

Analysis of the School Choice under China's Compulsory Education Based on Educational Equity

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Abstract: The root cause of the recent surge in school choice in China's compulsory education stage is the imbalance of educational resources. School choice is an objective expression of people's demand for better schools and education for their children after the popularization of compulsory education. However, due to the limited educational resources in China, various methods have been adopted to achieve the goal. This paper explores the issue of educational equity from the perspective of school choice in compulsory education by starting from the surge in school choice and its current situation, using qualitative research to analyse the relationship between the advantages and disadvantages of school choice and educational equity, and finally exploring solutions to the problem of the surge in school choice, so as to provide some ideas for the development of educational equity. Conclusions can be drawn that, to solve the problem of school choice, it is necessary for multiple parties to work together in order to address both the symptoms and the root causes.

Keywords: educational equity, compulsory education, school choice, educational resource

1. Introduction

In the early 1990s, as the economy developed and people's living standards were improved, parents paid more and more attention to their children's education. Many parents spared no expense, in order to get their children into selective schools. For over a decade, parents have been keen to choose schools, and the explicit restrictions imposed by the education administration have not been able to stop their enthusiasm. This paper focuses on the issue of school choice in compulsory education because it is the most controversial issue in both government and educational theory. The education administration has explicitly forbidden it, but the reality is that it is forbidden and growing in intensity. Educational theorists also have different views on this issue, making it an unresolved issue in the field of education [1]. This paper conducts qualitative research and comparative analysis on the emergence and current situation of the problem of school choice in compulsory education, the pros and cons of school choice from the perspective of educational equity, and the ways to solve the problem. In response to the reasons for the emergence of the problem of the surge in school choice, this paper elaborates on its intrinsic link with educational equity and proposes solutions.

2. The Emergence and Problems of the School Choice under Compulsory Education

School choice is an act of spontaneous choice by students and their families to choose a selective school to help their children's studies, given the lack of quality educational resources and unequal educational opportunities provided by society. In reality, however, school choice is common and objective at all stages of society, and no two or more schools in society are exactly the same [2]. The emergence of school choice reflects, to some extent, the freedom to choose schools that allow students to access better learning resources and lay the foundations for further study. The desire to learn is a good thing, but the practice of school choice has now become a default means among parents to get their children into good schools, and parents are choosing schools by using all kinds of social connections and paying expensive school choice fees to get their children into selective schools, which has led to a surge in school choice [2]. This is a perverse product of the context of educational equity.

There are certain historical reasons for the formation of the surge in school choice driven by the examination-based education system in China, and under the deep influence of the current examination system and compulsory education system in China, parents generally have a psychological expectation that their children will excel and make a difference in the future. Since the majority of students and parents are driven by this psychological expectation, the selective schools launched a vigorous pursuit [3]. However, contradictions have gradually emerged, focusing on the constant demand for quality educational resources and the insufficient supply of educational resources, mainly due to the imbalance in the distribution of quality educational resources.

Firstly, there is an imbalance between urban and rural educational resources. In view of the current urban-rural dichotomy in China, the government and the relevant administrative authorities have been studying effective ways and forms. Policymakers have tended to uphold the principle of urban first, giving priority to selective schools in urban areas, in order to maximize the use of limited educational resources. This continues to widen the gap between rural and regional educational resources. Especially in terms of investment in education funding, there has been a concentration of human, material, and financial resources in China for the construction of some areas, resulting in a large gap in the dormitories, teaching equipment, teaching facilities, and schooling conditions of ordinary schools in this category.

Secondly, there is an uneven distribution of quality teachers. In fact, school choice is also a choice of teachers; students want a good teacher and parents are happy with that [4]. The uneven distribution of highly qualified teachers is one of the main reasons for the formation of school choice. Teachers are seeking to make a better living. Generally speaking, teachers in rural areas are not paid more than those in towns and cities, and teachers in selective schools are often paid more than those in ordinary schools. The main reason for the loss of good teachers is the fact that they are not treated well and their benefits do not meet their expectations.

