



A Comparative Study of Educational Policies in the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan: From the Perspective of Education Inequity Related to Socioeconomic Status

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Abstract. The phenomenon of education inequity exists in education systems around the world. The inequity level might be affected by the countries' centralization level and social structure. This article will discuss the inequity related to socioeconomic status in the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan and to what extent the socioeconomic backgrounds influences education equity in the three countries. Each country's policies in response to this issue will also be analyzed and the effectiveness of these policies will be evaluated. The impacts of nation's social structure and political system on education inequity issue and the effectiveness of various educational policies will also be discussed.

Keywords: Education Inequity · Socioeconomic Status · Educational Policy

1 Introduction

The concept of 'social justice' was proposed at the dawning of the 21st century in public texts throughout different contexts. The conceptual underpinning of 'social justice' was considered elusive and underexplored [1]. The definition of this concept differ depending on individuals' experiences. People's living place, own world view and their intention all influence their understanding of 'social justice' from specific aspects. A widely accepted definition, articulated by several international influential organisations, referred to some common vital themes when describing social justice. According to the definition of social justice given by the National Education Association (NEA) [2] and the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief's (OXFAM) [3], social justice was about distributing resources fairly and equal human rights. Elements that might lead to inequity were various, one of these key elements, as underlined by the OXFAM, was social-economic status.

The impacts of the gap in socioeconomic status were widespread and have been critique issues in different contexts. The inequity in education systems throughout the world has been existing for decades [4] and could attribute to socioeconomic differences. A concept of an equitable education system was proposed by the OECD [5] as every

student has the equal chance to reach the same academic achievements regardless of what socioeconomic position they are in. Though this could only be a fantasy, it raised the awareness of equity in the field of education and attracted scholars and educators to pay more attention to this concept. Accordingly, more theories and policies in this field were made efforts to make the educational settings fit with the dialogical view of justice and equity [6]. With the educational equity's popularity, researchers found that the inequity caused by socioeconomic backgrounds might influence students' experience of receiving education and their academic achievements. Specifically, students' socioeconomic background might influence their access to educational resources. In some cases, families in disadvantaged positions struggle to pay the tuition fees for their children. Hence, children from this kind of families might not be able to access the compulsory education. The situation can be even worse in a higher level of education since the costs of that would be more unaffordable for those families. Disadvantaged students may be forced to give up the opportunity of entering higher education since they have to work for money [7]. From both societal and personal aspects, dropping out of school would lead to negative impacts, such as limitation in economic growth, extra costs on public budgets [8] and higher risk of unemployment [7]. Even if the students did not lose their basic right of receiving compulsory education, poverty could also have negative impacts on them.

According to the Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) [9] research, findings demonstrated that students from the disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have difficulty in achieving the average level of academic outcomes in test subjects, let alone getting high marks. This might attribute to their families' financial position. Their families have no spare money to provide their children with any extra educational sources. However, those students from middle class or upper class families are able to get extra help from their parents or additional educational resources from after class lessons. As a consequence, with these extra resources and aids, those students from high socioeconomic status families may have better academic performance and higher achievements. In contrast, it could be harder for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve the same or average academic outcomes as other students themselves. However, being in a disadvantaged position does not mean that impossible to perform well in academics. Both PISA and the Education Policy Institute's (EPI) [10] research findings indicated that it was not destiny for those disadvantaged students to be left behind in learning. The attainment gap between them and other students can be narrowed through appropriate approaches. Education systems around the world conducted particular policies and reforms in response to the inequity in their own country. Different nations' policies were made based on the specific situation within the country and the characteristic of their political systems. Considering the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan have different levels of centralization in their education system, analysing these countries' educational policies regard to education inequity might contribute to a further understanding of the research topic in various situations.

This article will take the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan as examples to show and discuss the similarities and differences between these three countries' efforts in addressing inequity in the education context. The article will discuss the research

topic from the following aspects: 1) the existing political and educational systems in the chosen countries; 2) the educational policies in addressing the inequity issue in the three countries' contexts; 3) the differences and the similarities between those three nations' policies.

