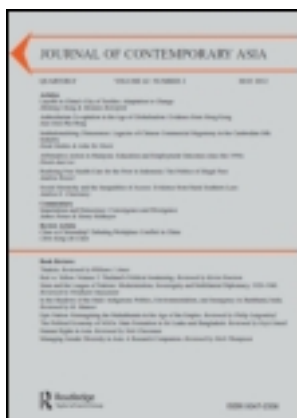


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Pursuing Equity in Education: Conflicting Views and Shifting Strategies

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ABSTRACT *Under what circumstances will governments in developing countries, infamous for their “bad governance” records, adopt “good governance” institutions and practices, as defined and advocated by international development and donor organisations? What meanings are attached to these initiatives in the adopting countries and to what extent are they similar to those as understood in the developed countries? These questions are discussed in this article in the context of education equity reforms in China and America. Despite their divergent histories and economic and political systems, their experience in terms of education equity reforms is more similar than one would anticipate. Penetrating these similarities is the observation that understanding the specific historical contexts wherein “good governance” reforms have evolved is essential to a proper appreciation of the meanings and significance of the reforms, as institutions and mechanisms, for the furtherance of good governance as an outcome. The nuances of tension and heterogeneity of internal developments in each country, respectively, have interestingly also exposed the parallels between the processes in both.*

KEY WORDS: School education, equity and adequacy, reform processes, United States of America, China

Attaining equity in education provision is widely considered essential to providing each and every child with equal opportunities in life because it offers an adequate baseline to start their future development in the increasingly competitive globalised age. Education and equity have thus ranked prominently in development indices devised by international organisations.¹ A comparison of how equity in education has fared in the largest countries in the developing and developed worlds, respectively, should reveal valuable insights on the paths of good governance reforms in different contexts. This study examines the circumstances under which governments of developing countries adopt “good governance” institutions and practices, as defined and advocated by international development and donor institutions. It discusses the meanings attached to these initiatives in adopting countries and the extent to which they are similar to those as understood in developed countries. Specifically, it investigates the questions of whether education equity reforms in the US experience a different mix of difficulties and challenges as compared to reforms in

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China, and whether the obviously different political systems and governance institutions in the two countries – one authoritarian and the other a democracy – mean that their education equity reforms would be impossible to compare.

By examining the trajectories of education equity policy in China and the US, we seek to highlight good governance policies in the context of their respective historical and social institutions, which have a direct impact for the meanings and implications of the policies. The meanings of education equity have been a subject of controversy and ongoing adjustments in both the US and China. Conflicting values of equity, efficiency, national coordination and local control have beset American society in addressing disparities in educational resources and outcomes across the country and slowed down improvements to reform design.

Previous reviews of school finance reforms in the US have acknowledged that it is not certain what *should* or *can* work to bring about education equity (National Research Council 1999). In China, education equity policies have emerged out of recurrent debates in society over the widening urban–rural divide as well as acute competition for places in “elite” schools. The modern concept of education equity, and what it means for government policy, is constantly “on the move” in both countries; the conceptual definition is still amorphous in China, given the shorter history of the policy discourse there. At the same time, largely reflective of the characteristics of the two political systems, the progress of reforms in the US was mediated through court litigation and decisions, whilst administrative actions have been the main driver of change in China. Nevertheless, despite their widely different histories and economic and political systems, reforms in the US and China share more similarities than one would expect. “Good governance” institutions are similarly a product in-the-making, notwithstanding the varied “good governance” records of the two countries. Discussion in this article thus drives home the message of historical institutionalism for change: that understanding the specific historical contexts wherein “good governance” reforms evolve is essential to a proper appreciation of the meanings and significance of the reforms, as institutions and mechanisms, for the furtherance of good governance as an outcome. Indeed, as the rest of the article shall show, it is through bringing out the nuances of tension and heterogeneity of internal developments in each society that the parallels between the processes in the two are also exposed.

United States: Equity or Adequacy?

Given the enormous resources involved in public education – nearly one-third of state and local spending in the US in 2009 (Barnett 2011) – and the critical private and societal benefits that it produces, few public policy areas have been more intensively studied, debated and acted upon in the US than the financing of primary and secondary education since the middle of the last century (See, for example, Moser and Rubenstein 2002; Beatty 2008). Indeed, debates about education can be traced to even earlier times and the development of a *public* education in today’s largest developed democracy has not been free of political controversy (Ward 1998). At the time of the rise of the “common school movement” in the early–mid nineteenth century, there were views that schools should not be totally supported by the government without tuition fees. There was also an emerging position in favour of an equalisation of education opportunities through the provision of free schools to all. The different shades of opinions constituting each of three American ideational traditions – liberalism, republicanism and egalitarianism – mean

that fundamental value conflicts have propelled and stalled changes of various sorts in society and public policy, including the development of public education (Rebell 1998).

