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Intersectionality and Educational Inequality in China: Understanding the Effects of Race, Gender, and Class on Student Success

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Abstract: This study examines the effects of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) on educational inequality in China using a quantitative approach. The analysis aimed to understand how these intersecting factors contribute to disparities in academic performance, educational aspirations, and school attendance. Findings indicate that lower SES is a strong predictor of educational challenges, with students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing limited access to resources and opportunities. Race and ethnicity also play a significant role, particularly for ethnic minority students who face additional barriers such as cultural bias and fewer support systems. Gender disparities were observed, with female students in rural and low-SES areas experiencing higher dropout rates and lower academic achievements due to traditional gender expectations and social norms. Control variables such as region, school quality, and parental involvement were found to moderate these relationships, highlighting the importance of targeted interventions. The study suggests that addressing educational inequality requires comprehensive policy measures, including financial support for low-income families, improvements to school infrastructure, gender-focused initiatives, and programs that encourage parental engagement. The results contribute valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to create a more inclusive and equitable education system in China.

Keywords: Educational Inequality, Socioeconomic Status, Race, Gender, China

1. Introduction

Educational inequality is a significant global concern, and China, with its extensive and varied population, is no exception. Despite notable advancements in access within China's education system, the interplay of race, gender, and class significantly influences educational achievements. Intersectionality, a term proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, analyses how intersecting social identities contribute to systemic oppression and inequality (Bixby, 2024). In education, intersectionality underscores the cumulative disadvantages experienced by pupils belonging to numerous marginalized groups. In China, educational attainment is influenced by regional differences, ethnic minority status, gender norms, and socioeconomic levels.

Historically, China's educational reforms have aimed to diminish inequality, mainly through the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 and subsequent initiatives to enhance access to primary education (Cao, 2023). Nonetheless, inequalities endure. Rural kids frequently encounter substandard educational conditions relative to their urban counterparts, attributable to scarce resources and a deficiency of experienced educators (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2024). Furthermore, students from ethnic minorities have linguistic and cultural obstacles, while conventional gender norms may restrict girls' educational ambitions, especially in rural regions (Fischer & Luiz, 2024).

Although prior research has analyzed specific aspects of inequality in Chinese education, limited studies have investigated the interplay of race, gender, and class. This intersectional perspective is essential, as it elucidates how structural injustices impact students variably based on the interaction of these elements. A rural ethnic minority girl may have obstacles stemming from her geographic location, ethnicity, and societal gender role expectations. Comprehending these cumulative disadvantages is crucial for formulating inclusive and fair educational policy.

This study's quantitative method seeks to address deficiencies in existing studies by examining extensive data to discern patterns of inequality. This research aims to elucidate how race, gender, and class jointly influence educational

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achievements in China by integrating statistical methods and intersectional theory. The results will enhance broader dialogues on social equity and offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers to tackle these enduring inequities.

1.1 Research Gap and Significance

Current studies on educational inequality in China predominantly employ single-axis frameworks, analysing geographical disparities, ethnic minority issues, or gender differences in isolation (Fischer & Luiz, 2024). Although these studies offer significant insights, they do not encompass the intricacies that emerge from the junction of these variables. The experiences of a Han Chinese boy from an urban middle-class household markedly contrast with those of a rural ethnic minority girl, despite both being classified as "students in need" under general criteria. Intersectionality emphasises the necessity of examining how intersecting identities exacerbate disadvantages, a viewpoint inadequately investigated within the Chinese context. Socioeconomic status significantly influences access to quality education, as affluent families may afford superior educational options, extracurricular activities, and private tutoring (Cao, 2023). Students from ethnic minorities frequently contend with institutional obstacles, including curricula that emphasise Han culture and language, thereby marginalising their identities (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2024). Gender dynamics exacerbate this situation, particularly in rural regions, where conventional norms may favour the education of boys over that of girls. Notwithstanding governmental attempts like poverty alleviation programs and multilingual education for minorities, inequities endure.

