

What are the Determinants Influencing Equity in Art Education under Compulsory Education in China?

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Abstract: Educational equity means that students of diverse regional, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds have equal access to adequate educational resources and opportunities. Art education in China serves as a crucial medium for cultural transmission and fosters students' holistic development. However, at the compulsory school level, its accessibility and fairness are influenced by multiple factors. Based on an extensive literature review, this study identifies three key determinants: the urban-rural divide, socioeconomic factors, and policy and structural constraints. In terms of educational resources, urban schools have significantly more advantages over rural schools. Additionally, family income and cultural capital shape students' access to art education, often favoring those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. At the policy level, the prioritization of exam-oriented education often marginalizes art education, reducing instructional time and funding allocation. While certain policies have expanded access to education, they have not effectively improved the quality and equity of art education in China.

Keywords: Education Equity, Art Education, Compulsory Education.

1. Introduction

Education equity, defined as ensuring students have equal access to educational resources, opportunities, processes, and outcomes regardless of geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, is a cornerstone of compulsory education in China (Li and Xue, 2022; Russo and Ma, 2024)[1] [2]. Within this framework, art education stands out as a vital discipline that fosters creativity, cultural preservation, and holistic development, offering unique opportunities to enhance educational outcomes and promote social cohesion (Lin, 2024; Kraehe, 2017; Xue and Li, 2021)[3] [4] [5]. Exploring the factors influencing equity in art education holds significant implications for advancing theoretical understanding of educational equity, promoting cultural diversity, and informing policies that ensure equitable resource distribution (Holochwost, Wolf, and Brown, 2024; Kraehe, and Acuff, 2013; Wen, Yang, and Zhao, 2022)[7] [8]

[9]. However, despite its importance, disparities in art education persist (Wang and Li, 2018)[6]. This review synthesises previous research to critically evaluate the determinants contributing to disparities among students under compulsory education in China, highlighting both progress and existing gaps in the pursuit of equitable art education. To ensure relevance and accuracy, the analysis focuses exclusively on mainland China, as regions like Hong Kong and Macau operate under distinct policy and curriculum frameworks (Lin, 2024)[3].

2. Approach

Previous literature was collected from databases including Google Scholar, CNKI, and the online library of University of Manchester. Boolean logic (AND, OR, NOT) and phrase searches (e.g., "art education equity" AND "China compulsory education") were employed to refine results. Table 1 outlines the keywords used for the search:

Table 1. three keywords and related terms

Keywords	Art education equity	China compulsory education	Determinants
Related terms	Education equity; educational disparities; art curriculum access	Education reform in China; Chinese primary/secondary school; Government policy	Influences; impact; factors

Based on the 'Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China', laying the foundation for a sign-year mandatory education system, was issued on 1 July 1986. The policy was gradually deepened after 1990, aimed at reducing regional disparities, so the selection criteria prioritised peer-reviewed research articles from 1990 onwards, focusing on urban and rural disparities, resource allocation, policy impacts, and structural inequities. Literature primarily in English and some translated Chinese studies were included.

3. Key Themes in the Literature

Based on an extensive review of relevant literature, this study identifies three primary determinants influencing equity in art education under compulsory education in China. The

first determinant is the urban-rural divide, which highlights significant disparities in access to resources, qualified teachers, and curriculum opportunities between urban and rural areas. The second is socioeconomic factors, where disparities in family income and cultural capital significantly shape students' access to quality art education, with higher socioeconomic status often correlating with greater opportunities and outcomes. Lastly, policy and structural constraints play a critical external role, as policies governing resource distribution, curriculum priorities, and systemic marginalisation of the arts either promote or hinder equity in art education.

3.1. Urban-Rural Divide

In recent years, despite support by the government and society to bridge the divide between urban and rural areas, the impact has been limited (Xue, and Li, 2021)[5]. The advantages of urban schools over rural schools is evidenced by the greater availability of superior resources, qualified teachers and a richer curriculum (Holochwost, Wolf and Brown, 2024; Kraehe and Acuff, 2013)[7] [8]. Furthermore, they tend to use advanced pedagogies and offer diverse arts education programmes. Conversely, the participation and achievement of students, residing in rural areas, in art education is often limited by the accompanying problems of inadequate teacher numbers and substandard facilities (Herman, 2020)[15]. Gong and Li (2024) posit that it is imperative to recognise and address the existing disparity to enhance the overall quality of art education in China[12].