Although the principle of universal free public education was established by the mid-nineteenth century as a result of the Common School Movement, which was part of a larger civic rights movement covering women's rights and anti-slavery at the time, there remained substantial differences within American society over what a "free" or "public" education was to constitute (Ward 1998; Burns 1982, 509–511). During colonial times, public schools were financed through a mix of local resources: taxation from properties, charity, revenues from public utilities, as well as tuition charges. Variations in local wealth thus meant variations in school funding and quality of public education across school districts. The strong emphasis on local control and citizens' choice in the liberal tradition has continued to reinforce local-based school funding long after universal public education becomes the norm. The egalitarianism tradition of "men are created equal" as engraved in the Declaration of Independence, on the other hand, has led some states to adopt language in state constitutions that makes support of education for all children a state responsibility. Quality public education for all requires higher taxes and often a redistribution of funds from wealthier districts to poorer ones. The conflict of egalitarian values with the conservatism in the Liberalism tradition, which is sometimes described as the "endowment effect" – entrenched local interests resisting all changes that may undercut their privileges – has historically created a fertile ground for school funding disputes (Dayton and Dupre 2004; Ward 1998, 18).

Into the twentieth century and in particular since World War II, many changes have taken place. The Progressive Reform of the first half of the twentieth century saw reflection on the proper role of government in society. Equality of opportunity in education was much discussed and educationalists debated ways to define and achieve equality (Mort 1946; Morrison 1930; Ward 1998). The provision of public education was more accepted, along with a certain degree of equity in its provision (Ward 1998, 8–9). The implications for the regulatory power and redistributive functions of government represented sharp breaks from past governmental policies and dispositions.

A landmark development indicating this egalitarianism tradition is the Federal Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declares unconstitutional state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students (Dayton and Dupre 2004). Departing from previous emphasis on the value of decentralised control over education, it was ruled that "separate but equal" schools were inherently unequal (Moser and Rubenstein 2002). The country's awakening to the perils of unequal access to employment and education led to the enactment of a series of important federal laws. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, for example, mandated a study of the factors of unequal opportunity of education. The Coleman Report subsequently published in 1966 generated a long line of quantitative research, the findings of which stimulated further challenges to the status quo for equity reforms. While researchers still debate the role of money in educational achievement, school finance equity litigations have been heard in virtually every state, with school finance reforms directly mandated by court rulings or indirectly spurred by the threat of litigation.

Three Waves of School Finance Court Decisions

Three "waves" of court decisions have significantly influenced the development of equity standards for public education in the US in the last four decades. The first wave started

with *Serrano v. Priest* in the California Supreme Court in 1971 and ended with the Supreme Court's decision in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* in 1973 (Heise 1995). In *Serrano*, reform advocates successfully argued that per-pupil funding should be substantially equal, and not dependent upon a local school district's property (Koski and Hahnel 2008). The victory was short-lived, however. The federal position on equal protection underlining *Serrano* was quashed by the Federal Supreme Court in 1973 in a narrow five-to-four decision in *Rodriguez*, which effectively closed the door to school finance challenges *via* federal courts (Koski and Hahnel 2008). It was ruled that education is not a "fundamental interest" under the Federal Constitution, so that the school finance system in the state (of Texas, and by implication in other states as well), unequal as it was, did not contravene the Federal Constitution, and that the state's interest in local control over education sufficed to justify the existing school funding system (Heise 1995).

The clash between competing egalitarian and liberal notions of educational opportunity is apparent in these litigations (Rebell 1998). Inequalities in educational funding deny children an equal starting point in the competitive race for individual advancement, thus impairing their opportunity to realise their full potential as individuals, which is a liberal value. Funding disparities also clash with the egalitarian value that calls for either equality of inputs (school expenditures) or outputs (student performance). However, the actions required to reduce funding disparities, say state redistribution of fiscal resources in favour of poorer school districts, or capping of school expenditures in well-resourced districts, all run against well-entrenched liberal values of local control. The conflict between aspects of liberal and egalitarian ideals has subsequently slowed the momentum for school finance reform, as equal opportunity of education lost its status as a fundamental interest in *Rodriguez* and a good proportion of state courts defended the status quo during the first wave of litigations (Ward 1998, 17).

The second wave of litigations, between 1973 and 1989, focused on forcing state legislatures and governments to reduce per-pupil spending disparities across school districts (Heise 1995), relying mainly on equal protection clauses in state constitutions. This wave of litigations yielded relatively few victories for plaintiffs (Lukemeyer 2003). Many courts upheld the existing school finance systems and adopted a classical liberal stance similar to the Supreme Court's analysis in *Rodriguez*, rejecting the egalitarian strand represented in the litigant's call for reform (Heise 1995). State courts ruling in favour of defendants of the status quo found a justification in local control of education, a value rooted in both the liberal and republican traditions, and maintained that there was no evidence of a failure of state responsibility to provide an *adequate* education for all, despite the varying levels of school funding across school districts (Rebell 1998). The uneven outcomes in the courts exposed a failure of equity theory in distinguishing school expenditures from other important variables that also affect educational opportunity, such as quality of school buildings, textbooks and curricula. This has subsequently led to an alternative theory rooted in the notion of adequacy in the third wave of school finance court decisions (Heise 1995).

The third wave, which began when the state supreme courts of Montana, Texas and Kentucky overturned the wealth-based school finance systems in 1989, focuses on the adequacy, or sufficiency, of education, rather than on equity defined as per-pupil spending disparities. An adequacy claim does not seek equalisation in funding among school districts, but seeks increased funding necessary to provide students with "adequate"

educational opportunities and outcomes (Minorini and Sugarman 1999). A departure of the adequacy litigations from previous court cases is thus the absence of a demand for access to *equal* resources for all school districts (Ryan and Heise 2002). Under adequacy, a large part of existing funding inequalities across districts will still remain since districts that can fund a more-than-adequate education will be free to do so.

