

A Critical Analysis of the Students' Perceptions of Fairness in the Gaokao System

Aijia Chen

1. Institute of Problem Solving, King's College London, London, WC2R 2LS, UK

2. Department of Computing, King's College London, London, WC2R 2LS, UK

Abstract: In recent years controversy has emerged over the fairness of the Gaokao, the most important selection examination in China. Understandings and perceptions of the exam's fairness seem to vary across people's social status and positions. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how socioeconomic status affects students' perceptions of the Gaokao's fairness.

Keywords: The fairness of the Gaokao; Socioeconomic status; Educational resources

1. Introduction

As the largest and most competitive selection examination, the Gaokao has considerable importance in China. This exam is not only the primary way for the country to select talents, but also guides the teaching and learning of the entire basic education period in China (Liu & Wu 2006). Although it is claimed that the Gaokao follows the core concepts of 'fairness, equality and transparency', with everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, equal in the face of academic achievements (Liu 2000 in Liu & Wu 2006), the fairness of this examination remains questioned. Bourdieu (1984) put forward the concept of capital and applied it to the field of pedagogy. Research to date shows that personal educational achievements are related to various forms of capital owned by individuals: people with strong social, economic and cultural capital are more likely to achieve better educational achievements. In China, the proportion of students from low socioeconomic status who pass the Gaokao to enter elite universities is declining year by year. Based on the above considerations, this research aims to answer the following questions:

(1) In what ways does family economic and social status inform students' perception of the 'fairness' of the Gaokao's outcomes?

(2) Do students perceive 'unfairness' in their interactions with school, based on their social class?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chinese high school education background

In China, once students have completed nine years of compulsory education, they enter high school to prepare for the Gaokao. As a link between basic education and higher education, high school can be regarded as the most crucial stage in a student's learning journey (Liu & Wu 2006).

The fierce competition brought about by the Gaokao begins with students' enrollment into high school. Many parents spend a lot of money and make use of their networks to send their children to prestigious high schools. In China, high schools are often divided into ordinary high schools and key high schools. Key high schools are those where students are offered better teaching resources, more experienced teachers and a better learning atmosphere. Therefore, the enrollment rate of key high schools is often greater than that of ordinary high schools (Xiao 2013). Furthermore, even within the same high school, there are key classes and regular classes. Those students who get a good score in the entrance exam are assigned to key classes. According to Li (2016), students in key classes then receive guidance from more experienced teachers. The reason for this may be that students in key classes are more likely to achieve good results in the Gaokao. In addition to the courses taken at school,

some institutions even use extracurricular time to secretly train students outside school to improve their achievement. This is the case, even if teachers' participation in off-campus training is prohibited by the Ministry of Education (Li 2010).

2.2 Influence

The impact of the Gaokao on Chinese society has been often fiercely debated. The focus of the controversy mainly revolves around whether the Gaokao is negative or positive for the development of educational fairness and social justice. Researchers opposed to the Gaokao believe that it is not a fair examination system, causes a series of social problems and exacerbates inequality in education. Zang (2007 in Li 2016) pointed out that the educational resources and curriculum quality of regions in China are inconsistent and that the fierce competition for the Gaokao may exacerbate the educational gap between different areas. In addition to regional differences, family economic status has a significant impact on Gaokao results. Li (2016) showed that students with high socioeconomic status spent more time receiving tuition and scored higher in the Gaokao. This puts working-class students at a disadvantage.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Bourdieu's capital theory

Bourdieu's capital theory has been a widely cited framework used to explain educational equality and social justice. Bourdieu divided capital into three forms: economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Economic capital can be understood as wages and other forms of assets, such as stocks and real estate (Bourdieu 1984 pp. 114-115). Economic capital can be directly invested in the education of students to help them achieve good academic results. China's shadow education is an example of how economic capital is used, as families with high economic status can hire better tutors and can enable their children to achieve higher Gaokao results through additional tutoring.

Bourdieu's capital theory framework is of great help to study the fairness of the Gaokao, since it provides a new perspective for the understanding of "fairness".

3. Methods and Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Research

To achieve its purpose, this study adopts the method of qualitative research. This method can make use of data and information collected from multiple sources, such as audio, documents, pictures and interviews. Qualitative Research can help us obtain students' real views about the Gaokao's fairness, and achieve more accurate research results. Semi-structured interviews are the research method used in this study. Given the research aims, interviews are the most appropriate method to express students' voices.

