

Maintaining Social Stratification in Education: The Influences of State Policies in China on Individuals' Well-Being or Life Courses

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Abstract. Based on organization theory, the paper focuses on inequalities within the educational system in China by discussing two types of policies enacted by the central government. Although an increasing number of scholars research on how states utilize policies, influencing individuals either in well-being or in time of transition, to stabilize existing social stratification, they lose sight of the importance of social institutions in linking macro and micro levels of the process. This article first introduces Compulsory Schooling Policy and Hukou system as instances of two contrasting types of policies and how school plays an essential role in carrying out two policies to penetrate social inequality. Then, the paper shows three different ways, unequal distribution of resources, limited choices offered, standardized assessments, of policies influencing individuals in education to continue social stratification.

Keywords: Education; Social Stratification; China; State Policies; Inequalities.

1. Introduction

State policies shape individuals' lives in economic, social, and cultural areas and change their life trajectories more or less. Although state leaders allege that in constructing a welfare state, which promoting equity, they spare no pains, not all state policies eliminate inequality and improve citizens' socioeconomic status. In addition, the efficiency of policies, which strive for equity, remains to be discussed. Some policies may be designed to benefit people by promoting equality, but they end up maintaining existing inequality, and other policies may intend to deepen social stratification to keep elite supremacy on purpose. To probe into the change brought by policies, concerns about organizations, the constellation of how people interact in a social space, come forcefully into play, considering that lots of policies direct at organizations rather than the mass directly. In other words, the state makes use of managing organizations to lead and govern individuals, and organizations are the bridge connecting state and individuals. This paper explores what alterations are brought by state policies to individuals in transitions and socioeconomic status and how policies stabilize existing social order by employing organization theory.

2. Different Types of Policies

Two contrasting types of policies could work together to deepen social stratification, although the original intention of one of them is promoting equality. The first type is policies changing individuals' timing in life course without altering socioeconomic status. In this case, Compulsory Schooling Policy fitting in the first type enacted in 1986 differentiating life stages by mandatorily requiring children to attend elementary school no later or no earlier than six. Noble in its ostensive intent, the policy strives to assure basic education for all children regardless of their social and economic status and disability and to narrow the economic gap. According to Law, "the average length of schooling among aged 6 and above rose from 5.3 years in 1982 to 8 years in 2004" and "from 1985 to 2004, the admission rate of primary school age cohort increased from 95.9% to 99.3% and that of the junior-secondary age cohort from 53.5% to 97% " (Law, 2007:180). However, the length of education and admission rate have a little causal relationship with social equality, and high drop out rates show a fact that social inequality is still deep-rooted in the educational systems and people's socioeconomic well-beings are not raised as promised by the government.

The second type of policy is which lowering or raising socioeconomic status without impacts on the timing of the transition. Hukou system issued in the 1950s is household registration records identifying and connecting people's information such as name, family, and date of birth. Hukou is a long-lasting label that represents role, responsibility, and rights, and is determined by parents' Hukou status (Fu & Ren, 2010:592). The main purposes to enact the act are to control rural-urban migration and to concentrate economic resources in urban areas to foster rapid industrialization, which is at the cost of peasants/rural migrant workers (Fu & Ren, 2010:594). Also, due to the astonishing size of the population in China, the government set up Hukou system as an institutional arrangement to drain vast countryside of agricultural goods. In other words, people born in rural areas are deemed to be inferior and suffer from persistent discrimination and exploitation because of Hukou system. Since everyone is tied to their parents' Hukou status and birthplace in few months after birth, the act would not alter the timing of transition in the life course.

3. How does Education as a Social Institution Penetrate Inequality

3.1 The Importance of Organization in Maintaining Stratification

Organization play a key role in shaping the broader racial hierarchy and structure of society and individuals' ideas, beliefs, frames of thinking via performing state policies. According to Scott's rational system, organization inclines toward leading participants to pursue particular goals via properly designed rules. (Scott, 2015:28-29). The education system, as a formalized social structure, governs and plans individuals' behavior with purposefully and precisely formed rules/policies to maintain and even reinforce social inequality. In this case, the government leads citizens to expected directions, that is ensuring promising prospect of one group at the expense of another.