The shift from equity to adequacy might be traced to strategic considerations by school finance reform advocates when conducting the litigations (Koshi and Hahnel 2008). First, by relying on the education clauses of state constitutions, judges may be less concerned about creating undesirable spillovers in other areas of public policy.² Second, adequacy arguments flow naturally from the language of education clauses, which requires the legislature to provide a “thorough and efficient,” “uniform,” or “high quality” education to students. Third, an adequacy standard creates less conflict with the value of local control. The authority of wealthy districts to make decisions of educational spending need not be constrained because of a court order that requires resources to be provided to poor school districts under adequacy. Finally, an adequacy standard may be more appealing intuitively than other fairness standards. One may feel an injustice when some school children are not receiving a minimally adequate education, but may not feel the same way if one child receives a better education than another, as long as the former has an “adequate” education.

More fundamentally, politics matters, as Wong (1999) demonstrates in a study on school funding decisions. Specifically, geopolitical developments internationally in the 1980s might have had an impact on the shift to adequacy. Economic downturn and acute global competition (the “Japan as Number One” discourse) during the 1980s led to a growing awareness of the competitive shortcomings of schools.³ A heightened sense of crisis thus emerged to see all American children receive an *adequate* basic education in order to participate effectively in the globalised competition. Empirical studies on the role of politics in state-level policymaking and in school finance equity have also demonstrated the positive relation, in quite significant measure, between the political inclination of the electorate and state policies (Wright et al. 1987). In particular, Wood and Theobald (2003) find that where the score of “citizen liberalism” in a state is high, state policies on school funding tend to be more liberal and in favour of enhancing equity. The more liberal states are also more likely to act upon court decisions in favour of funding equity. The shifts in political orientations and geopolitical contexts of the time explain why many state courts turned to the adequacy standard in the 1990s and ruled in favour of reform, in spite of previous positions defending the status quo (Rebell 1998).

Defining Education Equity Standards

How are the value conflicts and politics underlining reform, as described above, affecting the configurations of reform and the shifting definitions of equity standards in particular? Several questions can be identified in this regard (Berne and Stiefel 1984; Monk 1990). First, what should be equalised – spending per pupil, real resources per pupil, or students’ test scores (Johnston and Duncombe 1998; Yinger 2004)? Most school finance reforms and court litigations have focused on spending per pupil as the object of equalisation (Johnston and Duncombe 1998). However, this measure is widely regarded as unsatisfactory, because it does not account for the fact that educational costs vary across school districts for reasons outside the control of school officials. To move from spending per

pupil to real resources per pupil and student performance requires accounting for the cost differences that arise either from input prices, for example, teachers' salaries, or from factors that affect the learning environment and capacity of students, such as family background and student characteristics, which will require much more sophisticated policy instruments (Duncombe et al. 1996).

Besides the object of equalisation, we need a standard for evaluating the progress in achieving equity goals. Educational equity can be defined in terms of achievement of some *relative standard* where disparities in resources or outcomes among school districts are kept within a specific range. The extreme version of this standard is absolute equality between districts: education is uniform in all school districts. Wealth neutrality is another possible standard for relative equity, which is achieved when district wealth and district educational spending are not systematically correlated (Johnston and Duncombe 1998; Yinger 2004).

An *absolute standard* of equity is educational adequacy, which is achieved when students in every district receive an education that meets some minimum standard (Yinger 2004). To some, the focus on adequacy offers a promise of tackling problems that previous equity (equalisation)-oriented reforms have failed to remedy. Others consider adequacy as a discouraging retreat in the battle for basic fairness by perpetuating an education system that tolerates large disparities in available educational resources across territorial units and communities. To almost everybody, the concept of adequacy is an evolving one; there is no consensus on its meaning and the policy community has had only limited understanding about how and what would be required to achieve it (National Research Council 1999). There is no agreed-upon list of goals for an adequate education or a standard for the skills, competencies and knowledge necessary to serve those goals. Even if the legislature and courts were to craft those standards, the scientific base on which resources are matched to desired educational outcomes, given varying student characteristics, is not yet firmly established (Koski and Hahnel 2008).

Despite the absence of consensus and the limits to knowledge, people tend to agree that adequacy focuses on outputs and outcomes, whilst previous debates over education equity have focused on funding disparities, as a measurement of input, among school districts, with funding equalisation or wealth-neutral funding pursued as remedies. However, for definitional as well as practical purposes, the concept of adequacy seems less about the input-output distinction and more about its greater emphasis on absolute rather than relative standards. Adequacy demands the delineation of a minimum standard of education to be applicable to all districts, which may be about input, output as well as outcome. As long as people can agree on a view of the minimum level in the selected standard, the adequacy requirement appears to be more amenable to operationalisation and thus more achievable practically than the equalisation standard.

This last point becomes obvious when we consider the implication of the standards for local control. An absolute standard defines a minimum level for district resources or a minimum local tax effort, but does not restrict district spending above that level. A wealth neutrality standard can be consistent with variations in local preferences for education provided that they are not systematically correlated with district wealth. The standard that implies the most significant restriction on local preferences is the relative equity standard, to the extent that it requires the capping of the maximum resources that can be provided by districts for local education, as it clashes with longstanding values over free choice and local control (Johnston and Duncombe 1998).