3.2 Sample and Access

This research selected as interview subjects senior high school students from the No.7 High School in Zhengzhou City, in the Henan Province of China. As the capital of Henan Province, Zhengzhou is a relatively developed city. The Seventh Middle School is a public school with a high reputation in the local area. In addition, two students from Shaanxi Province, an underdeveloped area in Northwest China, participated in the interview. The school they are attending is the local ordinary public high school. Compared with Zhengzhou No. 7 Middle School, the family economic situation of the students in this school is relatively less wealthy.

4. Findings and Analysis

This chapter analyzes and discusses the results of the interviews. After coding, classification and sub-classification, three main themes emerged. The categories of the four themes are as follows:

- Educational resources
- Family's cultural capital
- Career planning.

4.1 Educational resources

Before analyzing how family economic status affects students' perceptions of the Gaokao's fairness, I first asked the interviewees how they viewed the relationship between class and the Gaokao. All six respondents believed that students' Gaokao score are closely related to their social class, with students from wealthier families tending to have an advantage during their studies. This is first manifested in educational investment, such as extracurricular tutoring and various other forms of learning support. Affluent families have enough financial strength to provide students with better educational resources.

Respondents explained that in high schools, extra tutoring is already a common phenomenon. Parents from a high socioeconomic status spend much money to hire the best teachers and the tutoring fees for many students are even more expensive than school fees, which is not affordable for working class parents.

4.2 Family's cultural capital

'Well-educated parents can often arrange their children's study and life more reasonably. When I was at high school, some parents with high socioeconomic status sent their children abroad during the holidays... You know, to attend that kind of short-term summer camp. This not only helps students to improve their English scores, but also helps to broaden their horizons'. (P1)

From the answers of the interviewees, parents with a high level of education maintain a more sensible and tolerant attitude towards their children's education. More importantly, parents with high levels of education provide their children with reasonable learning advice and learning support. As Jager & Holm (2007) explained, parents with a large amount of cultural capital are more likely to master practical information, so that they can make the 'right' choices at the secondary education stage and give their children more useful guidance. This may be difficult for working-class parents.

4.3 Career planning

'If I do not enter university, I might plan to go to work directly, such as by opening an art studio or something. There is no better choice for me'. (P5)

'The Gaokao is indeed critical, but not all... If I cannot pass the Gaokao, I originally planned to study abroad or find a job in my parents' work unit... There are always other choices in the future. Failure in the Gaokao does not mean that there is no good future'. (P2)

Based on the above interviews, it can be seen that career planning affects respondents' perceptions of the Gaokao's fairness. In general, students with high socioeconomic status will have more choices available, such as studying abroad or their parents helping them to find a good job. However, for students from low-income families, the Gaokao is their only chance. Only by passing it, can they enter a good university and get a good job afterwards. The Gaokao is more important to them than to middle-class and wealthy students. Therefore, students with low socioeconomic status have extremely high self-expectations and they pay extra attention to the Gaokao's fairness. This is one of the reasons why the two interviewees with low socioeconomic status felt more strongly about the unfairness of the Gaokao.

5. Conclusion

The influence of family economics and social status on students' perception of equity in the Gaokao is complex. In general, socioeconomic status can affect students' perception of fairness across three main dimensions: learning resources, family cultural capital and career planning. The data collected through the interviews seem to suggest that students with high socioeconomic status also enjoy strong cultural capital, abundant learning resources and flexible career planning. Therefore, their views on the Gaokao's fairness are more moderate. Wealthy students seem to agree that there is no fairer selection method than the Gaokao.

On the contrary, From working-class students' perspective, the Gaokao was seen more as a way the middle class and the rich to consolidate their status, than as an opportunity for them to improve their social status. This is because people with low socioeconomic status do not have sufficient economic conditions and cultural capital to obtain high-quality educational resources.

To sum up, there is indeed unfairness in the Gaokao, but for the middle class and the rich, its impact is small. For the working class, the Gaokao's unfairness significantly affects their future. It is not easy to change this phenomenon because policymakers are often also beneficiaries of this inequality.

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