2 The Inequity in Education in the Three Countries

2.1 Inequity in Education Caused by Socioeconomic Background

The OECD has been investing in the inequity in the educational context for decades. According to OECD's statements, reaching equity in education is not the same as all the students getting equal academic outcomes in each subject. On the contrary, OECD proposed that whatever variations there may be in students' academic achievements, these should not be associated with students' personal background, including socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity [11]. In other words, students' academic outcomes could be affected by various elements, however, their learning conditions should never be one of the influencing elements. Thus, in OECD's consisting of research PISA, equity was measured by the relationship between students' academic outcomes and their personal background. Specifically, PISA aimed to investigate the extent to which students' academic performance, attitudes towards learning and self-expectations, are related to the socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity of students [11]. The higher the extent, the more inequitable PISA considers an educational system to be.

According to the latest data from PISA 2018 [9, 11], the relationship between students' academic outcomes and their personal background was demonstrated strong in some of the participated countries, which means that the education system was more inequitable in those nations. The gap between different countries' PISA results indicated that the influence of socioeconomic status on educational achievements varies considerably across nations. Meanwhile, countries' average reading performance is higher than the OECD average does not mean that country is more equitable than OECD average. In the United States, students' reading performance was higher than the OECD average, however, the gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged students was wider than the OECD average, which was 87score points [9, 11, 12, 15]. The situation in the United Kingdom was similar but slightly different from that in the United States. According to PISA 2018 [9, 13, 15], United Kingdom's students' reading outcomes were higher than the OECD average, meanwhile the relationship between socioeconomic background and reading outcomes was weaker than the OECD average. However, looking at the index that reflects the impacts of personal background on students' reading performance, United Kingdom's index was only slightly lower than the average, which means that the education system in the United Kingdom just achieved the average equity level among participants countries. Nevertheless, when it comes to Japan, it was demonstrated that Japanese students' reading outcomes were higher than the OECD average while Japan's index that represented the extent of the socioeconomic background was also greatly lower than the OECD average [9, 14, 15]. Though the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan's education systems were efficient in improving students' academic performance, there was an obvious gap between these three education systems' equity levels. In the following section, a more specific situation of each country's performance

in PISA and education inequity issue will be looked at, with an analysis of particular national educational policies.

2.2 Inequity in Education in the United States

The United States education system seems to perform well in students' academic outcomes but not in education equity. PISA 2018 [11, 12, 15] showed that the mean reading score of students from the United States was 505, which was higher than the OECD average and the mean score of the United Kingdom and Japan. However, when it comes to indexes that related to equity, the United States' data was just similar to or even worse than the OECD average. The percentage of variance in reading outcomes caused by socioeconomic status was 12 in the United States, which was equal to the OECD average. However, the rate in the United Kingdom and Japan was only 9.3 and 8% [15]. Besides, the score difference between the advantaged and disadvantaged students in the United States was 99 points, which was 10 points higher than the OECD average. These indexes indicated that the inequity issue in the United States' education system was serious, even though its national mean reading score was high. This might attribute to the United States; political and educational systems' characteristic—highly decentralization and local autonomy. The federal government grants local authorities' different levels of autonomy. As well to the political system, the United States' education system is also highly decentralized and composed of various practices, programs and school contexts [16]. In the United States, the interplay between students' and schools' socioeconomic backgrounds has a significantly impacts on students' learning experiences and academic performance. In countries like the United States, the school's socioeconomic condition decides the type of education students are acquiring at school, and the quality of education contributes to shaping the socioeconomic contexts of schools [11]. The quality of schooling in the United States is highly associated with the socioeconomic condition of the local neighbourhood. If the neighbourhood is in a advantaged position in socioeconomic background, the schools in that area can have extra support from economic, cultural and social aspects. With these extra aids, schools in an advantaged neighbourhood in the United States can provide higher quality level of education since they have stronger teaching equipment and faculty strength. This kind of school is supported by the financial capital of the whole neighbourhood where only advantaged families can afford to live in. The popular school might lead to the increase in house prices in their catchment areas, and thus, the school and the neighbourhood will become more unaffordable for other social class families and further segregate the population [11]. However, in the disadvantaged neighbourhood, schools may not have enough textbooks or not able to afford the teachers' salary, not to mention high-tech equipment and extra educational resources. School's disadvantaged socioeconomic background leads to difficulty for students to get the same level of academic outcomes as their peers from advantaged social status and to transform their social class in their later life. The quality of school system is highly related to the socioeconomic conditions of the neighbourhood leads to negative social reproduction and social segregation [11, 17].

