

Research on Equity in Early Childhood Education in Western China: A Case Study of Sichuan Province

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Abstract: This article investigates the issue of equity in early childhood education in Western China through interviews with ten kindergarten principals from the region. The study reveals several factors impacting educational fairness, including a vague understanding of the concept of educational equity, a lack of equitable practices in education, and the inability to ensure equal educational opportunities. Furthermore, the region faces a severe shortage of early childhood educational resources, instability within the teaching staff, difficulty in maintaining educational quality, and a lack of communication and cooperation among kindergartens. These issues contribute significantly to the imbalance of educational opportunities, severely affecting the normal development of children and the overall quality of preschool education. To address these challenges, the article recommends enhancing policy support to improve resource allocation and optimization, increasing professional training and compensation for teachers to strengthen the practice of equity in education, and raising societal awareness about the importance of educational equity. These measures are crucial for promoting equitable and high-quality education for every child in Western China, ensuring that all children have access to equal and quality educational opportunities.

Keywords: educational equity, early childhood education, western China.

1. Introduction

In its 2021 report "Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education," UNESCO highlighted that in the face of widening social and economic inequalities, environmental degradation, democratic backsliding, and the rise of disruptive technologies, education equity remains one of the primary challenges for the future of education [1]. This is also true for China. Since 2010, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance of China, along with other relevant departments, have issued a series of policies proposing to "universalize preschool education and emphasize ethnic education" [2], and to "provide key financial support to the central and western regions and difficult provinces in the eastern region, with a focus on rural, remote, impoverished, and ethnic areas" [3], and require improving the quality of early childhood education in the western regions to promote educational equity, there are still many issues that remain.

The issue of educational equity in China is mainly reflected in the educational inequities caused by the unbalanced regional economic development. Specifically, "the economic downturn in the western region, relatively scarce educational resources, and seriously lagging development of early

childhood education" [4][5][6] make the problem of early childhood educational equity more complex and prominent. Additionally, "the number and quality of kindergarten teachers in central and western provinces of China show a serious imbalance, which is continuing to expand" [7], which also has a serious adverse impact on educational and social equity. This paper aims to explore the current issues related to educational equity in early childhood education in Western China and potential solutions through interviews with ten public kindergarten principals in Sichuan Province with over ten years of work experience.

2. Definition of Educational Equity

Throughout history, people have pursued educational equity. Different people and eras have different interpretations of educational equity. For example, the famous Chinese educator Confucius advocated the democratic educational thought of "teaching without discrimination"; American educator James Coleman pointed out that "people in society, regardless of their origin, race, gender, belief, etc., should enjoy equal educational opportunities" [8]. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, educational equity has two closely related dimensions. First, fairness, means making sure that personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to achieving educational potential. It prohibits discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin, or socioeconomic status. Second, inclusiveness, ensuring that a basic minimum standard of education for all. For example, everyone should be able to read, write, and do simple arithmetic. If some students need more to get there, they should receive it [9].

Additionally, "Equality" refers to the equal treatment of people, while "equity" recognizes the unique circumstances of each person and treats them according to their needs [10].

In summary, educational equity refers to the concept that all students, regardless of their economic status, family background, gender, race, or other factors, can receive the education they need. In the early childhood education stage, educational equity is particularly important because this stage is crucial for the physical and mental development of children. Equitable education can lay a solid foundation for their future development.

3. Background of Early Childhood Education in Sichuan Province and Investigation Methods

3.1. Background of Early Childhood Education

Sichuan Province is in Southwest China and has a diverse population. According to the seventh national census in Sichuan Province, the rural population accounted for 43.27%, while the urban population was 56.73%. The total minority population was 5.688 million, accounting for 6.8% of the resident population [11]. Therefore, it is common to see classes composed of children of various identities, such as Han, ethnic minorities, urban, and rural children, in kindergartens in Sichuan Province.