3. The Disadvantages of School Choice in the Context of Educational Equity

3.1. Exacerbating Educational Inequities

As the trend of school choice intensifies, the threshold of popular schools is being raised. School choice has become more and more popular, and this makes other schools unattended. Previously, the focus on school policies has artificially widened the gap between schools, and now, the surge in school choice has further increased the gap between schools. The massive selection of schools today has further increased this disparity, resulting in a vicious circle of stronger schools and weaker schools. In terms of equipment and teachers, selective schools have a clear advantage. In the admissions stage, it is, therefore, easier for selective schools to attract more students. The quantity

and quality of students are significantly better than that of ordinary schools. This is clearly unfair to other students at the compulsory education level.

For those families who are not registered in the school district, it is common for parents to use every possible means to get their children into selective schools. The fees paid by parents for school choice and sponsorship have helped to consolidate the advantages and development of selective schools. Nowadays, there is a distinction between so-called priority schools and ordinary schools. The majority of priority schools are able to improve their hardware and software with the help of their social prestige and reputation, and they can also absorb more and better students. In addition to the advantages of government funding and the absorption of funds from various sources, priority schools also take the best students into their own hands by accepting recommendations for the best students and by constantly raising the admissions line in a so-called “top” selection process [5]. The combination of strong teachers and excellent students has contributed to the school’s high promotion rate and built up its reputation. As a result, more parents who want their children to be a success choose to send their children to such ‘prestigious’ schools. In contrast, the majority of ordinary schools are significantly less well-funded and less able to attract good teachers and quality students compared to priority schools, which limits the development of ordinary schools and is detrimental to the development of their students and teachers. The situation of schools that were already disadvantaged has become even more difficult due to tight funding for education, poor teaching facilities, generally poor quality teachers, and a large loss of students. The massive loss of students from ordinary and disadvantaged schools, coupled with the fact that most of those lost are selective students with good grades, fail to complete their enrolment plans, ultimately leading to the inefficient use of educational resources and idle waste, increasing the overall cost of education to society and exacerbating educational inequity [6].

3.2. Affecting the Process of a Harmonious Society

Educational equity is both the foundation of a harmonious society and a way to achieve fairness. Fairness, in education, is an important element of a harmonious society. A harmonious society is fair and just, democratic and lawful, honest and friendly, vibrant, stable, and orderly, in which people and nature live in harmony. Fairness and justice, including educational equity, are the primary, inherent, and basic elements of a harmonious society. A society without or lacking fairness and justice cannot be described as a harmonious society.

3.3. Leading to a Vicious Circle of the Education System

The issue of school choice is a reflection of the inequitable distribution of educational resources in the national education policy. 3000 primary school students crowded the entrance examinations of prestigious schools and parents said it was even more difficult than the entrance examinations, which actually reflects the current surge in school choice in education [6]. This phenomenon is a product of the inequitable distribution of educational resources. Under the long-standing planned economy and the test-based education system, in order to train a group of elite talents, a number of selective schools focus on investment, and a system of selective schools at different administrative levels is set up, which exacerbates the imbalance in the allocation of basic education resources and leads to a widening gap in educational resources between schools in the same area and region, creating a group of schools with high-quality resources while creating another group of schools with a weak foundation, on the other hand, called “poor schools” and “rubbish schools”. This situation fully reflects the imbalance in the national education policy. Those who are eligible to enter prestigious schools and enjoy quality educational resources should not only be those who excel in their studies or who can pay high sponsorship fees. It is necessary to reflect on the purpose of

education, which should not just be for the elite and the rich, but also for the masses. In essence, it is a question of the education policy of the education administration. Children with excellent academic performance can be selected through examinations to enter prestigious schools to enjoy quality educational resources, and children of the rich can enter prestigious schools by paying high sponsorship fees to enjoy quality educational resources, but on the other hand, it is unreasonable to ignore the problem of how those children with learning difficulties, unsatisfactory academic performance, and whose families cannot afford high sponsorship fees can enjoy quality educational resources [7]. The disadvantaged groups with learning difficulties need more attention and help from society, and they need to enjoy quality education resources, but, in fact, they can only study in weak schools.