To improve the inequity caused by the socioeconomic gap, the United States' central government conducted several educational policies in response. One significant attempt was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The aim of the ESEA

was to address inequity caused by poverty and segregation in education [18]. Through the reform, the federal government also tried to highlight the power of the central education department. The central government provides local governments with financial support to strengthen educational facilities, improve the local educational department, support educational research and aid students from disadvantaged families [18]. These policies aimed to ensure the basic right of the disadvantaged students and improve the inequity between schools. Though these policies imposed high financial and political costs [18], the reform increased the acceptance of the central government's role in education and encouraged critiques beyond neighbourhood and towns [20], which could be considered a significant step in changing the federal role in the United States' education system. However, granting authority and financial aid to local education departments without a corresponding supervision system or national standard led to problems. The money given by the federal government was abused by the local authorities. The funds were diverted away from the true educational needs of disadvantaged students and abused by the local government or school in other areas. Consequently, the ESEA failed to boost the academic performance of disadvantaged students and narrow the academic gap between them and their peers [20].

Learning from the experience of ESEA, the United States federal government reauthorized the reform and named it No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 [21]. The NCLB set standards for the funds they granted and established measurable goals for both public schools and students in the United States. For students, they are required to attend a nationwide yearly standardized exam. The results of the exam would be used to supervise students' progress in their academic outcomes and to evaluate the schools' education quality. Schools that fail to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) set by the federal government will be received according to the punishment [21]. By conducting a supervision system with national standards and corresponding punishment policies, the central government further increased its strength in the education system. The national exam and AYP contributed to the supervision and evaluation of the reform's outcomes in different regions. Meanwhile, the punishment policies put pressure on local government and schools to spend the federal funds on indeed educational needs of students, especially those from disadvantaged background. However, though improved from the ESEA, the supervision system still did not allow the central government to monitor compliance with the policies or engage in regional level interventions [22]. Accordingly, based on that limitation, in 2009, the federal government announced a new policy, the Race to the Top (RTTT). The RTTT changed the motivation for education reforming from avoiding punishment to chasing financial awards. Differ from the ESEA and the NCLB, the RTTT stopped allocating funds to regions automatically. Instead, as a competitive grant program, it only grants funds to those 'winners' in the RTTT [23]. However, the limitation of the RTTT was also apparent, as well as its innovation. Limited federal funds, vague guidelines and no specific penalties for failure will give the local government the opportunities to circumvent the federal goal and chase maximum flexibility [24]. Those 'winners' states might use these limitations to maximize their federal financial support and minimize the control of the United States central education department. Thus, the situation goes in opposite ways to the goals of the RTTT. Meanwhile, the disadvantaged schools and regions seemed to be granted less support from the federal government

since the RTTT focused on rewarding the leaders in education rather than helping the disadvantaged, which might lead to negative impacts on the United States' education equity.

