in the most effective way. Subsequently, in 1962, the distinction between 'key' and 'non-key' schools emerged. In a context of scarce financial, teacher, facility and other educational resources, each region established a few key schools to concentrate the quality educational resources within the region (Yang & Liu, 2016). The local government prioritised the development of these selected schools, skewing public education resources towards these key schools (Wang, 2008) and resulting in a monopoly on experienced teachers (Yang & Liu, 2016). In addition to these selected key schools, other schools also began to set up key classes to increase promotion rates and popularity. The key classes concentrate the school's limited supply of outstanding and experienced teachers (Yang

& Liu, 2016). Similar to the case of key schools, schools often allocate the best teachers and educational equipment to key classes primarily (Lu, 2008). Although primary and middle schools are no longer allowed to distinguish between 'key' and 'non-key' schools, there is still a clear distinction between high schools and universities. The process of transition from middle school to high school becomes a process of student classification. To gain access to key high schools and universities, some middle schools offer key classes as a pathway for students to gain access to quality higher education opportunities (Chen, 2012). The key school system divides education into different levels, and students receive these different levels of education, which undermines the equity of education (Guo, 2019).

## **Case 2: School district housing**

The establishment of key schools and the division of school districts has led to the creation of school district housing. Students who are registered in a school district can only attend the compulsory public schools in that district, known as primary and middle schools. After middle school, they are not restricted by the school district and are allocated to high schools throughout the city based on their middle school exam results. The way to become a student in a school district is to buy a house in that district and the student uses that property address to register with the local public security police station or administrative service centre. After registration, the student has a hukou in that school district and can only attend public primary and middle



schools in that district by rule (Liu et al., 2016). In this way, a direct link is built between the key schools and the school districts. Parents are keen to own a house in a good school district, so the demand for school district houses rises rapidly in a short period of time. In China, especially in large cities, the price of school district housing near high-quality schools has rapidly increased (Guo, 2019), with a small proportion of residents in high-priced school districts sharing most of the high-quality educational resources (Mi, 2022).

## *Analysis*

### **Identification of the main problems in the cases**

In the historical and social context of China, both the key school and school district systems originally emerged to address educational dilemmas at a particular time in history. As society has progressed, however, China has paid a cost for achieving the educational gains from these systems. The cost of the historical phased policy is because of a choice of efficiency over equality and an education system which has not changed with the development of society (Guo, 2019).

This paper uses Sen's capability approach to measure people's access to education. The essential aim of compulsory education in China is to guarantee the right to education for all children of school age and to raise the standard of education. This means that people should have the same capacity to access the compulsory

education they want to receive. As the importance of education increases, the assumption is that the majority of people want to have access to quality compulsory education, which means that people tend to choose to achieve the functioning of a higher quality education.

In the first case, the presence of key schools divides people's capability of access into two categories, one for access to a key school and one for access to a general or non-key school. Since people follow the school district allocation, the capability of access to education is the same, and people have the same access to at least non-key schools. The capability of access to educational resources in non-key schools is also the same, as there is no overcrowding or competition. This is in line with the original intention of the government in enacting the school district housing policy. However, people's capability to access key schools is different. In China's compulsory education, students go to school for free (Wang, n.d.), therefore in the original intention there should be no differences regarding the capability to pay. In the case of school district housing, however, the high prices around key schools undermine the same capability of accessibility of education. Students with more economic capital have a higher capability of getting a high-quality education. Because of the high prices of school districts, students with more economic capital accumulate more financial capital. Students from families with insufficient economic capital are less able to have this capability because they do not have the adequate means to achieve access to quality education due to the high price of housing in the school districts. According to the capability approach, the direction of human development should be

to extend capability. For most families, they are not part of the minority advantaged group that enjoys access to high-quality educational resources. Although some of them may succeed in achieving upward mobility through their efforts, in general, their capability will not be expanded in these two cases. To make matters worse for non-key schools, key schools have been attracting the best teachers, so other schools have been lagging in educational resources. If we assume that people's definition of quality educational resources is constant in terms of both quality and quantity, the capability of disadvantaged groups will increase as society develops. However, human educational needs have improved along with social and technological development in response to changes in job content and job requirements in the labour market. As a result, the definition of quality education is likely to increase over time. Due to this situation, the capability of disadvantaged groups does not increase. Therefore, according to the capability approach, the gap between the capability of the advantaged and disadvantaged groups and the inability of the disadvantaged groups to expand their capability in line with the development of society are the main human development problems in the selected cases.