According to educational statistics from the Ministry of Education of China, as of 2023, Sichuan Province has 12,869 kindergartens with 2,539,742 children enrolled; there are 281,784 staff members, including 147,673 full-time teachers. The student-teacher ratio in kindergartens is 17.2:1, lower than the national average of 13.3:1, indicating a slight shortage of kindergarten teachers [12]. In terms of teacher welfare, public kindergarten teachers in Sichuan Province enjoy the same salary and welfare benefits as local compulsory education teachers.

Additionally, in August 2015, Sichuan Province implemented the "One Village One Kindergarten" plan for the first time in the Da Liang Shan and Xiao Liang Shan Yi area, aiming to establish a kindergarten in each administrative village, with some villages implementing "multiple villages one kindergarten" or "one village multiple kindergartens" based on conditions [13].

Based on this background, I conducted interviews with ten public kindergarten principals in Sichuan Province, each with more than ten years of work experience, focusing on three aspects: understanding of educational equity, practice of educational equity, and factors hindering the realization of educational equity.

3.2. Methodology

This case study on educational equity in Sichuan's early childhood education employs a robust methodology:

Research Design: We chose a qualitative case study approach, ideal for deeply exploring complex social phenomena in their real-life settings.

Case Selection: The study focuses on ten public kindergartens in Sichuan, selected for their principals' extensive experience (over ten years), ensuring a deep understanding of the local educational context.

Data Collection Methods: Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews with the kindergarten principals, supplemented by policy documents and public records to provide context.

Data Analysis Techniques: Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the data, with initial and focused coding processes to categorize the data.

Triangulation: Methodological triangulation was used by integrating interviews, policy documents, and educational statistics, enhancing the study's credibility and validity.

Reflexivity: The researcher's positionality as a scholar with a background in educational equity research is acknowledged. Reflexive practices were maintained throughout the research process to minimize biases and ensure a balanced interpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was secured, and all participants gave informed consent, with strict adherence to confidentiality and ethical guidelines.

4. Research Results and Analysis

4.1. A Vague Understanding of Educational Equity

More than half of the kindergarten principals interviewed pointed out that the term educational equity is rarely mentioned in early childhood education and is usually more common in basic education at the primary level and above. Only three kindergarten principals had a relatively objective understanding of the concept of educational equity, stating that "educational equity means allowing every member in the kindergarten to enjoy life in the kindergarten. Specifically, it means allowing each child to receive education beneficial to their physical and mental health and allowing each teacher to receive an environment or resources beneficial to their teaching and personal development." However, it is worth noting that the remaining kindergarten principals believed that educational equity means "treating every teacher and student equally and looking at everyone with the same perspective."

From the above results, we can notice that the issue of educational equity is often blurred during the early childhood education stage. I reviewed China's policies on educational equity. In 2010, China's National Development and Reform Commission issued the "National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010—2020)," which proposed the work principles of "giving priority to development, focusing on education, reform and innovation, promoting equity, and improving quality." It specifically highlighted that the key to educational equity is the equity of opportunities, and its basic requirement is to ensure citizens' legal rights to education. The focus is on promoting balanced development of compulsory education and supporting disadvantaged groups. The fundamental measure is the rational allocation of educational

resources, prioritizing rural areas, remote and impoverished regions, and ethnic areas, to accelerate the narrowing of educational disparities. The goal is to let every child become a useful talent [2]. This policy reveals that the current focus of educational equity in China is on ensuring the right to education for all citizens, with resources prioritized for the compulsory education stage and economically underdeveloped areas such as rural regions. Equity in early childhood education is not explicitly mentioned. The main promoter of educational equity is the government, whose decisions guide the development of educational efforts. Vague policies often lead to overlook by educators, which, in my opinion, may be why equity in early childhood education is easily neglected.