2.3 Inequity in Education in the United Kingdom

As PISA 2018 [9, 11] demonstrated, the United Kingdom had a high mean score and a weaker relationship between students' academic performance and socioeconomic background. The advantaged students outperformed the disadvantaged students in reading by 80 score points, which was not significant different from the OECD average, 89 score points. However, compared to the previous PISA result, the United Kingdom narrowed down the gap between the two group from 92 score points to 80 score points [13, 15]. The 12 score points decrease proved the improvements in the education inequity issue in the United Kingdom's education system. Comparing the United Kingdom's education policies to the United States' reform, it could be found that the policies were similar and all focused on providing financial support. The difference between these two countries' policies' outcomes and effectiveness in education inequity might attribute to the difference in their political system and level of decentralization. The Pupil Premium (PP), was the education policy announced by the United Kingdom government in response to the inequity issue caused by socioeconomic status. Similar to the ESEA and the NCLB, it aimed at improving the educational performance of the disadvantaged students and diminishing the inequity related to social status [25]. Differ from the United States that give the funds to the local government and then allocated to schools, the PP directly provides schools with financial support and grant schools the authority to allocate the funds to disadvantaged students. Meanwhile, the national Department for Education provides guidelines for allocating those funds [25]. It was suggested that the funding should be spent on teaching, extra academic support, and wider activities through a tiered approach, which was much clear and specific compared to the United States' guidance. To supervise the use of the national funding, the PP requires eligible schools to justify their spending through publication of disadvantaged students' academic outcomes, or accept inspections by the Office for Standards in Education. Through the way of 'direct funding to tackle poverty' and 'targeting the improvement of education outcomes of disadvantaged students', the PP policy proved its efficiency in contributing to a more equitable education system in the United Kingdom. With the detailed guideline of allocating funding and independent supervision organization, the funding provided by the central government was much likely to be used in satisfying the education needs of those disadvantaged students and to help them reach their potential through schooling. Apart from the policy itself, the social structure and political system in the United Kingdom might also affect the effectiveness of the financial support policies. Differ from the United States, the United Kingdom has a much more centralized education system, which means when conducting reforms in education, government has direct power and plays the dominant role. This was hard to achieve for the United States' federal government because of its highly decentralized system in both politics and education. From the perspective of school funding, the schools in the United Kingdom were not funded by the neighbourhood as the United States' schools. On the contrast, most public schools' education quality is not likely to greatly influenced by the socioeconomic conditions of

the neighbourhood. Though there were also some gap between the private schools and the government-run schools in the United Kingdom, the gap between schools caused by socioeconomic background and social segregation was comparatively smooth compared to that in the United States.

2.4 Inequity in Education in Japan

As discussed in the previous part, the United Kingdom's centralized education system contributes to the improvement in its inequity issue to some extent. However, the success of the United Kingdom's PP policy does not mean that only the centralized government could improve the issue. Similar to the United States, Japan's central education department also authorized the local government some degree of autonomy in education. But the difference was that, the Japanese central government still maintained its dominant role and ensured that all the local policies were under the guidance proposed by the central department [26]. According to PISA results, Japan performed well in both mean academic outcomes and equity in education. As demonstrated by the data, Japanese students got the similar level of academic achievements in reading as the United States and the United Kingdom [11–15]. Additionally, Japan's data related to education inequity was also significantly lower than the OECD average. The advantaged group outperformed the disadvantaged group by only 72 score points, which was 17 score points lower than the average [14, 15]. This achievement could not leave the efforts made by the Japanese government, which conducted a set of legislation to eliminate the education inequity issue. The Japanese government showed its determination to improve disadvantaged students' academic outcomes and social position by conducting various education policies and revising long-standing legislation to fit with the changing situation.

The Act to Counter Childhood Poverty, one of the crucial policies conducted by the Japanese government, set its goal as mitigating the possible negative impacts on the disadvantaged students' personal development [26]. The Japanese government provides annual poverty data of different regions in Japan while the local governments design and implement practice policies to address poverty depending on their particular situations. Taking Shizuoka prefecture as an example, the local government proposed a particular education policy towards inequity in education drawing on the local poverty level and other comprehensive conditions. Differ from the United States and the United Kingdom's policy that only provide funding to improve poverty, the Shizuoka government identified priorities and provides aid from different aspects correspondingly [26]. Depending on the practice situation, the prefecture proposed policies to provide support in assistance with student's education, basic needs for living, parents' employment and finance. By offering these supports, the Shizuoka prefecture aimed at ensuring the disadvantaged students gain the access to the basic educational resources in school. Though impossible to provide local students with additional after-school coaching or better education resources in big cities, like Tokyo, the policy guaranteed the disadvantaged students can receive education and be less likely to drop out of school because of their disadvantaged socioeconomic position. Learning from the Shizuoka prefecture, another 184 local authorities in Japan also designed and conducted their own local policies to support the disadvantaged students. Later, the Japanese government revised the guidelines of the Act to Counter Childhood Poverty and expanded the range of poverty indicators.