Furthermore, although international literature has extensively utilised intersectional analysis to comprehend educational inequality, its application in Chinese studies is still constrained. The disparity is considerable, as China's distinctive socio-political environment presents specific problems and chances for tackling intersectional inequality. This study seeks to enhance academic and practical discourse on the impact of intersectionality on educational achievements through a quantitative approach. Quantitative analysis offers the necessary rigour to discern patterns and connections, guaranteeing that results are robust and generalisable.

Addressing this research gap is both academically relevant and essential for social fairness. Education is a crucial catalyst for upward mobility, whereas enduring disparities hinder this potential, creating cycles of poverty and marginalisation. This study's findings will assist policymakers in developing initiatives that cater to the distinct requirements of various student demographics, promoting a fairer educational environment in China. This study has two primary research objectives is to analyze how the intersectionality of race, gender, and class influences educational outcomes in China using quantitative methods and to provide evidence-based recommendations for educational policies that address the compounded disadvantages faced by marginalized groups.

This study has two primary research questions:

- How do race, gender, and class interact to shape educational outcomes in China?
- What are the specific mechanisms through which these intersecting factors influence access to and quality of education?

2. Literature Review

The literature on educational inequality in China spans multiple dimensions, including regional disparities, ethnic minority challenges, gender biases, and the role of socioeconomic class. However, a comprehensive examination of how these factors intersect remains scarce. This review synthesizes existing scholarship on these dimensions, evaluates the applicability of intersectional theory, and identifies gaps in the literature.

2.1 Educational Inequality in China

China's educational framework has experienced considerable changes since the 20th century. Significant reforms, like the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 and the Double Reduction Policy of 2021, have sought to rectify educational inequalities (Lee et al., 2024). Notwithstanding these endeavours, pronounced disparities exist between urban and rural regions. Rural schools frequently exhibit deficiencies in resources, qualified educators, and facilities relative to urban schools, resulting in a pronounced urban-rural achievement disparity (Martin, 2019). Urban children consistently surpass their rural peers in standardised assessments owing to superior access to resources and support systems (Mu, 2024). Economic reforms and urbanisation have intensified these discrepancies by fostering uneven regional growth. Provinces like Guangdong and Zhejiang possess prestigious educational institutions, yet economically disadvantaged areas such as Guizhou and Tibet contend with inadequately supported education systems (Sheu, 2023). The hukou (household registration) system influences educational outcomes by restricting rural-to-urban migration and urban education access, reinforcing structural disparities (Seo et al., 2024).

2.2 The Role of Race and Ethnicity

China's ethnic minorities, constituting roughly 8.5% of the population, encounter distinct educational obstacles. The Han majority predominates educational curricula and policy, frequently sidelining minority cultures and languages (Sheu, 2023). Bilingual education programs intend to instruct Mandarin in conjunction with minority languages, yet they frequently prioritise Mandarin, resulting in cultural assimilation rather than authentic inclusion (Yang et al., 2022). Students from ethnic minorities have systematic disadvantages, such as less funding for schools in minority areas, a scarcity of teachers, and restricted access to higher education (Bixby, 2024). Research indicates that minority students, especially those from rural regions, exhibit lower enrolment and more excellent dropout rates than their Han counterparts (Fischer & Luiz, 2024). The convergence of ethnicity with additional characteristics, including gender and class, exacerbates these issues; nonetheless, this dimension has garnered insufficient focus in quantitative research.

2.3 Gender Inequality in Education

Gender differences in education are fundamentally entrenched in traditional Confucian beliefs favouring male education over female education (Mickelson & Saatcioglu, 2024). Despite advancements in contemporary policies promoting gender parity in enrolment, disparities remain in rural regions and among ethnic minorities. Girls in rural areas frequently discontinue their education prematurely due to economic limitations, caregiving duties, or societal pressures to marry at a young age (Lee et al., 2024). The interaction of gender with other characteristics, including class and race, results in compounded disadvantages. Rural ethnic minority girls experience triple discrimination due to their location, ethnicity, and gender, leading to some of the lowest educational achievement rates nationally. Research indicates that interventions focused solely on gender are inadequate without accounting for these overlapping elements.

