The Impact of Shadow Education Governance Policy on Education Equity in China

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Abstract: *China has successfully implemented nine-year compulsory education aiming for raising the overall education level and equalizing education opportunities. However, the efforts done by the China have been undermined by the rapid expansion of shadow education to some extent. Predominantly utilized by affluent families to boost their children's chances of entering prestigious universities, shadow education has shifted the competition for educational resources away from schools and into private tutoring, thereby exacerbating inequality. In response, the China has introduced various policies aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of shadow education on educational equity. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of these policies using the ecology of equity framework, focusing on the historical period before the measures that were introduced in 2021. The goal is to shed light on the effectiveness of past efforts and provide insights that can guide future development. The findings suggest that while regulations are necessary, policy interventions alone are insufficient to fundamentally alter the status quo in shadow education. A more holistic approach that addresses family, economic, and societal influences is required to achieve meaningful improvements in education equity.*

Keywords: Shadow education, Private tutoring, Government policy, Education Equity.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on policies issued in China about shadow education and how does it further influence education equity in China. Specifically, shadow education is the private supplementary tutoring offered by companies and teachers on a fee-charging basis (Zhang and Bray,2018). The main reason for students to take private tutoring is to improve their academic performances in school subjects (Zhang,2014; Zhang and Bray,2018). It is important to investigate the policies about shadow education in China since China is estimated to have the world's largest shadow education market (Hao, 2019). According to the data, in 2017, over half of the students in rich north-eastern China were engaged in shadow education (Wei, 2018). However, many studies have reported that shadow education has imposed an adverse impact on education equity as shadow education is usually fee-based and is an educational service with commodity attributes rooted in neoliberal principles, which excludes those who cannot afford it (Li,2019; Zhang,2014; Zhang and Bray,2021). Besides, this commodification of education leads to the blaming of individuals for their own lack of investment in human capital when they experience educational failure, particularly in formal schooling, while ignoring the broader structural and distributive inequalities that are at play (Wang and Hamid,2024). The data reported in 2007 also support this argument -- only 30 percent of students in the poor western area in China once took private tutoring (Wei, 2018). Despite its prevalence, the nature of shadow education determines that it has a closer relationship with well-off families. As a result, the Chinese government's efforts to equalize access to compulsory education may be undermined by the widening disparities caused by shadow education.

Shadow education has been deemed as an area lack of long-term government monitoring (Hao,2019; Li,2019). Recently, the Chinses government begins to explore ways to properly regulate it by issuing different policies. As Wang and Hamid (2024) noted, tracing the historical roots in the evolution of education policy related to shadow education can provide a clearer understanding of present-day challenges.

Building on this, the research question focuses on how government-issued policies might impact education equity, using the ecology of equity as the conceptual framework.

2. Shadow Education in China

The Chinese government has achieved great success in expanding mass schooling and providing more opportunities for children to enroll in compulsory education, particularly those from the deprived background (Luan et al, 2020; Zhang and Bray, 2018). However, as the enrolment rate of the lower- and upper- secondary schools continues to rise, the competition in education is becoming increasingly fierce (Zhang and Bray,2018). Accordingly, as a supplement to schooling, shadow education has ushered in rapid development as well. In China, the exam-oriented education system and the societal culture which values education as a path to upward mobility, are key drivers of shadow education's growth (Hao, 2019; Zhang,2014). Urbanization in China also plays a critical role in the expansion of shadow education. As migrant workers move from rural areas to urban centers in search of better job opportunities, their children are enrolled in local urban schools. This influx of students has intensified competition for limited educational resources in urban areas, further fueling the demand for private tutoring (Yu et al., 2017; Zhang and Bray, 2021). In response to this growing demand, market forces have facilitated the rise of large tutoring enterprises, turning education into a commodity that caters primarily to anxious but ambitious families who can afford it (Zhao, 2015). This has created a contested field where different forms of capital compete for economic profits, while parents strive to secure better educational resources for their children, resulting in an increased academic burden for students.

3. Concepts

This rise of shadow education in China underscores broader concerns about education equality. As Lynch and Lodge (2002) argue, equality is fundamentally about the distribution of "material goods" and opportunities to participate in various

fields. Their view frames education as a commodity, emphasizing social justice from an economic perspective. In this context, the key issue becomes how resources and opportunities—such as access to quality education—are distributed. For the Chinese government, ensuring education equality means addressing these disparities by striving to provide the same 'amount' of education to all individuals, concretely reflected in education credentials (Tawney, 1964).