### **Explain motivation with Bourdieu's distinction and definition of capital**

Bourdieu classifies capital as economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Among these, economic capital and social capital are equivalent to socio-economic status in this paper, as their role is the same for education. Cultural capital can be considered

the highest achievement a student can achieve through education. Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital can be institutionalised in the form of degrees and educational certificates. Since the introduction of the nine-year compulsory education in China in 1986, most people can have a middle school degree and therefore the cultural capital acquired by the key schools does not seem to be competitive. However, Chinese high schools and universities still distinguish between "key" and "non-key", which means that the associated cultural capital differs across the population. In addition to the development of compulsory education, which includes primary and middle school, Chinese higher education is also expanding. This expansion has led to a shock in the supply of labour with higher education diplomas. The consequences of this shock for fresh graduates are lower relative wages, higher unemployment rate, and lower entry rates into satisfying jobs (Knight et al., 2017). In addition, there is a common phenomenon and perception in China that there are significant quality differences between graduates from different universities (Hartog et al., 2010), and therefore the labour market takes this difference into account rigorously and screens accordingly. Apart from the symbolic capital such as the reputation that individuals gain as a result of this cultural capital, another important reason for the importance of university reputation is that graduates' salaries are closely linked to university rankings in China. Undergraduate graduates from the top 100 universities in China earn 25-30% more than those who graduate from the 400th-500th universities (Hartog et al., 2010). While China has a large and growing base of college entrance examination candidates, and although the acceptance rate is over

80%, the acceptance rate for top universities (defined as those on the 211-project list, a list of around 100 universities set by the government that changes every year) was only 6.58% in 2017 (Haitong Securities, 2018). As a result, there is a strong willingness to make great efforts to get into top universities, and the pursuit of cultural capital by Chinese students and parents lies in the ranking of universities. Graduating from a top university means having the cultural capital to achieve economic capital over others and develop social capital through a satisfying job, thus gradually building up one's symbolic capital. Variation in the quality of education in the Chinese education system exists from primary school to university, which means that achieving cultural capital distinction is competitive and essential. This is therefore the reason and motivation for Chinese students and parents to be willing and in need of economic and social capital to invest in education.

### **Comparison - Applying Bourdieu's reproduction theory in cases**

Bourdieu has developed a complete theory of educational reproduction, and this paper determines whether Bourdieu can explain educational inequality in China by comparing the degree of overlap between his theory and the Chinese cases. The paper finds that there are many similarities between Bourdieu's theory of educational reproduction and the actual situation in China, and that the Chinese case has been demonstrated by scholars through theoretical analysis and empirical research. The using of Bourdieu's explanation of the Chinese situation is mainly in terms of

education policies and social stratification.

Social stratification can be divided into middle class and working class, which in the case of this paper corresponds to high SES- and low SES- families. Mackenzie et al. (2022) conclude that middle-class parents develop academic habitus, while students from working-class families show practical habitus.

Differences in the development of habitus arise from the economic capital and educational plans of parents. For school district policies, economic capital purchases cultural capital through the purchase of school district housing. Families with higher incomes are freer to choose their educational programmes. In addition, middle-class parents are more likely to see education as a long-term investment and focus on lifelong educational returns. This pattern in Bourdieu's case is consistent with the results of empirical research in China. Zhu (2018) and Gao (2020) both analyse how parents' educational expectations of their children and educational planning can help them in their educational development. However, in previous studies in China, this depends mainly on the parents' level of education, while there is no direct correlation between the way children are raised and their parents' economic status. For a further explanation of this link, Yang and Liu (2016) note that higher levels of education lead to more opportunities for social development and higher incomes when controlling for impersonal variables. Bourdieu's theory can therefore explain the Chinese cases by the fact that parents with higher levels of education pay more for their children's education and help them achieve higher levels of education through more rational and long-term educational planning and adequate economic capital. This creates a cycle

that includes educational attainment and economic capital.

