

# A Study of the Relationship Between the Weakening of the Social Mobility Function of Education and the Educational Equity in China

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## Abstract

The social mobility function of education refers to the function of education to cultivate and screen individuals so that individuals can adopt different positions and give full play to their talents after stepping into society. This function is of great significance to the stability and development of social structures, and educational equity is a significant factor affecting the extent to which it can be performed. Based on the current situation of the weakening of the social mobility function of education in China, this paper first reviews the specific manifestations of the current weakening of this function and points out that the “Matthew effect” is the root of the problem, and the classification of school education is the direct cause of the situation. At the same time, this paper explores the causes of the weakening of this function from the perspective of educational equity, proposes the two-sided impact of educational equity on the function of social mobility, and proposes discusses the “Matthew effect” in the aspect of educational inequality. Finally, this paper puts forward three suggestions for improving educational inequality, seeking to provide references for improving the current situation of educational inequality in the future and alleviating the weakening of the social mobility function of education.

**Keywords:** education, social mobility function, educational equity, Matthew Effect, social class

## 1. Introduction

The weakening of the social mobility function of education as well as the issue of educational equity is receiving increasing attention. The social mobility function of education refers to the ability of individuals to switch, adjust, and change between different social regions, social levels, professional positions, and section organizations through the cultivation and selection of education to give full play to their personality strengths, show their wisdom and talents, and realize their life ambitions (Wang & Guo, 2016). The function can fully promote different social class groups to obtain suitable positions in the social structure and rationally exert their talents to meet the orderly requirements of social production (Zhao, 2013; Liu, 2019). Education has become a significant source of motivation for social mobility. While education plays a positive social function normally, its function of promoting good social mobility is gradually weakening (Wu et al., 2013). This trend manifests itself in different ways in various spheres of society, such as the most prominent “Matthew effect.” In the field of social mobility, this “Matthew effect” refers to the continued polarization of social classes due to the operation of social capital, which weakens the influence of education training and screening in social mobility. “Matthew effect” indicates a bigger problem in education, which calls for further investigation.

The reasons for weakening the social mobility function of education are closely related to educational equity which restricts the nature and degree of education, serving as the fundamental factor in weakening the social mobility function of education. As the foundation of social equity, educational fairness ensures the rational allocation of educational resources in the whole society and leads to healthy and reasonable social mobility (Xu & Mei, 2020). There are still different types of educational inequities in different stages of education in China, such as unequal resources in the essential education stage, the inability to guarantee enrollment opportunities at the higher education stage effectively, and the uneven quality of the higher education stage. This kind of educational inequity hinders the formation of a rational social mobility mechanism (Xu, 2016). Therefore, an in-depth exploration of the social mobility function of education from the level of educational equity can help to alleviate the weakening of the social

mobility function of education.

This paper takes the weakening of the social mobility function of Chinese education as the starting point and discusses the reasons for its formation from the “Matthew effect” and the classification of school education. This paper first analyzes the weakening effect of the social mobility function of education from the perspective of educational equity and then reviews the impact of the existing unfair starting point, process, and result of education in China with critical comments. Finally, this paper focuses on three kinds of educational equity issues, further emphasizes the constraints of educational equity on the social mobility function of education, and puts forward some suggestions on promoting educational equality and weakening the social mobility function of education.

## **2. The Weakening of the Social Mobility Function of Chinese Education: An Introduction**

### *2.1 Background*

Education leaning toward urban areas is a thorny issue, and the gap between urban and rural areas indicates the weakening of the social mobility function of education. Statistics show that, in most cities, the enrollment opportunities have not yet been equal for each person (Wang & Guo, 2016), and the urban and rural population has a significant gap in access to high-quality secondary and higher education due to geographical differences. Not only are the urban and rural population’s access to schools unequal, but the value illustrated in textbooks is highly urbanization-oriented, and the choice of materials is almost detached from the daily life in rural areas (Huang & Ming, 2014). Given that they were born into an environment different from urban children, and the materials in the textbook are closely related to modern urban life, it is difficult for rural students to absorb knowledge. This makes it difficult for them to obtain higher academic achievements and, at the same time, weakens their chances of being selected by significant enterprises after graduation, which demonstrates how education fails to promote social mobility (Duan & Peng, 2018). From the perspective of educational equity and social equity, this inequality between urban and rural education opportunities is the most prominent phenomenon in terms of educational inequality in China (Huang & Ming, 2014).

