

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Inequality of Preschool Enrollment in China: A Narrative Review



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Abstract: This narrative review identified and compared previous research information to evaluate the inequality of preschool enrollment. Based on three leading questions, this review identified household registration categories, family income, and parent's education level as sensitive, definite, and solid predictors of preschool enrollment inequality. Moreover, an ecological model covering multilevel analysis will surpass the limitations of past empirical studies that did not uncover profound structural barriers. Future empirical research needs to test whether 5A1Q are an effective indicator to disclose the intricate reasons for inequality in a multilevel model.

Keywords: preschool enrollment; inequality

Foreword

Researchers were puzzled by preschool inequality paradoxes based on empirical studies. Competing theories [Maximally Maintained Inequality theory and Effectively Maintained Inequality theory] can both be partially supported by empirical data. Admittedly, it is challenging for scientists to depict the complicated panorama of inequality in preschool opportunities in China. Nevertheless, a multilevel model will help uncover the "deep-seated national myths (Hadjar & Gross, 2016)".

1. Introduction

To resolve "ru yuan nan" [low enrollment rate] and "ru yuan gui" [expensive fees], the central government of China ratified the universal preschool policies [UPP] in 2010 (Liu, 2010). Then we witnessed the rapid expansion of preschools across the whole country of China in the past decade. The preschools raised from 150420 to 281174 from 2010 to 2019, and gross enrollment in preschool education rose from 56.6% to 83.4% at the same time (Huo & Cui, 2021). However, researchers were puzzled by paradoxes: differing from the number surge of preschools, parents' sense of equity in educational opportunities declined (Zhu, 2021); public ECE provision is an inclusive and effective way to ensure equal access in European countries (Akgündüz, 2015), but it is exclusive for some children in China (Yang & Xie, 2015); maybe fiscal investment did not release but expanded this inequity (Song, 2019); child- and family-centred reforms aimed at reducing social inequalities, whereas multiple obstacles may exclude disadvantaged children (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). This critical review was intended to integrate evidence from 18 published empirical literature. The research questions include:

1) Which group of children does not enjoy the equal opportunity of preschool enrollment?

2) Whether the UPP narrowed the preschool enrollment gaps between upper and disadvantaged families?

3) Which theories have been applied to depict these unequal phenomena?

Finally, we will discuss the knowledge gaps in theory and measurement at the end of this review.

2. Which group of children does not enjoy the equal opportunity of preschool enrollment?

The literature retrospection manifested family characteristics such as household registration categories, family income, and parent's education levels as sensitive predictors of preschool enrollment inequality. Xing and Hu (Xing & Hu, 2015) revealed a significantly lower rate of access to preschool education for migrant children who do not hold permanent residence permits in cities compared with native children. And more indigenous children have been enrolled in public preschools than migrant young children (Yang & Xie, 2015) (Zhang & Yuan, 2011) (Sun, 2013).

The three main explanatory variables of family background were family income, cultural capital, and social capital. More than seven studies revealed a positive relationship between family income and preschool enrollment (Liu & Song, 2013) (Xing & Hu, 2015) (Xu & Han, 2016) (Chen & Chen, 2016) (Zhang & Huang, 2017) (Wang & Gong, 2018) (Wang & Gong, 2020). Moreover, Wang and Gong (Wang & Gong, 2020) demonstrated that family cultural capital significantly impacts preschool enrollment, especially among rural children and girls. Finally, parents' educational background is a sensitive variable within the family cultural capital index to forecast children's preschool access (Zhang & Huang, 2017). The higher the mother's education level, the higher the ECE enrollment rate of migrant children. (Xing & Hu, 2015). Xiang and Zhao (Xiang & Zhao, 2021) included all such

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family characteristics into their multiple regression model to support precursors' conclusions and introduced parents' education expectations as an intermediary variable to strengthen the chain of evidence.

Parents' vocation is usually used to signify family social capital. However, researchers did not reach a consensus about its' validity of interpretation (Zhang & Yuan, 2011). The possible reason is the differences in occupation classification. Though, scholars acknowledge that the likelihood for the upper classes to send their children to public preschools or high-qualified preschools is considerably higher than disadvantaged families (Sun, 2013) (Zhang & Huang, 2017).

3. Whether the UPP narrowed the preschool enrollment gaps?

Huo and Cui (Huo & Cui, 2021) distinguished the impact of UPP on children's enrollment and family expenditure burden based on the Effectively Maintained Inequality theory. The UPP expanded the opportunity for age-eligible children to be enrolled in preschools but increased the burden on disadvantaged parents. Low-income families pay more effort to pursue essential enrollment opportunities.

Song (Song, 2019) systematically analyzed three main conflicts during the process of UPP. First, the structural supply-demand disequilibrium caused by market and government failure sharpens the contradiction between the increasing enrollment rate of ECE and the scarce resources of quality and inexpensive preschools. Second, the improvement in preschool quality did not minimize the development gap between urban and rural children. Finally, the gradual increase in financial investment and the expansion of public preschools did not reduce the economic burden of disadvantaged families.