4.2. Insufficient Practice of Educational Equity

Eight kindergarten principals mentioned that the composition of their kindergartens is relatively complex. Besides the Han ethnic group, children of ethnic minorities such as Yi and Tibetan are also common. The urban-rural gap in kindergartens is also apparent. "Some children are raised by their grandparents in rural areas from birth until they turn 3 years old and are taken to the city by their parents to enter kindergarten." "Some minority or rural children have poor hygiene habits." In response, less than half of the principals would specifically remind teachers in monthly meetings to give these students more attention and patience. For example, "chatting with children more in Mandarin to help them master correct pronunciation and communication methods with others." "Participating in group games together to ensure that no child is left out in any game." "Providing more companionship and guidance to children who have difficulties in using the toilet, dressing, and eating, helping them master these life skills as soon as possible." Additionally, two principals specifically mentioned regularly reminding teachers to communicate with the parents of these children to solve parenting problems together. Regarding the implementation of educational equity, one respondent mentioned that in her kindergarten, "each child is assigned a small duty, which is rotated weekly, allowing them to feel that they are an indispensable part of the class, and today's class is the result of everyone's efforts."

However, regarding teachers, almost all principals mentioned cultivating and retaining their teachers. For example, "regular in-house training and educational research," "sending teachers to participate in national/provincial training and requiring them to report back to the kindergarten after the training," and "providing one-on-one guidance for newly graduated teachers." However, only three principals specifically mentioned providing welfare for teachers in need, such as "providing housing subsidies" and "allowing some teachers to leave early on Friday afternoons to spend time with their families."

This shows that kindergarten principals, as educational leaders, focus on educational equity not only for children but also for the teachers they lead. However, their practice of educational equity is insufficient. Indeed, in the modern era advocating lifelong education, continuing education for kindergarten teachers is essential. However, the difficulties teachers face in life are easily overlooked, which may hinder teachers from teaching with peace of mind. Due to the unique composition of people in kindergartens, although it allows students to be exposed to more diverse cultures and there is no significant difference in appearance that might lead to discrimination or unfairness, differences in language, foundational knowledge, and living habits can lead to teacher neglect and exclusion by surrounding students, resulting in educational inequity. These phenomena may be particularly evident in early childhood education and require more tolerance and assistance from teachers. This also reflects the gap in educational resources and family education between ethnic minority settlements and urban-rural areas.

4.3. Inability to Ensure Equal Educational Opportunities

During the interview, seven principals mentioned encountering children forced to drop out due to family issues during their educational careers. For example, one rural Yi child was mentioned by a principal whose parents were too busy working to take care of the child and eventually decided to withdraw the child and send them back to their grandparents in the countryside. Some parents, due to poor economic conditions, are unwilling to bear the cost of sending their children to kindergarten and choose to keep the children at home or have grandparents look after them.

This shows that parents' attitudes and family economic conditions directly affect children's educational opportunities. In essence, society and parents still do not place enough emphasis on early childhood education (ages 3-6). Although recent years have seen increasing subsidies from the state to kindergartens, reducing tuition fees, and implementing the "One Village One Kindergarten" plan in Sichuan Province, ensuring that every child has equal access to early childhood education remains a problem.

4.4. Scarcity of Early Childhood Education Resources, Instability of the Teachers, and Difficulty in Ensuring Education Quality

Almost all principals mentioned in interviews that "cultivating and retaining a good teacher is not easy." "Many teachers resign and choose higher-paying jobs after 2-3 years of training and work due to low salaries, causing a disconnect in work continuity." "Some teachers feel that being a kindergarten teacher has no future. No matter how much they learn and progress, others still see them as just a kindergarten teacher." To cultivate and retain excellent teachers, two principals created various opportunities for teachers to participate in training and provided certain financial support for training, but "the training and funds available for kindergartens are still very limited, and sometimes the training received may not solve the problems teachers encounter in actual work." Therefore, "special daily discussion times were set up specifically for teachers in need, inviting experienced teachers to answer questions or for everyone to discuss and find solutions together."