The Compulsory Schooling Act has little influence on people's socioeconomic status, while the Hukou system even lowers people's socioeconomic status in rural areas. The low efficacy of the Compulsory Schooling Act attributes to that it realizes the universalization of basic education at the expense of quality and equality (Law, 2007:181). Compulsory Schooling Act and hukou system interplay to deepen the boundary between rural and urban areas in three ways: unequal distribution of resources, limited choices of rural teenagers, standardized tests.

3.2 Unequal Distribution of Resources

The urban-rural bond strengthened by the Hukou system divides the distribution of resources. Ray believes that "the power dimension of structures refers to the ability of schemas to muster material or social resources"(Ray, 2019:33). It means that the capability to exert resources equals power. Because of prioritizing the development of cities and rigid bureaucratic hierarchy, lower governments, such as county and township government, lack bargaining power with superior governments, such as provincial and central government, concerning the allocation of educational funds, while Compulsory Schooling Act nominally guarantees sufficient funds over the nation (Fu & Ren, 2010:595). Schools in rural areas usually possess poor teaching facilities and inadequately trained teachers, which lead to a lower length of education. Fu and Ren's research show that "in 2001, only 20.3% of primary school teachers in rural areas had finished at least specialized secondary education (Fu & Ren, 2010:595). Hence, not surprisingly, drop-out rates in rural areas are high, despite high admission rates. School drop-outs bring financial pressure on parents and further deteriorate a state of poverty.

Besides the imparity of material resources and funds distributed along urban-rural lines, people living in the countryside are exploited of time resources. People in rural areas put less time into learning, due to long travel distances to schools and expectations to handle housework. On account of the sparse population and a limited number of schools in rural areas, children spend tons of time in school commuting. While children in urban areas enjoy the convenience brought by school buses, their cohorts are suffering from less sleep and study time. Also, rural teenagers are expected to take care of siblings and housework, which oppress governable time resources.

3.3 Limited Choices

In addition to unequal deployment of resources, the Hukou system and Compulsory Schooling Law constrain social mobility by limiting choices offered to children in rural areas. Collins presents an outlook of the essence of education based on conflict perspectives: the graduation certificate is a criterion of selection and manipulation of members in terms of a status group to keep elite supremacy (Collins, 1971:1010). Generative knowledge can be learned in daily life and technical skills can be practiced in workplaces. In this regards, education has limited value in shaping talents. Even though some people acknowledging the fact, countless parents pay for a position in a prestigious school. Interestingly, the more expensive the school choice fee prove the better the school is (Law, 2007:186). However, school choice fees limit the choices of rural people, considering that most of them are subjected to poverty. Granted that there is no school choice fee, rural teenagers are still victims of the Hukou system restraining urban-rural mobility.

3.4 Standardized Assessment

It is unwise to neglect how examination-oriented education constructed by the Compulsory Schooling Act has been instrumental in widening the urban-rural gap. Standardized assessments, seemingly promoting equality, have long been a tool to oppress the inferior. As Ladson-Billings presents that “testing has become a proxy for student learning without any consideration for the differential challenges with which many students live” (Ladson-Billings, 2018:99), the popularization of standardize tests ignores an essential fact that students are not on the same starting line. Sadly, the standardized college entrance assessment is the final purpose of education in China. Expect for the ignorance of social contexts of teenagers, enrollment preference accelerates social inequality. Colleges prefer local students over foreigners because colleges need economic supports from local governments. Thus, Hukou linking with the likelihood of getting to leading universities imposes a constrain on social mobility.

4. Conclusion

The paper shows how the state policies in China influence individuals either in socioeconomic status or in the timing of transition and mutually deepen social stratification by employing organization theory. The paper concentrate on inequality in the educational system divided by the urban-rural line and quality of being students by examining Compulsory Schooling Law and the Hukou system. Hukou is reified as a credential labeling not only assigned duty but also resources and power in the educational system. People with rural Hukou are deprived of material and time resources and choices. Standardized tests further ostracize the people with rural Hukou by overlooking challenges they faced in social contexts. However, the paper loses sight of how the state policies influence citizens in other organizations. Effects of state policies on different organizations still need researches.

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