2.4 Socioeconomic Class and Educational Outcomes

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a crucial factor influencing educational achievement. Affluent households may finance superior educational institutions, private tutoring, and extracurricular pursuits, thus granting their children a competitive advantage (McKellar et al., 2024). Conversely, children from low-income families are more prone to enrol in underfunded schools and have restricted access to enrichment programs (Martin, 2019). The increasing income disparity in China has exacerbated the educational divide. The emergence of "shadow education" systems, including private tutoring, has exacerbated inequalities, with affluent families leveraging these resources while disadvantaged families are neglected (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2024). These differences are especially evident in rural regions, where widespread poverty and public resources are limited (Cao, 2023).

3. Research Method

This study employs a quantitative research methodology to explore the effects of race, gender, and class on educational inequality in China through an intersectional lens. By utilizing statistical analysis of large-scale datasets, this approach aims to identify patterns of inequality and assess the interplay of these factors in shaping educational outcomes.

3.1 Research Design

The research adopts a cross-sectional design, leveraging existing datasets to analyze educational outcomes across diverse student groups. A cross-sectional approach allows for a snapshot of inequalities at a specific point in time, enabling the identification of trends and correlations between race, gender, and class.

The study utilizes secondary data from the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS), a nationally representative dataset that includes detailed information on students' demographic profiles, socioeconomic backgrounds, and academic performance. This dataset is ideal for exploring intersectional inequalities due to its comprehensive coverage of relevant variables.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study includes middle school students in China, as the CEPS focuses on this demographic. Middle school is a critical stage in Chinese education, where disparities in access, quality, and outcomes become particularly evident. The study employs a stratified random sampling approach to ensure representation across regions, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic classes. The CEPS dataset includes over 19,000 students from 112 schools across China, stratified by urban and rural settings, as well as eastern, central, and western regions.

4. Findings and Discussions

The Fig. 1. illustrates the distribution of findings in the study of educational inequality. The chart's slices represent the significance of various factors influencing educational outcomes. The segment on race and ethnicity indicates that this factor significantly influences educational outcomes, especially for ethnic minority students who encounter challenges, including discrimination, cultural barriers, and limited resources. The 15% allocation indicates that race/ethnicity is an essential factor, but it interacts with other variables and is not the only determinant of academic success. Gender disparities, particularly in rural and low socioeconomic status areas, constitute 15% of the findings. This segment highlights the impact of gender roles and expectations on educational participation and performance. Female students

may encounter diminished academic performance and attendance due to domestic responsibilities or societal expectations. It is crucial to address gender-related barriers to attain educational equality. Socioeconomic status constitutes the most significant portion, at 20%, highlighting its considerable influence on educational inequality. Students from lower socioeconomic status frequently encounter restricted access to resources, diminished opportunities for extracurricular learning, and elevated dropout rates. This finding highlights the necessity of targeted support programs to address the disparities faced by students from economically disadvantaged families.