Firstly, urban schools benefit from richer and more modern arts education resources, but rural schools face a lack of resources (Zhang, Canestrari, and Marlowe, 2018; Wang and Li, 2018)[11] [6]. Survey data from Gong and Li's (2024) study shows the insufficient equipments and spaces for art education in rural schools[12]. The low variety of art programmes, as well as the lack of specially equipped classrooms, accounting for 79.05% cases, significantly impedes schools' capacity to offer a comprehensive art education. Furthermore, in this modern era, urban schools are establishing go a combined online and offline service platform through the internet to develop online art courses (Holochwost, Wolf and Brown, 2024)[7]. It is considered by Gong and Li (2024) that this may improve the accessibility and effectiveness of expanding art education resources to rural areas[12]. However, even if this measure is implemented effectively, the urban-rural gap still persist. This is due to the research contents of Herman (2020) and Li et al.(2016) that, in addition to classroom education, students in urban areas have greater access to resources with an art component, such as museums, art galleries and historical sites[15] [10].

Moreover, a wide disparity in the strength of teachers is evident across different areas. In respective studies of Kraehe and Accuse (2013) and Wen, Yang and Zhao (2022), both pointed out that urban schools generally have more funding, enabling them to employ a higher number of qualified arts educators and utilise the resources mentioned above to offer a diverse art programmes[8] [9]. However, rural schools frequently lack qualified teachers (Herman, 2020; Li et al., 2016)[15], [10]. This is also reflected in Li and Wu's (2023) statement, the shortage of educators in schools and the fact that the prevalence of a solitary instructor overseeing the curriculum for several grades. Teachers in rural areas do not have adequate training and professional development opportunities such as symposiums and academic communication opportunities, which are commonly offered to their urban counterparts Liang's (2019)[20]. By exposing to innovative and incorporate internationalised forms of art education through ongoing exchanges, teachers in urban schools show better ability to support a variety of art programmes (Liu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2016)[13] [10]. The same textbooks of compulsory education are used in China, but the content is often more suited to the need of urban students than rural ones (Li and Wu, 2023)[25]. In addition, urban curricula are able to include a more diverse range of artistic content, whereas rural curricula are more oriented towards traditional curricula or what teachers are able to teach. As a result, students in rural areas often miss out on the

opportunities provided by modern and innovative art education.

3.2. Socioeconomic Factors in Art Education Equity

Disparities in socioeconomic status (SES) significantly influence access to art education in China (Liu, 2023; Yuan et al., 2021; Ye, 2018), creating inequities at family, school, and district levels[16] [17] [18].

From perspective of family SES, Wen, Yang and Zhao (2022) explicitly make this point that families with higher income China often provide more opportunities in children's art education that enhance their achievements[9]. Also, well-educated parents in high-SES families tend to provide their children with art-related cultural experiences, such as visiting museums and art galleries, that further promotes the artistic interest and skill development (Holochwost, Wolf, and Brown 2024; Li et al., 2023)[7][21]. However, children from low-SES families lacking the knowledge and resource support for art education will start later, and the learning environment is relatively unfavourable (Holochwost, Wolf, and Brown 2024)[7]. Moreover, low-SES individuals may prioritise other subjects, perceived as more economically beneficial and view the arts as secondary subjects, which further elongates the participation of different SES groups in art education (Herman, 2020; Holochwost, Wolf, and Brown 2024)[15][15] [7]. It is not easy to those low-SES student to access out-of-school art education activities, enhancing their skills, because of barriers such as limited economic resources and family perceptions (Liu, 2023)[16].