State Strategies and Their Effectiveness

Nearly all of the 50 states have implemented some sort of school finance reforms since 1971. Most states have used a lump-sum per-pupil grant, referred to as foundation aid, to denote a minimum expenditure level, on top of which local revenue supplements may be added (Fisher 2007). To design a foundation aid programme, a state will select a foundation level which corresponds, more or less, to the decision on the standard of education the state will regard as adequate. Since a higher foundation level implies a higher cost of funding, each state has to balance the educational benefits of having a higher standard against its cost.

An alternative instrument is a power-equalising or guaranteed tax base (GTB) programme, which is basically a matching grant with a higher matching rate for lower-wealth districts to provide an equal per-pupil property tax base to each district (Yinger 2004). The key issue in a GTB plan is to determine the specific level of the guaranteed per-pupil tax base. If a state sets a guaranteed tax base close to the per-pupil property value in the wealthiest district, then every district in the state except the wealthiest receives some state assistance. A low guaranteed tax base, on the other hand, lowers the amount of state aid and the cost to the state. A provision of “recapture” may also be included in the GTB formula to restrict spending by wealthy districts through a negative matching rate and hence a higher local price of education (Yinger 2004).

The selection of a state aid mechanism is often guided by court decisions. Since many of the earlier state court decisions focused on disparity in education spending, GTB formulae tended to be more popular. The third wave of school finance court decisions, emphasising adequacy of education, has seen the foundation plan become the most popular state aid programme, which has since been adopted in the majority of the states (Yinger 2004).

Both the foundation and power-equalising grants have boosted total local spending on education, but not by the full amount of the grants, as a substantial amount of grant dollars are often used for local tax relief. Moreover, to the extent that the measures help with enhancing education equity, neither traditional foundation aids nor power-equalising programmes are fully effective in equalising per-pupil spending among districts, due to inelasticity of demand for education spending (Fisher and Leslie 2000). Partly to improve the efficacy of the instruments, since the 1990s there has been a search for alternative options, including more restrictive foundation programmes that include some form of mandatory minimum local fiscal effort and capping of spending or taxes for high-spending districts.

Setting a minimum tax rate for districts ensures a “foundational” amount of local fiscal contribution to education equivalent to the mandatory minimum tax rate. This measure should set off, to an extent, the replacement effect of state aid for local inputs in education; otherwise, districts receiving a relatively high amount of state aid might lower their tax rates to free up taxpayers’ resources for other purposes. The decision concerning capping local supplementation in high-spending, usually wealthier, districts is more controversial, as it directly challenges the tradition of local control and, implicitly, the interests of the more privileged, as noted above. In both cases the tension between equity and centralisation on the one hand, and local choice, efficiency and decentralisation on the other, is evident, both in terms of public finance theory and practical politics, as people’s opinions and interests vary and shift (Johnston and Duncombe 1998; Oates 2005,

2008). These tensions will be mitigated if adequacy is the desired equity standard, which focuses on the sufficiency of education provided to the least-funded locality or student against some perceived standards and objectives, rather than on relativity of performance (inputs and outputs) between localities or students. This perhaps also explains why adequacy has emerged as the preferred approach to define equity more recently.

Whatever the nuances in definition and standards, are the reforms of the past few decades effective in reducing inequities in school education? Assessments vary considerably and the prudent conclusion is that the results are mixed. On the one hand, there are those who suggest that reforms have *generally* achieved their goal of moving towards a more equitable distribution of resources (Evans et al. 1999; Reed 2001). One assessment states that, for example, the court-mandated reforms reduced within-state inequality by 19–34% between 1971 and 1996, depending on the measure of inequality employed (Evans et al. 1999). The reforms have also been found to be effective in increasing spending in low-wealth districts, though they are less successful in reducing spending in high-wealth districts (National Research Council 1999). The key issue for policymakers and courts is not whether the state should use education aid to equalise education spending, some have said, but how and by how much (Yinger 2004). More recently, the emphasis over adequacy of education has raised the question of whether state aid reform indeed improves student performance, rather than just equalising education spending (if at all). But given our current state of knowledge on input–outcome relations, this has proven to be a tricky issue (Ward 1998: 19).⁴

Others are sceptical of what the reform can deliver. In a review of the effects of litigation over school finance, Dayton (1996, 27) concludes that “judicial action can be *a useful tool* in the struggle for legislative attention and in the attempt to communicate to the electorate the need for equitable and adequate educational opportunities for all children” (emphasis added).

The emphasis is on the role of the litigations as part of the political processes of policy change. There are many actors in these processes, amongst whom are the courts and the litigants. The main effect of the litigations is *not* the degree of reduction of inequity in the school resources the litigations directly influence, even though the latter is the subject of the litigations. Rather, the litigations’ effects are seen in how they shaped the ideas and behaviour of other actors, including the legislature, administrators and the electorate in the matter of school finance and education equity. This interpretation of the role of *any* piece of reform being realised through its *interaction* with related processes and other actors in the change process, cautioning against a mechanical measurement of direct effects and indeed a unilinear notion of causality, echoes an analysis made in 1930 by educationist Henry Morrison. When reviewing the effects of the early attempts of his time on state equalisation subvention, Morrison observed:

The essential purpose of subvention...is *not* equalization, neither equalization of opportunity nor fiscal equalization. It is rather *the encouragement of local districts to undertake what they would not otherwise undertake* for the achievement of some purpose in public education which the state government thinks ought to be achieved (Morrison cited in Ward 1998, 11, emphasis added).