The lower classes cannot effectively move upward with the help of education, and the phenomenon that education promotes social mobility is becoming increasingly conspicuous in its hierarchy. Statistics reveal that although currently, the chances for Chinese to receive higher education have reached 48.1%, and internationally recognized standards for higher education massification (Bei & Meng, 2018; Zhang, 2020), the quality of higher education is declining. The increasing number of college students has led to the depreciation of college degrees, and graduates with a higher degree from prestigious universities have more advantages in employment mobility, making it easier for them to enter higher social classes (He, 2018; Liu, 2019; Zhang, 2020). Moreover, due to some implicit rules of various capital forces, the advantages in educational resources possessed by the upper class are gradually transforming into educational opportunities for the next generation. That is, the children of the upper class have more opportunities to receive quality education than those of the lower and middle class (Li, 2006; Huang & Ming, 2014; He, 2018). The children of the upper class with more high-quality educational resources will be more likely to achieve higher educational achievements and thus have more opportunities to enter the even higher classes of society. On the contrary, the children of the lower and middle classes are put at a disadvantage due to insufficient high-quality educational resources. They have fewer chances to enter the upper middle classes of society, so they can only continue to stay in the lower classes. This phenomenon reflects the increasingly apparent phenomenon of social class solidification (cf. Wu et al., 2013; Huang & Ming, 2014; Duan & Peng, 2018; He, 2018). This phenomenon of class solidification reflects the gradual weakening of the social mobility function of education.

Education can be of use in different ways, which makes it possible to distort its educational function, and the social mobility function of education is caught in a vicious cycle and continues to be weakened. Ruan (2014) believes that today’s education uses the prestige of interests as a yardstick, which significantly distorts the physical and mental health of the educated and becomes a tool for pursuing goals, desires, and maximizing personal interests. Inequality in educational opportunities will lead to the loss of this important tool for upward mobility in the lower and middle classes of society. This effect directly hinders the normal flow of society, which contributes to an increasing correlation between family class background and the quality of higher education received by offspring, making it increasingly difficult for children of the lower class to access quality higher education resources (cf. Ding & Liang, 2010; Wu et al., 2013). The function of education is distorted, and educational mobility has been weakened, which gives rise to doubts over whether higher education can help one to move upward in society, and many are hence doubting whether education is useful at all (Le, 2018; Zhang, 2020); that is related to Huang & Ming’s (2004) view that there are no more achievers of humble origins. Education serves to construct social stratification (Hao, 2015; Zhang, 2020), so the realization of its function depends to a certain extent on whether it is possible to compete for

mobility in society. The invisible distortion of the meaning of education would result in more fierce competition in society and enlarge the space where social capital plays a role (Xu, 2002; Wu et al., 2013). Eventually, education fails to construct social stratification and loses focus on whom it should serve (Hao, 2015). In Wu et al.'s (2013) case of the imbalance of the function of the educational hierarchy, employment inequality is even worse for students from disadvantaged social classes (Wu et al., 2013). Therefore, this kind of imbalance in the hierarchical function of education is caused by the weakening of the function of education. This is undoubtedly a vicious cycle.

### *2.2 Potential Causes*

There are many manifestations of the weakening of the social mobility function of education, which not only reveals that education still has a long way to go in China but also exposes some adverse effects of social capital intervention in education. The reason for its formation is inseparably associated with the “Matthew effect of education” and the classification of school education.