What needs to be noticed is that currently, a 'weaker version' of distributive justice which focuses on equalizing opportunities rather than equalizing resources has dominated the discussions in China (Tawney,1964; Archer, 2001). In other words, equalizing resources focus on getting access to the same quality of education resource for every student, while equalizing opportunities only guarantees that the disadvantaged groups have the same chance to receive education as others, but does not ensure that the quality of educational resources is the same. However, many previous studies argue that equalizing opportunities alone could not bring a substantive form of equality unless the basic social and economic rights can be guaranteed (Tawney,1964).

Compared with equality, equity is broader in the meaning in that it includes equalizing opportunity but also emphasizes providing more to help to the disadvantaged groups, which may contradict the idea of distributing equally among different groups (Unterhalter, 2009). However, it is argued that aiming to achieve the exact same outcomes is futile. For education, the OECD (2007) report named No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education, provide a definition of educational equity including two aspects: fairness and inclusion. Specifically, fairness means that personal origins and social environment should not be the reasons for individuals not being able to achieve success in education. Inclusion indicates that a minimum standard of education should be delivered to all. In this case, equity in education is more meaningful and realistic. In particular, for one thing, compared with the equality in resources based on egalitarian theory, education equity under the framework proposed by OECD is more realistic and achievable (OECD,2007). For another, compared with the equality in opportunities, its outcomes tend to be fairer for the disadvantaged students. While it is worth noting that till now, China has almost fulfilled the requirement of equality in educational opportunities, as almost every child has the chance to get enrolled in compulsory education. The focus has been shifted to how to ensure education equity. This is in line with what is promoted in Education for all (Rose, 2015) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015) which all emphasized the importance of establishing an equitable educational system.

4. The Ecology of Equity

The "ecology of equity" framework proposed by Ainscow et al. (2012) offers a comprehensive approach to understanding educational equity by considering the complex and interconnected factors that influence students' experiences and outcomes. This framework moves beyond the narrow focus on individual schools and classroom practices, recognizing that educational equity is shaped by a wide range of influences, including societal, economic, and policy factors.

"Within schools", equity issues primarily revolve around classroom practices, such as how teachers address the diverse needs of students. Additionally, the characteristics of the school itself, including its response to student diversity and its relationship with the local community, play a crucial role in achieving educational equity.

The "between schools" aspect of the framework focuses on disparities in specific local districts. For example, schools in rural areas often face significant resource constraints compared to those in urban areas (Yu et al., 2017). This section highlights the importance of addressing inequalities between schools that are geographically and socioeconomically diverse.

The "beyond schools" section of the framework expands the focus to a broader context. National education policies, for instance, can influence how schools operate, recruit students, and allocate resources. Similarly, the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which schools are located can impact their functioning and the opportunities available to students.

One of the strengths of the "ecology of equity" framework is its recognition of what individual schools can achieve while simultaneously drawing attention to external factors that influence educational equity.

Using the "ecology of equity" framework, this paper examines how government policies influence the growth of shadow education by shaping the allocation of resources, access to educational opportunities, and the distribution of academic pressure. For instance, a stricter policy that restricts or regulates shadow education can directly impact its prevalence and accessibility, thereby affecting the equity of educational outcomes.

5. Changes of Policies

Although a plethora of literature argue that shadow education might undermine the efforts done by the government in providing an equal chance of access to schooling, before the recent changes in the trend of the policy to head towards stronger governmental monitoring in private tutoring, there was a period when shadow education was promoted by the Chinese government (Li, 2019; Zhang,2007). The reason is that as a part of the market economy, the government can take advantage of the private education's prosperity to boost the development of the economy and the release of the Non-governmental Education Promotion Law of the People' Republic of China in 2002, which acknowledged the market value of shadow education, can support this argument (Li, 2019).

However, it is undeniable that shadow education has an adverse impact on education equity as it enlarges the gaps existing in students from different economic and social backgrounds (Zhang, 2007). To be specific, despite the fact that shadow education might contribute to the economic growth in China (Li, 2019), the possibility brought by shadow education to strengthen the tie between low academic achievements with poor family background and stifle the

social mobility for individuals moving from a lower place to a relatively higher status make the shadow education less attractive to the government. Therefore, finding a proper way to regulate shadow education has become an important issue in the government agenda which aims at establishing a more equitable education system.

Many policies have been published to regulate shadow education in China. (Hao, 2019; Li, 2019; Zhang and Bray,2021) I have selected a few representative cases (shown in the following chart) that can show turning points in the official attitude towards shadow education at different stages. In particular, this paper employed the ecology of equity as the framework to examine how these policies influence shadow education and to what extent do these policies exacerbate or mitigate the education inequalities within-, between- and beyond- schools.