Regarding the intergenerational transmission of class power, Bourdieu (2000) argues that it is reproduced through symbolic capital, which is not the main situation in China. Symbolic capital refers mainly to reputation and prestige. However, there is no Chinese literature on the prevalence of parents' reputations in China in terms of helping their children's education. Social status plays a greater role than reputation. Parents with high status in the workplace (Gao, 2019), high social status, privilege and strong social connections (Wu & Wang, 2008) are more likely to provide their children with access to high-quality education. Children of privileged parents receive special attention at school (Qiao, 2006), meaning they receive more educational resources at the school and class levels. Thus, rather than using symbolic capital, in Chinese cases social capital is a common way of accessing quality education opportunities.

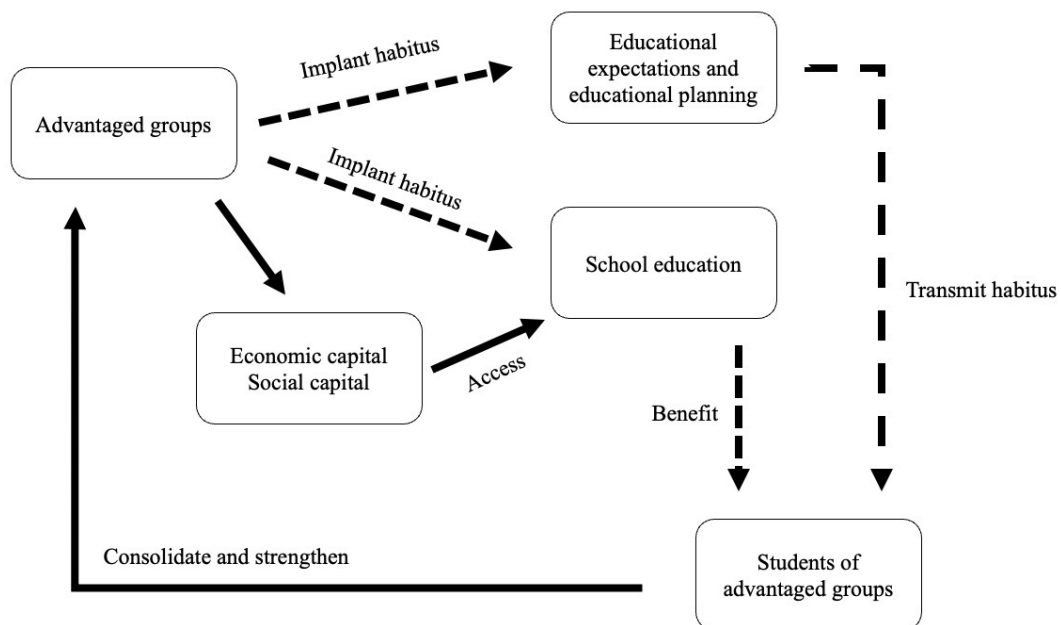
Bourdieu points out that inequality is maintained by educational policies and structures (Mackenzie et al., 2022). This is in line with the educational situation in China, as educational inequality is indeed a consequence of policy in these two cases particularly. Structures can be divided into social and educational structures. The maintenance of inequality by the social structure is reflected in the fact that the cycle of income inequality to educational inequality leads to the difficulty of breaking down pre-existing social classes. In China's educational structure, students in key schools and classes are at the higher levels of the hierarchy and have a higher probability of achieving. The shift from cultural to economic and social capital, and the high

investment in children's education by high SES families, confirms the role of educational structures in maintaining inequality.

The comparative result is that Bourdieu's theory of educational reproduction can explain current educational inequality in China in economic and policy terms. The cycle between economic and educational capital, combined with policy and social class effects, makes it difficult to reduce educational inequality as society progresses, but rather to maintain or deepen it.

### Mechanism analysis

Bourdieu's (1986) mechanism is that educational certificates representing cultural capital lead to economic capital. In the case of China, parents' education level and social status are also present in the cycle. The circular mechanism that includes education level, income level, social status and capability is represented in Figure 1.





## Figure 1

In this mechanism, the high education levels of parents generate their educational expectations and long-term educational plans for their children. Those with higher levels of education will have higher incomes and higher occupational and social status, representing more economic and social capital. The accumulation of this capital extends their capacity of getting high-quality education resources.

Assuming that these parents choose to realise the functioning of letting their children get into good schools or classes, this mechanism is then cycled through their children's generation, and then continues through the intergenerational cycle. The children of low SES families can only participate in this cycle by working hard to get into good universities, yet they cannot join in at any of the other steps. This closed-loop monopoly on quality educational resources is therefore the cause and mechanism that contributes to the perpetuation of educational inequality.