The “Matthew effect of education” is the fundamental cause of the weakening of the social mobility function of education. Statistics disclose that education in China is unbalanced regarding resource allocation and geographical location. The 21st century has seen a trend to divide schools into “key schools” and “non-key schools” (Huang & Ming, 2014). This phenomenon shows that individuals or groups cannot have the same high-quality educational resources after entering the same education system (Zhu, 2009; Sun, 2010), thus social capital has a role to play, which in turn results in an exchange of money and educational resources, and excludes underprivileged group from quality educational services (Sun, 2010; Zeng, 2011; He, 2018). This is the “Matthew effect” in the field of education, that is, the higher the social class a group is in, the more likely they are to take advantage of various educational resources and their offspring to have more opportunities to move upward (Yang, 2012; Cai & Wu, 2014); the lower and middle classes of society have lost their competitiveness due to the lack of social capital, and would find it even more difficult to move upward (Huang & Ming, 2014; He, 2018). This effect violates the principle of self-consistency that social mobility should conform to (that is, individuals determine the direction of their social mobility through the knowledge and skills they have acquired and the influence of pre-determined conditions such as gender, family status, and wealth on mobility should be excluded (Zheng, 2003; Wu et al., 2013). It is shown that education has been gradually reduced to a tool for the “internal reproduction” of each class, and this internal flow has undoubtedly weakened the upward and downward mobility between different social classes.

The classification of school education is the direct cause of the weakening of social mobility function in education. The employment fairness of college students is embodied in the competition of their employment based on the advantages and disadvantages of individual ability and quality under the condition of excluding the influence and interference of external forces and excluding any prejudice (Wu et al., 2013). Although the popularization of higher education has made it possible for children born into poverty to attend college, most of them are enrolled in relatively mediocre local institutions (He, 2018). This indicates that when the number of university graduates in China has grown significantly (Wu et al., 2013), ordinary colleges are less competitive for employment than top universities (Sun, 2010; He, 2018). To achieve upward mobility, students tend to improve their academic qualifications to develop their employment competitiveness. Studies have shown that the improvement of academic qualifications is conducive to realizing long-distance upward mobility (e.g., Yue & Zhang, 2014; Zhang, 2020), thus making it easier for them to enter higher social classes. For example, the employment status of graduate students is significantly higher than that of undergraduates, and undergraduates are higher than that of junior college students, so the opportunities for graduate students to engage in technically advantageous industries will be significantly higher than those for undergraduates (Liu, 2019; Zhang, 2020). This allows students to indirectly solidify their social class after graduation through academic qualifications before being employed, which ultimately weakens social mobility.

## **3. The Weakening of Social Mobility in Education: A Basis of Educational Equity**

The weakening of the social mobility function of education and its causes are closely related to social equity. As part of social equity, educational equity is associated with the weakening effect of social mobility. This section will first discuss the two-sided nature of educational equity in social mobility and its impact and then delve into the formation, operation, and impact of the “Matthew effect” from the perspective of educational inequality.

### *3.1 The Two-Sided Impact of Educational Equity on Social Mobility*

Educational equity can motivate education to fulfill its social mobility function. Education not only has the function of disseminating knowledge but also screens, balances, and stabilizes social groups, thus positively affecting the income level of groups or individuals (Li & Ding, 2003; Xu & Mei, 2020). This theory shows that education can provide opportunities for individuals to move from low social classes to higher ones and promotes social mobility

and economic growth. Educational equity, on the other hand, connects education and social mobility as well as economic growth, which not only ensures that education gets to change society but also has an undeniably positive impact on the promotion of social mobility (Peng, 2017; Xu & Mei, 2020). With the implementation of the policy of universal access to education, China has achieved equality of opportunity in education. The general public has successfully enjoyed the fruits of education reform so that every family's children have the opportunity to receive an education. This has fundamentally improved the overall quality of the population and produced healthy and rational social mobility. In other words, ensuring educational equity guarantees social equity, which promotes the fairness of social income distribution and reduces the excessive stratification of social classes (Fan, 2019). Thus, it can be seen that educational equity plays a significant role in forming a reasonable social mobility mechanism and achieving social equity to a certain extent, and is gradually becoming a goal that China's educational development is constantly pursuing.