4. Solutions

The uneven allocation of educational resources is the root cause of the surge in school choice. The fundamental way to cool down the school choice surge and achieve equity in education is to make a reasonable distribution of educational resources. In order to achieve this goal, there is a need to proceed with the following reforms.

4.1. Institutional Reform

Starting with institutional development to improve the education system, the education authorities should focus on increasing their efforts in providing high-quality educational resources [8]. From a certain point of view, school choice is plunder of quality educational resources. In order to achieve equity in education, it is necessary to increase the total supply of quality educational resources, so that every educated person has the opportunity to receive quality educational resources, which requires the government to always adhere to the principle of public welfare, increase investment in education, constantly improve the welfare of teachers, especially the treatment of teachers in the countryside, and use legal means to safeguard all the legal rights of teachers [9]. While encouraging private schools, it is also important to strengthen the supervision of private schools so that they can actively establish educational institutions such as schools within the limits of the law and consider profitability on the basis of providing quality teaching resources. The education sector should also achieve synchronised development and progress between regions, urban, and rural areas and schools.

4.2. Optimisation and Allocation of Educational Resources

Selective schools were transformed into various provincial and municipal model schools immediately after the promulgation of the New Compulsory Education Law, but high-quality educational resources still remain within these schools, and, in fact, the phenomenon of uneven allocation of educational resources still exists. In order to completely solve this issue, the government and other administrative departments should identify the root cause of the problem and solve it by establishing a reasonable mechanism for allocating educational resources so that the government and education authorities can guide the development of education and always with the goal of a balanced education, thereby ensuring that high-quality educational resources can reach the areas and schools with weak educational development.

4.3. Strengthening Disadvantaged Schools

To strengthen the construction of disadvantaged schools, competition between schools exists and this objective gap exists as a result of the unreasonable distribution of high-quality educational

resources, in order to improve the situation and allow the development of weak schools [9]. Specifically, government departments should formulate and introduce policies to support disadvantaged schools, invest more in them, and give them priority in funding arrangements so that these schools can improve their running conditions and the gap between schools can be narrowed, allowing schools at all levels to develop in a balanced manner and progress together. The appointment of school leaders should be based on the principle of “seeking truth from facts” and the careful selection of competent, qualified, and responsible educators who know how to manage and teach [9]. The training of administrators in weak schools should be improved so that they can have more contact with other schools and create their own schooling characteristics, philosophy, and management systems.

4.4. Improving the Benefits of Teachers

Improving the benefits of teachers in weak schools is essential to the improvement of the quality of school education. The salary system for teachers should be improved and the management mechanism for teachers should be evaluated. The choice of teachers mainly focuses on the school's superior competitiveness, which, to put it plainly, is the amount of education funding a school can apply for, the number of excellent teachers in the school, the rate of advancement of the school's graduates, etc. Sufficient education funding can attract a large number of experienced teachers to congregate here. It has the ability to attract more experienced and excellent teachers through generous pay, which results in an increase in the gap between schools. The most effective way to address this problem is to encourage the movement of teachers between advantaged and disadvantaged schools through different subsidies so that students in disadvantaged schools also have access to good educational resources [10]. The subsidies motivate schools and teachers and allow teachers to be fully developed and to work in any environment, effectively reducing the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged schools. For example, in Shenyang, a city in China, the teaching resources of a number of schools in urban areas are consolidated. A subsequent survey found that the campaign had led to a significant reduction in the gap between schools and, to a certain extent, a lessening of the school choice surge.

5. Conclusion

Chinese society is currently in a period of transition, where new and traditional ideas are colliding with each other, giving rise to a variety of inequalities and spreading some ideas of inequality in society. In such a social environment, China's educational equity is being seriously undermined, and the surge in school choice is inextricably linked to the lack of social justice. In this critical period, education reform must pursue justice and fairness and respect the bottom line of educational equity, which is what the general public is willing to see. The country's education system and administration must have the idea of educational equity, and the government itself must have the idea of pursuing educational equity. Only under the infection of this idea can the education that society and the state can provide be free, equal, and non-discriminatory. Only then can equity in education be achieved in the direction of inter-school and inter-urban-rural educational integration.

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