The education equity reform is, ultimately, a restructuring of the institutions and incentives to instil an appropriate set of ideas and dispositions for the desired behaviour. The

assessment of any components and aspects of the reform process, be they the litigations or specific measures and policy instruments, has to be conducted and interpreted in this light.

China: Standards-In-The-Making

In socialist China as in the democratic US, basic education (primary and middle school) has long depended on local funding. This is especially the case after the decentralisation of state responsibilities in the 1980s, when the post-Mao leadership embarked upon the dismantling of the command economy framework. With limited investment from higher levels of the government, uneven economic development and varied fiscal capacities in different parts of the country, previous disparities in education spending across localities further widened (Wang and Zhao 2012). The turn to the market for additional resources to compensate for the shortfall of state investment did not help, as often better-endowed localities attracted the most additional investment. Access to education became a function of one's ability to pay. By the 1990s, complaints were commonplace over pricy "elite" schools beyond the means of the average urban residents, and over rundown rural schools whose upkeep both parents and local governments could not afford (Tsang 2000).

Early Discussions

In comparison to the US, the emergence in China of a policy discourse on education equity is a more recent phenomenon: in 2004 the term "education equity" (*jiaoyu junheng*) appeared for the first time in the text of a central government document (Ministry of Education of PRC et al. 2004). Nevertheless, despite the lack of an explicit mention, the notion of equity, or more precisely inequity, had been central to heated debates over education in society. At least 20 central government documents were issued between 1991 and 2010, for example, to demand tighter control over the fees charged by elite schools to prospective students. The "switching school" phenomenon, whereby parents voted with their feet against the laxly enforced "school where you live" policy to pursue better educational opportunities for their children, has further accentuated the imbalance of distribution over educational resources across schools. As the quality of education in weaker and less well-endowed schools dropped further due to loss of senior teachers to elite schools, the exodus of teachers continued and deepened the vicious cycle. At the same time, the fees to secure a place in a top-ranked school shot up, generating grievances both amongst those who were priced out of the schools and those getting in.

Rural education is another major site of grievances over inequities. Fiscal centralisation in the mid-1990s had raised more revenues for the central coffers at the expense of local revenues, while local governments were loaded with a lengthening list of responsibilities from agriculture to industrial development, medical insurance, pensions, education, culture and social control. This resulted in the infamous "unfunded mandate" syndrome as commensurable amounts of government funds were not made available to finance the responsibilities (Wong 1997; World Bank 2002). To meet these ends, local governments and schools turned to parents to pay teachers and even school electricity bills. The rural tax reform in the early 2000s banned many excessive fees (Li 2012). The result, however, was that many rural schools suffered a fiscal crisis as no alternative funding had been provided. Many schools shut down, not being able to pay even minimal costs (Li and Wu 2005; Wang and Zhao 2012). Whilst education inequity in cities was about differences

between a privileged few schools and the majority, in many parts of rural China the question was whether classes could continue and students actually get *some* education.

Yet another issue of education inequity that caught public and media attention was the education of the children of migrant workers (Xiang 2005). These children were caught in a no-win situation. Accompanying their parents in their new urban homes, many struggled to find a place in urban public schools, which they were often denied access to due to their official rural household status. Most of these children ended up studying in social schools operated by local groups with a meagre budget and, obviously, substandard facilities. Those children not travelling with their migrant parents and staying in their rural homes faced another sort of nightmare – potential neglect, which along with a whole range of developmental and sociological problems have been identified as, summarily, the “Left Behind Children Syndrome” (Wu and Yang 2005; Zhou et al. 2005).

An Evolving Concept and Agenda

These discussions over problems in urban and rural education gradually crystallised into an explicit policy of education equity. An online search of the literature in the China Journals Full-text Database (CJFD) using “the equitable development of compulsory education” (*yiwu jiaoyu junheng fazhan*) as title keywords gives a total of 743 articles between 1994 and 22 October 2010, with 36 articles during the decade of 1994–2004, and 707 articles in the five years since 2005. Most articles in the earlier period discuss funding deficits. There was no attempt to define education equity or to delineate measures to improve equity. The watershed moment came in 2004–05. In 2004, enhancing education equity was explicitly prescribed in a Ministry of Education document on combating illegal fees in the educational sector as an “important measure” to deal with the “switching schools” issue. Local governments were urged to “take up the responsibility for improving equity, devise effective measures to make available more education resources, and elevate the standards and quality of education in the weaker schools” (Ministry of Education of PRC 2004). The Ministry of Education (2005) issued *Some Opinions on Further Enhancing the Equitable Development of Compulsory Education*, which is the first document issued by a central ministry with “equitable development of education” (*jiaoyu junheng fazhan*) prominently in its title. The 2005 document marks the beginning of a new chapter in education policy: as a universal basic-level of education has been attained, 20 years after the promulgation of the goal in the 1986 Education Law, it is time to move on.

The 2005 document lays out an approach for implementing the new objective of education equity. The major grievance over inequities has been the differential access to educational resources in schools in different territorial units. A first step is thus to specify a territorial scope wherein such differences should be narrowed. This territorial scope is defined as the county/district level. In other words, equity improvement efforts will seek to reduce the gaps in education between towns and townships, the constituent urban and rural territorial units within a county. There is still, however, no specific definition of “education equity” in the document, though there is an elaborate discussion of the need to reduce the increasing disparities in educational resources. Measures listed include more funding to weaker schools and localities, stricter control over school switching, and improving teachers’ training and resources (such as teacher–student ratio and school

facilities). Provincial governments were also urged to enhance their role, though what it means practically speaking is not at all clear.