Education equity benefits social mobility and solidifies the original social stratification at the same time, it is undeniable that ensuring educational equity can positively impact social mobility to some extent. However, in Xu's (2016) empirical study of the relationship between educational equity and social mobility, he found that educational equity can also hinder social mobility (Xu & Mei, 2020). This negative effect is reflected in the popularization of higher education, including the college entrance examination system and college enrollment expansion. On the one hand, although the exam design, mode, and admission mechanism have been constantly improved, the college entrance examination has always emphasized the academic level of students. Doing so maximizes the equity of access, so the college entrance examination system works for all students who meet the criteria (Han, 2019; Tan, 2020). That is to say, the college entrance examination ignores the examination of students' comprehensive quality. The college entrance examination cannot scientifically position and evaluate the overall quality of students, making it impossible to scientifically allocate candidates in colleges and universities (Zhang & Huang, 2018), which in turn indirectly harms social mobility. On the other hand, while the expansion of college enrollment has drastically increased access to higher education, the large number of college students has resulted in the devaluation of a college degree. Moreover, the academic requirements of various enterprises and companies for talents are getting higher and higher, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for graduates to find satisfactory jobs. This indicates that the popularization of higher education may, to some extent, reduce the upward career mobility of college graduates (Mok, 2016; Wang & Zhang, 2017; Xu & Mei, 2020). In short, the popularization of higher education has made it socially competitive, while its social mobility has been indirectly weakened to a certain extent.

In sum, achieving equity in educational opportunities positively contributes to education performing its social mobility function, and seemingly fair education policies such as the college entrance examination system and the expansion of enrollment in colleges and universities are indirectly weakening the social mobility function of education. The two-sided nature of educational equity to the social mobility function of education deserves further exploration.

### *3.2 Educational Inequities and the "Matthew Effect"*

The function of educational equity on the social mobility function of education is twofold, and educational inequity will fundamentally affect social mobility and maximize its negative impact. The function of educational equity on the social mobility function of education is twofold.

The inequitable starting point of education inhibits the social mobility function of education. Equity in the starting point of education means that everyone has the unconditional opportunity to start their academic career. Since the 21st century, China attaches great importance to and has achieved equity in higher education opportunities through various policies. However, there are still various restrictions for lower-class families, mainly in cultural and economic capital aspects. From the cultural capital perspective, most families from the lower class do not have enough access to and knowledge of higher education resources to provide sound, visionary advice to their children, nor can they provide their children with accessible resource shortcuts. Hence, their children have fewer opportunities to receive higher education (Peng, 2017). From the economic capital perspective, due to limited economic resources, low-income families take many factors into account whether to choose higher education after completing compulsory education. They may even give up the opportunity to continue to receive higher-level education because of the high risk of academic and economic investment (Zhu, 2015). In contrast to lower-class families, middle- and upper-class families in more educated societies are more inclined to allow education to play the role of investment, providing their offspring with more financial support and a variety of high-quality educational resources so their children can progress to academic achievement (Yamauchi, 2010; Peng, 2017; Fan, 2019). Such pre-determined factors can have a negative impact on equity in educational starting points (Zeng, 2011; He, 2018), thus proving that

inequality in the starting point of education is a major factor contributing to the “Matthew effect” and is a major obstacle to the promotion of social mobility through education.

Inequity in the education process gives birth to the “Matthew effect”. Equity in the education process means that every student is treated equally in the education process. Due to the geographical differences in China, the inequality of educational resources has been reflected in elementary education. This uneven allocation of educational resources directly leads to students not enjoying the same educational resources upon entering the same educational system, thus generating an exchange of capital and educational resources. Analysis shows that “proximity enrollment” indirectly results in parents paying more to get their children into better schools because the distribution of educational resources is uneven. To provide their children with better educational resources, parents give full play to the power of economic and power capital to “choose schools” and the phenomenon of “school choice” in China runs counter to the original purpose of individual education (Shao, 2019). This phenomenon shows that elementary education, which is supposed to achieve resource equity in China has slowly evolved into a competition between family capitals (Fan, 2019), further indicating that the equity of the education process is the core driving force of the “Matthew effect”, which will continue to solidify the stratification of social classes. What is more, at present, China’s education takes the culture of the high social class as the focus of value (Wang & Zhang, 2017), and even some academic development requires a higher economic foundation. If the children of the lower class want to make achievements in society, they must first get rid of the various wrong cultural concepts and behavioral habits developed in the lower social class and then learn the upper culture taught in school (Zhu & Wang, 2014; He, 2018). In short, China faces the daunting task of changing the inequities of its educational process if it is to reduce the adverse effects of the Matthew Effect.