Year	Policy or Practices
2000	Urgent Notice on Reducing the Heavy Study Load on Students (Ministry of Education, 2000)
2015	Absolute Prohibition of Primary and Secondary Schools and In-service Teachers from Providing Private Tutoring (Ministry of Education,2015)
2018	Rectify Out-of-school Training Institutions in Order to Reduce extracurricular Study Load on Primary and lower-secondary Students (Ministry of Education,2018)

6. Application

In this part, I will examine the impact of the government's policies on shadow education in China chronologically, and how the change in shadow education has further promoted/threatened China's education equity.

1980s

Before the first policy on shadow education was released in 2000, the main suppliers of private tutoring are in-service teachers, and the main places for offering shadow education are in school classrooms (Zhang, 2007). During this time, shadow education does not provide additional knowledge supplements beyond the daily classroom. Teachers could not make much money from tutoring because these tutoring sometimes may even be voluntary and free of charge - usually, the purpose of tutoring is to let the students with poor academic performance catch up (Zhang, 2007; Zhang and Bray, 2018). Hence, in this case, not many students would like to take shadow education and teachers would still deliver the same course content in daily school teaching and for most of the students, even if they do not attend these private supplementary tutoring, they can still catch up with others. In general, during this time, shadow education did not pose a serious threat to education equity. Instead, voluntary shadow education can even promote educational equity by helping disadvantaged students improve their academic performance. Thus, the influence of shadow education is mainly limited to within schools.

1990-2000

By the end of the 20th century, after the rapid expansion of low-secondary schooling and the prosperity of the market economy, shadow education has experienced a dramatic development (Luan et al., 2020). To be specific, the expansion of lower-secondary school enrolment has led to intensified competition for the high school entrance examination (Luan et al., 2020; Guo and Guo, 2012). Chinese parents have become increasingly anxious, and many people have participated in shadow education in order to give their children a head start in the upcoming high school entrance examination (Liu, 2016).

Besides, as mentioned by Shavit and Park (2016), education has been more viewed as a positional good in China then. This means the value of education is not fixed in itself but in the comparison with others. Moreover, as the entire job market places more emphasis on academic qualifications, many people recognized that only by having access to a more and better education resource can one be assured that they have enough chances to find a better job and to be in a higher position in society (Luan et al., 2020). Thus, this exacerbates the competition in getting high-quality education and in turn, stimulates the demand for shadow education. These factors are from beyond schools.

As people become more aware of the connection between high-quality educational resources and a promising future, education competition has become increasingly fierce. This led to shadow education in this period no longer limited to the content taught in schools. Many tutoring organizations have begun to increase the difficulty of courses, for example, some of them even introduced the knowledge of the Mathematical Olympiad to give their students an advantage in the education competition (Zhang and Bray,2021; Zhao, 2015). In this stage, shadow education began to have a deeper influence on education equity because the high fees charged by schools or tutoring institutions might hinder some poor students from joining this activity (Li, 2019). The contextual factor that happened beyond schools has influenced how things are organized within schools. Overall, shadow education in this period contradicts the government's efforts in offering equalized access to compulsory education.

2000

In 2000, the government decided to reduce school-works and totally ban all kinds of after-school tutoring in order to reduce the burden put on the school kids (Li, 2019). However, the policy issued in 2000 failed to achieve the initial aim of mitigating the fierce educational competition. Against the backdrop of a second expansion of the access to schooling at both low- and upper-secondary levels, this policy only increases the parents' anxiety (Zhang, 2020). To be specific, the reduction in school education time makes parents worry that their children do not fully command the knowledge required for the entrance examination, which urges the parents to find other supplementary educational resources to remedy the lacked schooling hours (Liu, 2016; Zhang, 2020). At this phrase, to some extent, the policies promulgated at this stage aiming to reduce the burden on students have become a catalyst for the expansion of shadow education. Besides, due to the shortened office hours in school teaching, teachers have more time to provide private tutoring (Liu, and Bray, 2017).

From the perspective of the 'between schools' competition, the policies of this period are not conducive to the realization of

educational equity either. In general, in order to promote their reputation, schools will compete with each other in attracting better students and educational resources (Ye, 2015). Therefore, almost every school is keen to promote their students' academic performance in entrance examinations of high school or higher education (Ye, 2015; Zhang and Bray, 2018). In this case, the school's attitude towards shadow education is tacit or even encouraged as extra tuition tends to contribute to a better grade.