The new policy emphasis on education equity quickly led to a blossoming of studies on the subject. As noted above, the 707 articles with “education equity” in their titles in the five years from 2005 are almost 20-fold the number of studies recorded in the CJFD during the previous decade (Du and Sun 2009). Mirroring the societal discussion and policy emphasis, scholarly studies show a similar concentration on a relative standard of equity, and stress the importance of narrowing, gradually, the disparity in educational resources across various definitions of jurisdictions and boundaries. However, similar to the official documents, no clear definition of the concept of equity is offered. While discussion focuses on the need to reduce disparities, there is no delineation of *how large* a disparity at any time will be unacceptable for the criterion of equity.

In January 2010, the Ministry of Education issued *An Opinion to Further Enhance the Equitable Development of Compulsory Education as a Measure to Implement the Scientific Development Strategy*, which further develops the education equity policy in a number of ways. First, it outlines a phased approach, setting the year 2012 for achieving “preliminary” equity in education, and 2020 for “basic” equity. Again, there is no explicit definition of what counts as “preliminary” (*chubu*) and “basic” (*jiben*) equity, but a “gradual” progression in the reduction of disparity has apparently been taken to differentiate the two phases.⁵ A second development is a designation of the respective roles of different levels of government over the reduction of inequities. The provincial level will provide coordination and guidance, and formulate the basic education standards for implementation at schools. It will also design measures to support weaker localities within the provincial boundary. The prefectural (city) level is charged with the formulation of detailed plans of action, which the county will execute.

Two points are worth noting. The first is the delineation of roles of government at various levels. This reflects an understanding that reducing inequities in schools requires a larger role for the upper tiers of government as often the redistribution of resources across jurisdictions of varying means is necessary. Second, there is for the first time an explicit mention of the need to formulate school-based education standards, in addition to the traditional emphasis on meeting funding needs. The new emphasis on common standards begs questions of *what* the standards are and *how* they are determined. More importantly, setting common standards to be applicable to all suggests a shift to an absolute standard of equity – a *minimum* level of “adequate” education, as opposed to a relative standard emphasising equalisation or reduction of differences in the quality and resources of education.

Probing for a Strategy

Whilst court decisions have had a conspicuous presence in education equity reform in the US, in China the locus of events was mostly within the administration, though the increasingly active virtual space of the netizen community is posing an increasing influence on policy (see Lewis 2013). “Informal” sources, such as officials’ elaboration of policy in media interviews, speeches and articles, offer important insights into aspects of the policymaking process, supplementing the formal sources of policy documents and regulations.

In a national education conference in late 2009, a few weeks before the production of the 2010 document, the deputy director of the Compulsory Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education briefed conference participants regarding the ongoing debates for and against the promulgation of a common national standard for the quality of education (Yang 2009). Supporters of a common national standard saw in it guaranteed access to education of a similar quality for all children. Opponents stressed the need for diversity in education, in view of the long-standing local characteristics in a continent-sized country, and doubted the feasibility and possible negative repercussions of a common standard. Whilst noting the controversy of the issue, Yang made clear his preference for the delineation of a common *minimal* standard, so that all children will be guaranteed at least a certain minimal standard of education, *in order to attain some degree of equity*. Yang (2009) stated: “This standard will provide a ‘floor’ for all, and it brings no capping of the upper end beyond it. At least we need a floor, or else how can we still claim we are to improve equity?” This reference to a “floor” was repeated by Gao Hong, Yang’s senior at the Compulsory Education Bureau, in another media interview explaining the 2010 document.

The overall strategy is...to take education equity reform as a means towards a better quality of education...we make it clear that equitable development (of education) does not imply capping the strong in order to elevate the weak. *Rather it is to gradually elevate the standards of education across the board as we advance on the front of equity* (Gao 2010, emphasis added).

The reference to a “floor” in the Chinese context is similar to the foundation grants of states and the adequacy concept of equity in the US, upheld by many state courts as the preferred standard of equity since the 1980s: since all students had access to a minimum, basic education, the school finance system was not unconstitutional despite disparities in its educational quality and equality (Verstegen 1998). Given the acute concerns over relative inequity in education in Chinese society since the 1990s, the arrival of an absolute minimal standard and the explicit denial of plans to cap the upper end of the continuum remind us of the criticism of retreat in the US over adequacy.

There is also an explicit reference to a *dynamic* notion of equity in Gao’s articulation of the minimum standard, with the “floor” moving upwards to a higher standard over time. A similar note was also heard in US courts in the 1990s. When discussing how to define standards of education adequacy in a changing society, it was maintained that “what was adequate in the past is inadequate today” (Verstegen 1998). The floor will be shifting upwards in an escalating “spiral” over time. A theoretical possibility is that the successive elevation of the “floor,” if sustained long enough, will lead to an eventual closing of the gaps between strong and weaker schools. Or the floor can become so sufficiently high that other schools “above” the floor will not materially cause any substantive injustice or deprivation.