At the district level, efforts to redistribute resources to underperforming schools, as highlighted by Wen, Yang, and Zhao (2022), address macro-level disparities but fail to fully bridge gaps within individual schools or across districts[9]. In art education specifically, resource-rich districts invest significantly in teacher training for art subjects, enhancing creative outcomes for students (Li et al., 2016)[10]. Schools in higher-SES districts receive more resources, enabling targeted interventions that improve educational outcomes for underprivileged students. However, high SES can exacerbate intra-school inequities by disproportionately favouring high-performing students, creating a feedback loop that widens the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Holochwost, Wolf and Brown, 2024; Wen, Yang, and Zhao, 2022)[7] [9].

Highlighting the positive contributions of district-level SES in improving intra-district equity, Wen, Yang, and Zhao (2022) demonstrate that schools in higher-SES districts receive more resources, enabling targeted interventions that enhance educational quality for underprivileged students[9]. However, at the school level, high SES often exacerbates intra-school inequities by disproportionately favouring high-performing students. This creates a feedback loop, where advantaged students receive greater benefits, further widening the gap between them and their peers (Holochwost and Brown, 2024; Wen, Yang, and Zhao, 2022)[7] [9]. While district-level interventions address broad disparities, they fail to resolve localised inequities within schools. For instance, resource-rich schools often attract more experienced educators, leaving resource-poor schools with under-qualified staff and fewer creative opportunities for their students (Wei, and Broome, 2022)[19].

To conclude, SES-based disparities in art education are primarily driven by unequal resource allocation, limited

access to qualified educators, and the absence of culturally responsive curricula. These systemic inequities disproportionately affect underfunded schools and low-SES students, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage.

3.3. Policy and Structural Constraints

Due to the focus of exam-oriented education in China, art education as 'non-core' subjects is often on the edge of compulsory education (Li et al., 2023; Irwin, 2018; Leong, 2010)[21][22], [23]. Thus, the equity faces serious challenges. Such non prioritisation leads to reduced curricular resulted in a decrease in course time, funding, and resources allocated to art classes. Holochwost, Wolf and Brown (2024) argue that such marginalisation diminishes opportunities for students to engage in creative practices that are essential for overall growth[7]. The same conclusion showed in the research of Leong (2010), who also highlighted that the rigid focus on high-stakes testing limits the integration of creative disciplines into the broader educational framework, impeding students 'holistic development[23]. Moreover, this approach perpetuates a narrative that the arts are less valuable than subjects like mathematics or science, a perspective entrenched in traditional Confucian hierarchies and policy frameworks (Ye, 2018; Hallinger, and Liu, 2016)[18],[14].

Although policies like 'nearby school enrolment' aim to address general inequities, their impact on SES-related disparities in art education remains limited, as high-SES families still access extracurricular resources that rural or low-income families lack(Wen, Yang, and Zhao, 2022)[9]. As Xue and Li (2021) highlight, these policies focus more on access rather than quality, leaving significant disparities in teacher distribution and resource allocation unaddressed[5]. The focus on theoretical frameworks over actionable strategies results in inequitable distribution of resources, leaving rural schools disproportionately disadvantaged (Li et al., 2016)[10]. Here is another example, the program of the 'Plan for special Education in Central and Western China' illustrate the government's commitment to addressing educational inequities (Li et al., 2016)[10]. However, its implementation is often ineffective, especially in the allocation of resources in rural schools (Lin, 2024; Xue and Li, 2021)[3] [5].

In conclusion, the equity of art education is closely related to China's education policy and structure. To this end, policy reform, equitable allocation of resources and rational implementation should be combined to address these challenges (Kraehe, 2017), such as expanding teacher training programmes tailored to poor areas[4].

4. Conclusion

Overall, there are abundant of researches about art education equity under compulsory education in China. As most of them point out, art education takes up a relatively small proportion in compulsory education. Policies aiming for equity often focus on increasing access art education but fail to improve quality, which leaves many schools under-resourced and unable to deliver effective programs. While efforts to address these inequities have been made, significant gaps persist in resource allocation, cultural inclusivity, and systemic prioritisation. The extant research on this topic has thus painted a firm picture. Perhaps future research can help to explore more depth curriculum development for rural art education and improve equity. The culturally responsive curricula can be designed to ease off SES-related disparities

while addressing the broader systemic marginalisation of art education in examination-oriented systems. These steps are essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable art education framework in China.

(1973 words)

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