However, since shadow education in this period has become more prosperous than in the last decade, it is quite common for most of the children in a class in urban schools to have attended extracurricular tutoring classes (Zhao, 2015). Hence, compared with the past, the average level of students in the class has improved. In order to adapt to this situation, the teacher has to increase the difficulty of the course accordingly (Guo and Guo, 2012; Zhang, 2014), but this is unfair to other students who have not undergone shadow education. In other words, it would intensify the class stratification. In this sense, it can be found that the changes of policies happened beyond schools, but it reached into the between- and within-school areas and eventually changed the concrete teaching practices in the classroom. However, the changes that happened in between- and within-school areas were against the goal of realizing education equality. The policy failed in reducing the study burden and even exacerbated the education inequalities.

2015

The policy issued in 2015 has officially prohibited school teachers from providing charged-tutoring as such behavior of teachers has seriously damaged education equity. Specifically, much literature in this period reported teachers' misconduct such as deliberately omitting important teaching context in class in order to encourage students to attend their after-school class (Guo and Guo, 2012; Zhang, 2014).

However, the prohibition of in-service teachers from joining this education market did not hinder shadow education's prosperity, which means the policy issued beyond schools did not change the problems faced by school teachers within schools. Instead, the private tutoring industry already has a mature system: After losing the participation of in-service teachers, private education institutions have developed a complete training system to provide them with a large number of well-trained full-time tutors (Hao, 2019; Zhang and Bray, 2021). Besides, compared with schools, private education institutions have a clearer division of labor. Teachers are divided into leading tutors, assistant tutors, professional tutors who are respectively in charge of the delivering of classes, answering questions from students, and designing class content (Zhang and Bray, 2021). This detailed classification makes it suitable for different modes of teaching from mass teaching to one-to-one tutoring (Zhao, 2015; Liu and Bray, 2017). Thus, parents as consumers can purchase the best teacher and modes of teaching suitable for their kids.

However, this might cause repercussions for formal school teaching within schools. Specifically, in China, a normal class would contain 40-50 students (Luan et al., 2020). Due to the curriculum requirements, teachers may be limited to few teaching activities to conduct daily teaching, while research reported that some students would not engage with classroom activities and sometimes might even refuse to accept the teaching delivered by formal teachers (Luan et al., 2020; Zhang and Bray, 2018). However, if teachers adjust the teaching content to suit the students who have taken private tutoring outside school, it would be against the principle of equity and automatically exclude students who haven't been to tutoring. In this stage, the policy issued did not reduce the bad influences caused by shadow education beyond schools.

2018

Policy 2018 marked the beginning of the strong regulation on shadow education. However, huge demands for shadow education still exist, especially in "insecure and ambitious" middle-class parents (Zhang and Yamato, 2018). Thus, in the educational market, venture investors continue supporting the development of shadow education so as to make more profits from it (Zhang and Bray, 2021). Huge demands from parents combined with growing business investments contributed to the massification of shadow education (Zhang, 2020; Zhang and Bray, 2021). Although a strong government policy is issued in 2018, it only has a weak influence in its development - only some small tutoring companies closed because of the pressure from the government and other tutoring competitors (Li, 2019). At this stage, the policies issued beyond schools failed to arrive at between-or within- schools.

After 2019, influenced by the Covid-19, more tutoring enterprises start offering online courses by using digital technology (Zhang, 2020; Zhang and Bray, 2021). Private tutoring in this time has become more accessible and affordable. Compared with the tutoring business before, families can spend less money in getting high-quality qualified shadow education. Besides, big tutoring companies expand from the wealthy eastern area to the western area, from urban places to rural places (Yu et al., 2017). Several big tutoring companies even reached poor areas to give extra help to struggled students. What these companies want was clearly more than taking corporate social responsibilities - it would help them to do marketing and branding as well (Zhang and Bray, 2021). In view of this, it could be suggested that shadow education, as a help offering to disadvantaged groups rather than a method to increase competition, can also contribute to education equity. Shadow education offers more educational resources for deprived students. Thus, efforts done beyond schools reduce the inequalities of educational outcomes within schools. Besides, it may indicate that policies aiming at improving education equity should not just focus on how to prohibit shadow education but rather guide its development.

7. Conclusion

Inequalities in education could not be solved by solely issuing policies about shadow education. The policy in 2000 did not target shadow education, but it changed the contextual factors beyond schools. The shortened school time increased parents' anxiety and therefore the demand to make up for the lost studying hours accelerate the emergence and development of shadow education. Later on, the government began to regulate shadow education because of the backwash it caused to formal schooling and the threats it posted on education equity. However, as the above analysis showed, strong policies

adopted at the state level are not effective in reducing education inequality. It is suggested that, in the future, the focus of the policy should be shifted from strong regulation to effectively guiding it towards a more equitable direction.

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