Underlying the strategy of a minimum standard of education is the broader policy of “equalisation of basic public services.” Emerging out of two discourses on the role of government and widening regional disparities, respectively, in the 1990s, the notion of “equalisation of basic public services” reflects an attempt to delineate the boundary of the government’s role and responsibility to ensure an adequate provision of public services across the variably endowed regions in the country. The overriding concern is the growing

disparity in the level of service provision, and in particular the low level of provision in some areas. “Equalisation” has been officially described, in that regard, as a “necessary strategy towards achieving co-ordinated development of different regions and narrowing regional disparities” (Hu 2007), but its precise meaning has been rather ambivalent, from an initial emphasis on “equalising” – reducing and eliminating differences – to the more recent interpretation of having a “basic,” or minimum, standard of provision for all (Liu 2010).

So far the most important policy instrument at work to serve the policy objective of improving education equity has been the Fund Guarantee Mechanism (FGM). In the early 2000s, the central government implemented the Rural Tax Reform to contain the excessive extraction of revenue in the countryside in light of rising threats to social stability and regime legitimacy. To compensate for the loss of revenues historically supporting rural education, in 2006 the FGM was instituted to provide rural schools in the more deprived regions of the country with a “floor” of funding, largely from central and provincial coffers (State Council 2005). Through enacting common standards for provision, and gradually elevating the standard of provision, the FGM provides a mechanism to increase the resources available to weaker schools and localities and thus raise education quality gradually. Equity in education will be improved through “lifting” the “floor” from the bottom end. From 2006 to 2011, nearly 500 billion *yuan* of additional funding from central and provincial coffers has been injected into rural schools, mostly in the economically weak central and western regions. The levels of subsidies to school operation costs, on a per student basis, have been raised four times, from RMB 150/250 (primary/middle school) in 2007, to 300/500 in 2009, 400/600 in 2010, and up to 500/700 in 2011.

Apart from the lifting of the “funding floor,” another initiative was to formulate an education equity index, which in 2009 involved 312 counties participating in a national “pilot” scheme and several pioneering provincial governments (Ministry of Education of PRC 2009; Chongqing City Government 2010). One objective of the pilot scheme was to gain experience in gathering *precise* and *detailed* information on the existing situation of education provision, including the extent of disparities, which is essential for the development of education standards and classification of the “floor” (Chen 2009). In fact, the lack of good data has not only impaired the assessment of education equity but also its implementation by local governments. The heavy reliance on funds from higher levels of government has also brought issues of agency control and efficiency. Somewhat similar to the effect of state grants on local tax relief in the US, the additional FGM funding from the central-provincial governments has had a “crowding out” effect on local educational spending, as local governments diverted local resources to other policy areas (Li and Yuan 2011). By 2012, a full system of national education standards had been put in place to monitor the progress of education equity in the counties and provinces. For the first time, the central government clearly delineates the required education equity standard based on a composite measure of resources for schools within a county (Ministry of Education of PRC 2012).

In comparison to various distinctive education aid designs adopted by individual states in the US, China has mainly pushed for more educational funding from the central and provincial governments for localities all over the country. The major policy objective has been to define and guarantee the minimum “floor” of funding for education.

Conclusions

Both China and the US have pressed the need for a good education at the turn of the twenty-first century. In 1994, the US Congress enacted the Goals 2000: Educate America Act mandating provisions to ensure “students can learn and achieve to high standards,” noting that students “must realise their potential if the United States is to prosper.” In 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law, which was designed to improve student achievement and to hold states and schools more accountable to student progress. Also in 1994, the Chinese government stepped up the implementation of compulsory basic-level education for all children in the 6–15 age cohorts, pledged in the 1986 Education Law, leading to ambitious school building programmes across the country (Ministry of Education 1994). In 2005, a decade after the Educate America Act was enacted, education equity was formally placed on the national policy agenda in China. New central funds of an unprecedented scale were provided to the financially weak regions to enhance education quality in schools. In both the US and China, policy discussions on education equity were embedded in concerns in society over the quality of education students received, as well as over broader issues and values of local autonomy, fairness, social stability and regime legitimacy. In both countries actions for change started with adjustments to government funding. Policy strategies were devised to reduce the funding gaps and, similarly, there has been a gradual shift in emphasis from equalisation of education funding towards a minimum standard of adequacy, which in turn leads to the definition of educational standards.

These common trends between the two countries have co-existed with important differences, which serve not to offset the similarities but inform them, to enable a deeper appreciation of the trends and anticipation of possible future developments. Table 1 shows a comparison of education finance reforms in the US and China. One difference lies in the movement from equity to adequacy in each country. Despite the apparent parallels, in China there has not been an explicit articulation of the shift as in the US, where numerous studies have debated the concept of adequacy *vis-à-vis* equity. Indeed an equivalent term for “adequacy” has yet to emerge in the Chinese discourse, where the most used terms are “equity” (*junheng*), “equalisation” (*jundenghua*), “fairness” (*gongping*) and “equality” (*pingdeng*) (Liu 2010). The notions of a “floor” or “baseline” (*dixian*) that have appeared in academic studies and the speeches of education officials should be closest to