Regarding teacher recruitment, half of the principals expressed a preference for male teachers in specific teaching areas, believing that "male teachers are more energetic and professional in physical education and outdoor activities," but three principals stated that "if they love education, possess good morals, and have certain professional abilities, gender restrictions will not be imposed on teachers."

This shows that early childhood teachers in the western region have low salaries, harsh working environments, and unclear career development prospects, leading to unstable and highly mobile teaching staff. I further reviewed data and found that although policies state that public kindergarten teachers enjoy the same welfare and treatment as compulsory education teachers, data indicate that low salaries for rural or remote kindergarten teachers in Sichuan Province is an undisputed fact. For example, the average salary of kindergarten teachers in Butuo County, Sichuan Province, is 2,000 yuan/month (about \$274/month), with an after-tax salary of 1,771.37 yuan, which is still used today and does not match the growing local consumption levels [14]. Research indicates that teachers with 0-5 years of teaching experience are the most likely to leave, and male teachers have a higher turnover rate than female teachers [15]. This leads to issues with the stability of teacher resources and the continuity of educational quality in kindergartens. The lack of high-quality and sustained teaching staff may compromise the quality of early childhood education.

4.5. Lack of Communication Between Kindergartens Within the Region

After further organizing and categorizing the respondents' content, I found that some of the examples discussed by certain principals could serve as references and learning instances for other

kindergartens. However, from the results, it appears that these principals did not share this information with each other. This lack of communication is not conducive to the common improvement of early childhood education quality within the region.

5. Solutions

5.1. Policy Support

The Chinese government needs to continue increasing investment in early childhood education and early childhood educators in the western region, providing more high-quality educational resources and financial support. Policies should also be formulated to encourage outstanding teachers to work in the western region, improving the overall level of early childhood education in Western China.

5.2. Teacher Training

Strengthen the training of early childhood teachers in the western region to improve their professional skills and cross-cultural communication abilities. Invite experts in relevant fields for regular guidance and maintain continuous learning and improvement through rotational training and distance education. Training should also focus on cross-cultural education for teachers, addressing the special needs of minority children, and utilizing Gorski's equity literacy framework (efforts to recognize injustice, respond immediately, redress inequity in the long term, and sustain equity efforts-for regular self) examination and reflection [16].

5.3. Social Attention

Increasing societal attention is crucial for achieving educational equity. The government should intensify its efforts to promote the importance of early childhood education. This can be achieved through partnerships between communities and kindergartens, by regularly organizing public lectures on early childhood education, and by holding events like one-day parent-child experiences in kindergartens to raise parents' awareness of early childhood education and enhance their ability to educate their children at home.

5.4. Strengthen Communication

Local governments should provide a venue for kindergartens in the region to regularly communicate with each other, allowing teachers in need to discuss and solve issues together with principals or teachers from other kindergartens. If there are good examples, they can be promptly shared with other kindergartens. Enhancing opportunities for collaborative discourse amongst educational institutions will serve to foster inter-kindergarten knowledge exchange, ultimately leading to a collective elevation in the quality of early childhood education within the designated region.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of educational equity in early childhood education in Western China is complex and multi-dimensional, requiring the joint efforts of the state, society, kindergartens, and families. Through policy support, teacher training, social attention, and strengthened communication, educational equity in the western region can be gradually achieved. Only when every child can grow up in a fair educational environment can we truly achieve educational equity and social progress.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

- Q1. Please talk about your background as an educator.
- Q2. As an educator, how do you understand educational equity?
- Q3. How do you practice educational equity in your daily work?
- Q4. As a fair leader, what problems have you encountered or are currently dealing with? How did you solve or are solving these problems?
- Q5. You just discussed many topics regarding teacher training. When recruiting teachers, do you prefer male candidates? It is said that males have an absolute advantage in kindergarten teacher recruitment.
- Q6. In summary, what do you think is important to achieve educational equity?