Result equity contributes to the solidification of social classes. Tolston & Zhang (1987) proposed that the traditional concept of equity in educational outcomes is the equality of opportunity for students to achieve academic success. Scholars nowadays, on the other hand, are accustomed to illustrating equity in educational outcomes in two ways: first, students acquire knowledge and skills that match their personal needs through educational development and screening, and fully stimulate their potential through education (Luo, 2020); second, students’ investment throughout the education process matches the return they receive after education, with a focus on the relative equity of higher education in promoting employment (Wang & Qiu, 2013; Qin, 2016; Xie, 2016; Zhang, 2020). It can be seen that student employment outcomes are a significant criterion for evaluating the quality of higher education. However, at present, the employment of Chinese students not only depends on their efforts and academic achievements in the educational process and is highly affected by family classes. That is, higher-class families with more social capital, such as network resources and economic resources, will be able to take advantage of those resources so that their children can search for jobs in a better environment after graduation, which in turn helps them find well-paid quality jobs (Xu, 2016; Xu & Mei, 2020). It can be seen that upward mobility is essentially the protected mobility of the higher social classes, through which the dominant class groups will make sure they can move upward, while the disadvantaged class can only remain inferior. This is the “Matthew effect” embodied in the inequality of educational outcomes, which makes education invariably a tool for the higher social strata to maintain their status and interests, and eventually puts the social strata into a vicious circle of continuous solidification.

This section discusses the relationship between the inequity of the starting point, process, and outcome of education and the “Matthew effect” showing that family capital (including the social class and place of residence of the family, etc.) has a significant impact on the level, quality and nature of education obtained by children. Children with different levels of education have different opportunities for upward mobility in society after graduation, which leads to family capital indirectly determining the social class of the next generation. It can be seen that social mobility is dominated by family capital, which manifests the inequity in Chinese education these days. Therefore, to change the weakening function of social mobility in education, we must focus on solving the fundamental problem of educational inequity.

#### **4. Educational Equity: Improving the Weakening of Social Mobility in Education**

Alleviating educational inequities requires attention to the impact of social factors on education and a targeted approach to conflicts. This section will propose recommendations to improve the current situation of weakened social mobility from four perspectives, namely, economic policy, cultural policy, education resource allocation, and higher education quality, and around three levels of inequity in the starting point, process, and outcome of education.

Economic support should be offered to underdeveloped regions in the field of higher education. Although the national policy of “compensatory education” for underdeveloped areas has made significant progress, for some underprivileged families, their daily educational needs are still barely met. Low-income families still have no choice

but to give up the opportunity to receive higher education in the face of the considerable expenses of higher education (Zhu, 2015; He, 2018). This shows that the demand for economic subsidies in underdeveloped areas has been at a high level since China's higher education became universal, so local and central governments need to continue to implement economic support policies. Local governments need to be aware of the wants and needs of people and fully understand the living standards of families in their areas so that they can provide real economic support to underprivileged families and reduce the impact of pre-determined factors on the education of children born into poverty (Zeng, 2011), to guarantee the opportunities for children from low-income families to receive higher education. Measures should be taken to formulate and improve the economic support policies for higher education. The government should invest more in underdeveloped areas through redistribution policies of a compensatory nature, to increase the financial support for underprivileged students at the higher education stage, and ultimately guarantee the inflow of resources to higher education for students of humble origins.

Effective implementation of policies to help the weak can enrich the cultural capital of families at the bottom. The dominant culture in schooling is often determined by the higher social class, which suggests that students' cultural capital is an important factor in their educational achievement (Xu & Mei, 2020). Therefore, in addition to offering financial support to the underprivileged, cultural guidance and care should be provided as well. Local governments need to focus on changing the perceptions and opening up the horizons of underprivileged students so they can be more confident and become participants in higher education. Eventually the underprivileged groups can be free from the cultural and psychological shackles of poverty (He, 2018). The state needs to care for the lower-class families as well as college students of humble origins, with enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility (Sun, 2016), to solve their schooling problem step by step.