While the mechanisms in Figure 1 explain the current state of the cycle and deepening of educational inequality, the history of educational inequality is deep and entrenched. Achieving inequality mitigation also requires an understanding of the motivations for the persistence of inequality. In addition to the cycle between capitals mentioned earlier, Bourdieu has a complementary perspective on social stratification. The integration of economic and cultural capital helps people in higher social classes to embed their institutions and values in schooling (Bourdieu, 1971a), so that they can maintain their status over time. Therefore, the introduction of habitus in the mechanism is necessary. The education system favours the habitus of the middle and

upper classes, making the education system favourable to the advantaged groups. The advantaged groups are more likely to produce educational achievements as a means of securing their social position. The role and function of the habitus in the education system can be represented as Figure 2.

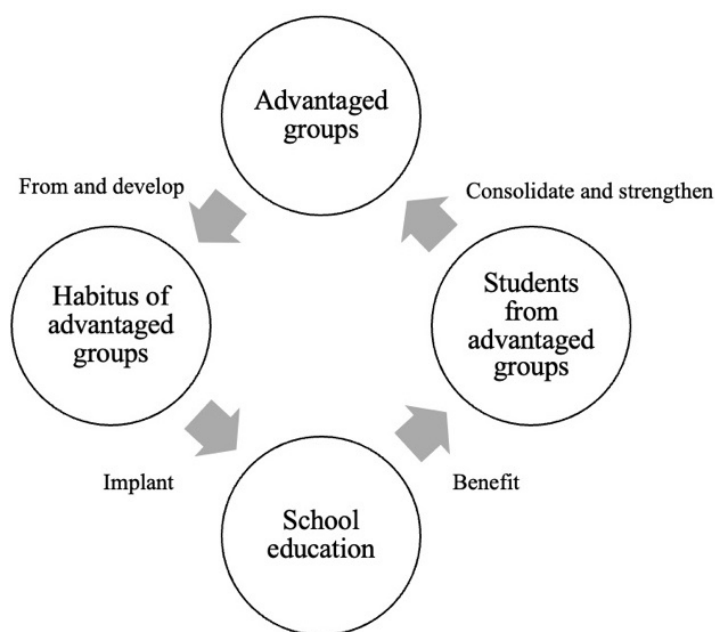


Figure 2

The relationship between these two mechanisms is that the mechanism of habitus explains the existence of the mechanism of capital and the reasons for each step in it.

The influence of habitus on the school system makes the admission and training system more favourable to the advantaged group so it is difficult for general students to achieve educational success. This also explains the closed loop of the capital mechanism. The existence of the closed loop means that each step becomes the only way to the next stage (although in reality there are always other possibilities).

Habitus leads to deeper segregation between the advantaged and the disadvantaged groups. The link between these two mechanisms also lies in the

perception of well-educated parents. Since habitus includes tendencies and habits such as behavioural habits, social attitudes and tastes, this paper assumes that these parents' habitus influences their planning for education for their children. These parents may subconsciously plan their development in ways and paths that are more consistent with the advantaged group's habitus. Thus, in addition to having a long-term vision for human development, parents' expectations of their children can also be interpreted as a consolidation of the upper class. Combining these two mechanisms results in Figure 3, where the dotted line indicates the way in which habitus works.