4. Which theories have been employed to illustrate these unequal phenomena?

There is a divergence between economists and sociologists in explaining the reasons for preschool enrollment inequality. Based on the hypothesis of economic man, economists evaluated inequality by comparing the cost and benefits related to educational opportunities (Yan & Sun, 2017). Besides, Gini Coefficient and purchasing power were also used to testify to the inequity of preschool affordability among families with different income levels (Huo & Cui, 2021). Additionally, Maximally Maintained Inequality theory [MMI] and Maintained Inequality theory [EMI] have been deployed by economists to portray the shifting trend of early childhood education inequality during the process of preschool universalization (Zhang & Feng, 2018). Nevertheless, scholars disagreed on the two theories' applicability in explaining the ECE inequality (Zhang & Feng, 2018) (Huo & Cui, 2021).

Stratification theory [including Bourdieu's cultural capital theory] and social exclusion theory have been used by sociologists to illustrate the inequality of ECE. The evidence to support a positive correlation between family income and preschool enrollment was sufficient. Gong and Wang's (Wang & Gong, 2020) paper epitomized the pattern of how to apply Bourdieu's cultural capital theory to present the gaps in early childhood education enrollment. In Yang's model (Yang & Xie, 2015), the social exclusion theory has been employed to illuminate why the public preschool waiting list did not include migrant children.

5. Gaps in theory and measurement

As concluded before, most efforts have been dedicated to testifying that family characteristics are significant explanatory factors. However, this analysis framework has been severely criticized as "being embedded in a neoliberal policy context" (Vandenbroeck, & Lazzari, 2014) and narrowly restricted to family choice (Scholz, 2019). The theoretical and methodological limitations will be discussed by comparing with a multilevel model (Gross & Hadjar, 2021), which comprises the macro-level of institutional arrangement, the mesoscopic organization filtration, and the micro-level of family choice.

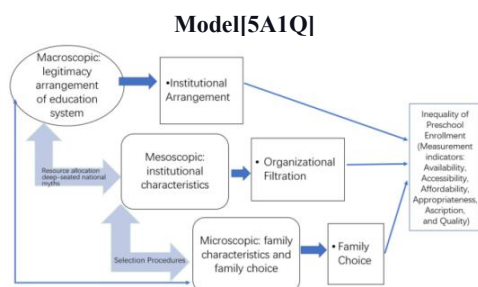
1) The institutional barriers to the distributive equity of ECE should be included in the macro-level analysis framework. Chinese sociologists prefer to use the policy interference model (Li, 2006) or the government-dominated model (Gao, 2016) to disclose the institutional or structural barriers behind secondary or higher education inequality. Besides, more and more European researchers proposed a model of structural barriers other than parental choices (Erhard & Haring, 2018). Nonetheless, the "deep-seated national myths" (Hadjar & Gross, 2016), which are the historical origin and reality fundamentals of ECE inequality, have been a concern by few studies. The structural segmentation in providing systems refers to the "Double-track Funding System" (Zeng & Liu, 2019), which is the crucial factor in "supply-led systems" (Akgündüz, 2015). Institutional transformation and social structural change tangled various entrance exclusion mechanisms together. Disentangling these intertwined rules is the primary challenge for researchers.

2) For economists, a historical institutionalism paradigm seems valuable. In other words, path dependency and institution "sticky" (Scott, 2014) are valuable tools to explain the controversies about inequity. A better explanation of the ECE fair paradox, based on former work (Song, 2019) (Zeng & Liu, 2019), asks economists to disclose the intricate relationship between institutional change and path dependency, norms and regulation.

3) For policymakers, mesoscopic organization filtration is a black box of policy implementation. We know little about the role preschools play in the process of inequality institutionalization. How do preschools play a role as a filter to limit the access of some groups of children? Do opening hours keep disadvantaged children out of preschool because their parents work irregular schedules? Effective targeted policies for disadvantaged groups require clear evidence from the meso-level.

As important as choosing a more explanatory theory is choosing more precise measure indicators. Nevertheless, an overgeneralized tool to gauge inequality in preschool enrollment in past research is ineffective in including the Macro and Meso-level analysis. Based on the 4A model (Erhard & Haring, 2018), we developed 5A1Q indicators to construct preschool enrollment's multilevel selective exclusion model (figure 1). Due to space constraints, this model will be described in detail in another paper.

Figure 1: Preschool Enrollment's Multilevel Selective Exclusion



6. Conclusion

More than a dozen studies have verified the inequality of preschool enrollment in China. The explanatory variables in the most commonly empirical model were restricted to the micro-level. Cross-country research proposed 'an ecological model' (Vandenbroeck, & Lazzari, 2014), which covers multiple levels (Gross & Hadjar, 2021) the micro-level [family characteristics], the Meso-level [organization], and the macro-level [policy or institution] and will tell us more about ECE inequity in future.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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