Table 1. Education equity reforms in the United States and China

	United States	China
Changes in education equity standards	Shifted from equity (a relative standard) to adequacy (an absolute standard)	No explicit shift in standards; the concept of adequacy has yet to emerge
Strategies to achieve education equity	Guaranteed tax base (GTB) and foundation programmes	A larger spending commitment by the central and provincial governments, e.g., Fund Guarantee Mechanism (FGM)
Drivers of education finance reforms	Value conflicts in American society; the three waves of court decisions; state government actions	Concerns over disparities in educational resources and outcomes in the communities and policy circles; party–state administration

“adequacy” in the US context, but they were used in China to explain what “equalisation” or “equity,” which appear in the official texts, actually mean in terms of practical consequence. In other words, the deed is still in search of the right name, and the semantic confusion sometimes has led to conceptual ambiguities. The adequacy discourse in the US has, on the other hand, gone beyond the prescription of a basic or minimum standard of educational programme that was deemed acceptable three decades ago (Verstegen 1998), to a more precise definition of *what in the contents of the education process and outcomes define an “adequate” or “sufficient” education*. Central to this is the curriculum. There is also an increasing awareness that our knowledge on this question – the linkage between input and expected outcome – is limited (National Research Council 1999). It is, for example, difficult to predict or anticipate what children will *need* to know or be equipped with for their future, given the rapidly changing society. Efforts to pin down some sort of an answer to this question have led to the emerging movement of education standards, including an ongoing debate on whether federal common standards should be developed for voluntary adoption (Beatty 2008).⁶ The idea of national standards seems easier to come by in China, which has recently put in place a national evaluation framework, despite a late start to the conceptual discussion. Here the more centralised political tradition of China is likely to be instrumental.

With regard to strategies, both countries have adopted centralisation of some sorts in their equity reforms. In response to the early court decisions, several states in the US implemented GTB programmes to meet the equalisation standard. With greater emphasis on adequacy in later years, the foundation plan has become the most popular aid programme. Common to either instrument is the state-level’s intervention in local education finance. In China, the FGM is explicitly a scheme of intergovernmental transfers through earmarked funds to schools. The requirements for local matching funds and imposition of provincial and national standards also spell an enlarged role of the central and provincial governments in local education. Indeed, as fundamental value conflicts in American society have permeated reforms in the US, equity reforms in China have similarly accentuated traditional concerns over agency control and implementation efficiency.

Another point of interest is the process through which change was driven. Litigation resulting from fundamental value conflicts in society played a critical role in the US, having started the school finance reform movement in the early years, though state governments have also initiated reforms independent of court decisions. In China, given widespread concerns in society and academic circles over the unequal distribution of educational resources and outcomes, the party–state administration has remained the major venue in which critical decisions are made. In both countries inter-governmental relations have loomed large. In the US, the states have been critical players, demanding and supplementing actions of the local districts. Even the Federal Government has increasingly been drawn in, through executive orders and legislations, despite the earlier constitutional ruling against a definitive federal role. In China, the policy on education equity emerged as part of the central government’s broader objective of improving local provision of basic public services, mostly through a larger spending commitment from the central and provincial coffers. On the one hand, a stepped-up role for the regional levels is necessary to correct imbalances in local resource allocation in education, the roles of state governments in the US and central government in China have nevertheless been criticised, as the negative impacts of the equity reforms for local control and efficiency have surfaced (Johnston and Duncombe 1998; Li and Yuan 2011). To the extent that the trade-off between equity and efficiency, and national

direction and local control, reveals a conflict between fundamental values and is thus “irresolvable,” how to strike a compromise between the simultaneous demands will inform, to a large measure, the future trajectory of education equity policy in the US and China. Finding a way in which the various levels of government may work together more effectively will be a common challenge for the two countries in their shared objective to deliver a good education for all American and Chinese children, as well as for future research.

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Notes

- ¹ Education features in, amongst others, the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program) and Sustainable Governance Indicators (Seyfried 2011). Equity is explicitly listed amongst the three major values (with sustainable development and peace) in the World Governance Indicators (World Bank), is one of the four in the Urban Governance Index (United Nations Human Settlements Programme) (with accountability, participation and effectiveness), and one of the eight major characteristics constituting “good governance practices” (with accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, rule of law, participation and consensus), according to the Economic and Social Conditions Committee for Asia and the Pacific of the United States.
- ² Views on this matter are at best tentative, however. Lukemeyer (2003) finds that the hypothesis that courts defining their constitutions as imposing an adequacy standard were more likely to rule in favour of plaintiffs cannot be supported. While courts were more likely to accept an adequacy standard, they were also more likely to find the standard met.
- ³ For an example, see the controversial *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Alan D. Bloom (1987).
- ⁴ The relevance of school-related inputs and educational outcomes was once again questioned during the Chicago teachers’ strike in September 2012. The strike triggered heated debates over the need for a broader approach beyond the education/school budget to the dire inequities in educational outcomes in Chicago schools and in the US generally (see Angert 2012).
- ⁵ It is stated that “the focus for most localities will be to enhance equity in education within the boundary of a county-district, whilst others with the means will improve inter-county equity.” When “basic equity” is achieved by 2020, “the educational resources and quality of education in rural schools will be further improved, and the mechanisms for education equity will be further perfected” (Ministry of Education 2010, paragraphs 2 and 4).
- ⁶ By 2008, all 50 states had established their respective, and varied, standards for education from kindergarten through grade 12, including both content standards (which describe material that students are to learn) and performance standards (which describe the level of proficiency expected). The current debate is about options to improve state standards and how standards can best improve education results, including the development of voluntary federal standards.

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