Improving the quality of higher education can reduce the involvement of social capital and promote the employment equity of students. Measures should be taken to ensure that underprivileged children enjoy the same quality educational resources when they enter the same stage of the education system. First, the education department needs to beware of the gap between urban and rural education and change the value orientation of textbooks (Wang, 2007; Huang & Ming, 2014). The materials in textbooks should be relevant to the technologically-advanced urban areas, but also close to the natural rural life, so that students from different regions can accept the textbooks alike. Second, local governments need to strengthen the construction of weak schools in backward areas, treat all levels of culture and children of all classes equally in the distribution of educational resources, increase the tilt of educational resources to remote areas or "non-key schools", and promote the relatively balanced development of basic education resources. Introducing more quality teachers to underdeveloped regions can reduce the difference in teaching between schools in rural areas and those in developed areas (Zhang, 2014). Therefore, the government should invest more in education, improve the teaching conditions, and encourage more teachers to go to the underdeveloped areas or schools by raising their salaries. Third, there is also a need to strengthen the balance in the development of compulsory education in all regions. Currently, the overall investment in education in China is insufficient and the demand for quality educational resources is high (Wang & Guo, 2016). Sufficient education funding and equal distribution of educational resources at the compulsory education stage is the way to ensure equity in China's education process. In a word, increasing the share of investment in China's education and equal distribution of educational resources are fundamental paths to addressing inequities in the educational process.

Improving the quality of higher education can reduce the involvement of social capital and promote the employment equity of students. The best way to promote the equitable employment of students is to improve the structure and quality of higher education and build an equitable employment mechanism. First of all, facing the current situation of the devaluation of college students caused by the increase in the number of college students, measures should be taken to increase the investment in higher education and improve the structure of various majors so graduates can adapt to the structural demand of social production and appropriately reduce the employment pressure. Secondly, regarding the employment environment, There is also a need to introduce laws to restrict the influence of social capital on employment equity. Reducing the interference of social capital forces on graduates can reduce the negative influence of social capital forces on graduates in employment so that graduates can fully enjoy equal opportunities so that graduates can compete pretty for employment based on their abilities and qualities (Huang, 2006; Wu et al., 2013) to promote effective and benign social mobility. Finally, in school education, schools should cultivate students' correct concept of employment and encourage students' entrepreneurial behavior to promote employment through entrepreneurship (He, 2018). Measures should be taken to prevent the influence of social capital on students' inequitable employment concept, increase support for students from disadvantaged classes, and provide them with more employment information and job searching channels to reduce the adverse impact of employment inequity on graduates. To sum up, how to reasonably distribute the structure of higher education majors and how to reduce the

functional space of social capital on graduates' employment will become two issues that must be considered to improve the results of educational inequity in China.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the current situation of the weakening of the mobility function of education in China, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis and reflects on the causes of its weakening of the flow function of education, including the connection between educational equity and the "Matthew effect" and the educational inequity. Also, this paper discloses the relationship between the function of education, social mobility, and educational equity. From the perspective of educational equity, some strategies are conducive to constructing an excellent social mobility system. With the continuous improvement of China's education level, a growing number of people realize that primary education and professional education are closely related to an individual's ability to move in society after graduation, and educational resources are becoming increasingly valuable and desirable under the condition of the insufficient total amount and uneven distribution. Therefore, constructing a mature equitable system of educational resources is a crucial issue.

The limitation of this article lies in its lack of a microscopic analysis of the relationship between educational equity and social mobility. Therefore, future research can explore the role of educational equity in social mobility and social development from both the macro and micro levels. First, researchers are suggested to conduct theoretical research on education equity and evaluate the process of social mobility based on the equity as society progresses. Second, empirical research can involve various impacts of social factors on education from the perspective of social capital, especially in underdeveloped areas and put forward targeted suggestions to promote the realization of educational equity. It is strategically significant for narrowing the gap in educational resources, promoting educational equity, and enhancing healthy social mobility.

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