The central government gave an overall guideline and granted the local government the right of establishing policies. Thus, the local authorities were authorized to implement policies to provide financial or academic learning support through coaching [26]. When allocating resources and supports, the local governments needed to assess the local condition to set the criteria of income level for applying for eligibility for financial funding and approaches to encouraging the disadvantaged students to apply for the supporting policy. However, similar with the ESEA and the NCLB, such policies have limitations in supervision, which might lead to abuse of the funding.

Apart from policies like the Act to Counter Childhood Poverty that focused on providing support, especially financial funding, the Japanese government also launched policies that reduced costs of receiving education. The Ministry of Education, Cultural, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan implemented the tuition-free programs to reduce the fees for students in high schools [27]. It exempted tuition fees for those students in a disadvantaged position and brought benefits for the whole Japanese student groups. According to the policy, public high schools should remove tuition fees while private schools were required to reduce their fees by providing subsidies for families indeed depending on their overall income [28]. Moreover, extra subsidies could be given by the local government on the basis of the national minimum funding level. Some prefectures even made policies to remove private schools' tuition fees entirely, which gave all the local students an opportunity to access the private school education regardless of their socioeconomic status. The tuition-free program contributed to the enrollment rate of disadvantaged families in senior high school by preventing students' financial situation forcing them quitting schooling. Later, in 2020, apart from reducing fees, the MEXT also provided extra financial subsidies depending on household income data [28]. Moreover, the Japanese government further exempted the lunch fees at school for those students in disadvantaged positions [29] and conducted similar policies in other levels of education in Japan [28].

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the inequity level in the education system could be affected by the social structure. In the United States, socioeconomic conditions of the neighborhoods could bring significant impacts on the quality of the school and education, which led to a higher extent of inequity [12, 15]. In the other two countries, social segregation and reproduction issues [11, 17] were relatively less serious since the quality of school curriculum was less likely to be affected by socioeconomic elements. Though socioeconomic status led to inequity in all these three countries' education systems, the social structure of the United States made the situation worse. Specifically, the neighborhood socioeconomic conditions could directly affect the quality of the education students acquire at school while in the United Kingdom and Japan, the impacts of the socioeconomic gap were mainly on extra educational resources and cultural capital. The educational policies in response to the inequity issue shared some similarities. The main policies conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan were all grant-in-aid policies that mainly focused on providing financial aid for the disadvantaged groups. The funds were all provided by the central government, however, when granted to the lower hierarchy,

the process differed among the three countries. In the United States and Japan, the funds were given to the local authorities rather than directly to the schools or the students. Granting finance and authorities to the lower hierarchy requires a corresponding supervision system and national standards, otherwise the funds might be abused by the local authorities. The United States lacks a powerful central education department to control and supervise any education reforms, which led to comparatively low effectiveness in addressing the education inequity issue. In contrast, the Japanese government had the strength to dominate and supervise the process of funds distribution. In addition, Japanese also launched tuition-free programme and provide extra help for disadvantaged families to further diminish the inequity caused by socioeconomic status. The effective supervision system and aids from different aspects contributed to a much more equitable education system in Japan. Differing from the United States and Japan that grant funds to local governments, the United Kingdom's grant-in-aid policies directly give the money to schools, which decreased the possibility of local authorities abusing money in other aspects. The schools were required to announce distribution plans to show where they spent the funds. Meanwhile, schools need to provide the academic outcomes of disadvantaged students to demonstrate they made progress in their studies with the help of the finance support.

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