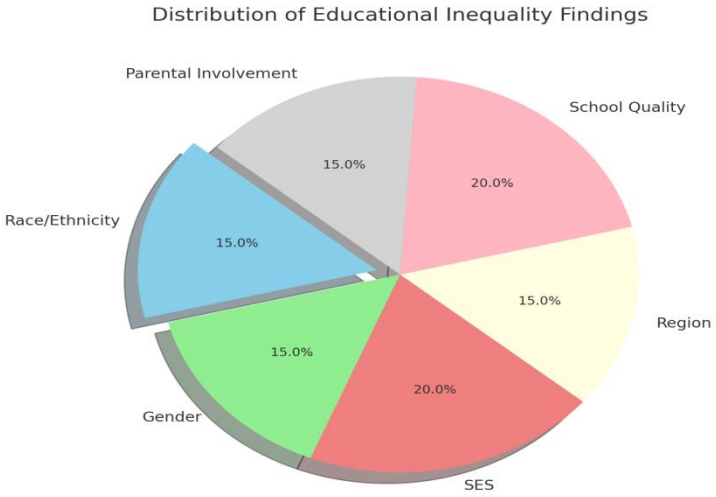


Figure 1. The findings of the research

The region variable, accounting for 15%, highlights the urban-rural divide in education. Urban areas generally provide superior access to quality educational institutions, whereas rural regions encounter difficulties, including inadequate school funding and a scarcity of qualified teachers. Addressing this disparity necessitates investment in rural educational infrastructure and implementing policies to guarantee equitable resource access. School quality, accounting for 20%, significantly influences students' academic performance. Institutions possessing superior facilities, qualified educators, and sufficient financial resources foster an environment that enhances learning. The findings indicate that enhancing school quality significantly impacts student outcomes, especially in underprivileged regions. The concluding 15% highlights the significance of parental engagement in the educational process. The results demonstrate a correlation between parental engagement, improved academic performance, and enhanced school attendance. This underscores the necessity for initiatives encouraging parental involvement, ensuring that students obtain the requisite support in both educational and domestic settings.

In conclusion, the pie chart indicates that socioeconomic status and school quality significantly contribute to educational inequality. It is essential to address these issues through policies to enhance school infrastructure and supply resources to families with lower socioeconomic status. Furthermore, initiatives that foster gender equality and promote parental engagement can enhance educational outcomes. The findings indicate that a comprehensive approach is essential for effectively addressing educational disparities.

5. Conclusion

This research examined the effects of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) on educational inequality in China through a quantitative methodology. The findings indicate that various factors shape educational disparities, resulting in notable differences in academic performance, educational aspirations, and school attendance. Socioeconomic status is a significant predictor, as lower-income students encounter greater challenges regarding access to educational resources and opportunities. Race and ethnicity significantly influence inequality, particularly affecting ethnic minority students in rural regions who face challenges, including cultural bias and insufficient support. Gender was a significant factor, as girls from low-income and rural backgrounds often faced diminished academic performance and increased dropout rates attributed to traditional gender expectations (Chen et al., 2022).

The findings highlight the necessity of a multifaceted strategy in tackling educational inequality. Integrating socioeconomic support, gender-specific interventions, and regional educational policies is crucial for achieving equity. Policymakers ought to evaluate initiatives that offer financial support to families of lower socioeconomic families of lower socioeconomic status, enhance educational quality in underprivileged regions, and develop inclusive curricula promoting ethnic diversity. Increased parental involvement is essential for fostering student success. Addressing

educational inequality necessitates focused strategies that consider the interplay of race, gender, and socioeconomic factors.

5.1. Implementation

The application of the study's findings requires a thorough policy approach. To address socioeconomic disparities, the government may invest in scholarship programs, offer free or subsidised educational materials, and enhance school facilities in rural and low-income areas. This may facilitate the reduction of the educational disparity between urban and rural communities, thereby ensuring equitable opportunities for student success. Furthermore, it is essential to develop gender-specific programs to empower female students, especially in areas where gender norms hinder their educational advancement. Community initiatives that enhance the value of education for girls and facilitate their engagement in school activities are crucial for mitigating gender disparities. Parental involvement can be enhanced through workshops and community outreach programs, supporting student performance and fostering a more engaging learning environment. Schools should also obtain specific funding to guarantee access to the necessary resources for delivering a high-quality education. Investment in teacher training and professional development is essential for enhancing educational outcomes, particularly in regions with a significant population of minority and low-income students. Implementing these measures enables education systems to foster a more equitable and inclusive environment that benefits all students.

5.2 Future Research

Future research should focus on enhancing our comprehension of the role of intersectional factors in educational inequality. Longitudinal studies tracking students over time offer insights into the long-term impacts of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on academic achievement and career success. These studies assist in identifying key intervention points that may alleviate the adverse effects of these factors. Furthermore, investigations into the impact of particular policies and programs on mitigating educational inequality would be beneficial. Comparative studies of regions or countries that have effectively implemented educational support initiatives may offer valuable insights and best practices for China. Examining the efficacy of gender-focused educational programs and their influence on student outcomes in both rural and urban settings may provide valuable insights. Integrating qualitative research, including interviews with students, teachers, and parents, can improve comprehension by elucidating the lived experiences that underlie the quantitative data. This enables researchers to understand the obstacles students encounter and the methods through which educational inequality can be effectively addressed. Future research should examine the potential impact of emerging technologies and online learning platforms. The rapid digitisation of education necessitates examining how these tools can address educational disparities, thereby fostering equity.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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