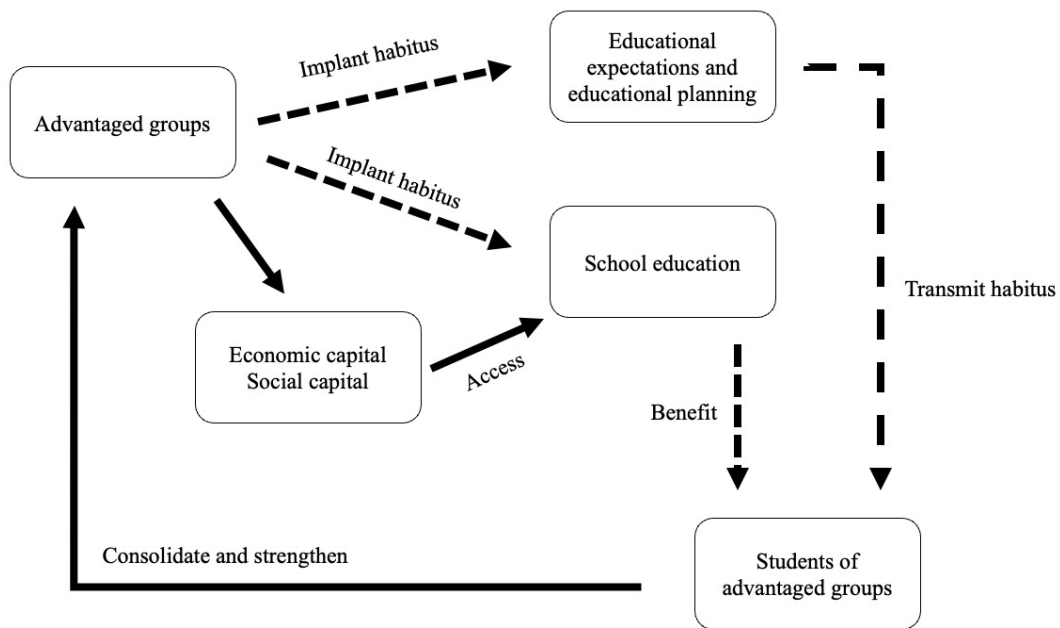


Figure 3

### *Conclusion*

The analysis in this paper starts with Sen's capability approach and finds that

people have different capabilities to enter key schools and to receive quality educational resources. According to Bourdieu's definition of capital, high SES families are accompanied by high cultural and symbolic capital in addition to economic and social capital. The main reason for the desire and competition for educational resources among Chinese students and parents is the huge variation in the quality of university education in China, resulting in severe competition for entrance examinations. Furthermore, the economic and social capital that university graduates can obtain in the labour market varies extremely. A comprehensive review of previous literature and theory suggests that the education-economic-social status cycle for advantaged groups is fraught with negative impacts on disadvantaged groups and low-SES families, and that the way in which capital and status are transmitted hinders their access to resources.

### **Policy recommendations**

Governments should increase investment in education and allocate educational resources rationally. The distribution can be not equally divided but in favour of disadvantaged groups to fill the current inequality gap. This paper argues that equal sharing of public education resources does not limit people's freedom to enhance their education. There are alternative ways of accessing education, such as private educational institutions and private training institutions. People have access to additional educational resources for both basic and additional education. It is worth

noting that policymakers need to be careful to avoid conversions of congestion from public resources to private ones. If public education becomes equal but not of high quality, people will concentrate on extra-curricular training. Since most extra-curricular training is private, an increase in demand will immediately lead to a shortage of private education resources and higher prices. If people can only compete in the education system by acquiring more private education resources, then the disadvantaged will still not have sufficient access to quality education resources and educational inequality will remain.

Previous scholars have concluded that one of the reasons for the continued existence of key schools and classes is the distinction between "key" and "non-key" high schools and universities. The demand for "key schools" and the competition for limited quality educational resources is sinking from high schools and universities to the compulsory education stage. It is therefore necessary not only to promote equality in primary and secondary education, but also to invest more educational resources in the development of "non-key" high schools and universities.

The implementation of education policies needs to be more effective. Li (2019) points out that delays and semi-transparency are hindrances when governments implement educational or economic policies. Semi-transparency refers to implementation and planning discrepancies in the implementation of policies. Governments should also monitor the entry requirements of individual schools to ensure parity for all groups, or in favour of disadvantaged groups. Therefore, the government should strengthen the implementation and monitoring of education

policies.

### **Limitations and suggestions for further research**

The limitation of this paper is that the analysis of these two cases in China is specific to a particular period and situation, and therefore the findings may not be applicable to other countries or situations. In addition, this paper focuses on the entirety of China, but the country is geographically diverse, with differences in income and education levels, competitive pressures, and population density within each province. Therefore, each region or province may differ in terms of policies and mechanisms. More empirical analysis and social and historical theoretical support are needed to determine the extent to which the mechanisms in this paper are used for cities and other countries. In exploring mechanisms, the analysis in this paper focuses on how advantaged groups gain access to more educational resources and consolidate their social class, rather than analysing in detail how disadvantaged groups are excluded from this educational and social system. Future research could therefore focus more on mechanisms that apply to disadvantaged groups.

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