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Article

From Privilege to Public Good: Advancing Educational Equity in Dance Education for Disadvantaged Children in China

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Abstract

Although China has made remarkable progress in expanding compulsory education and promoting educational equity, access to quality arts education remains unevenly distributed across regions and socioeconomic groups. Dance education, in particular, is frequently regarded as an extracurricular privilege rather than an essential component of holistic child development. Consequently, children from low-income families, rural communities, migrant households, and other disadvantaged backgrounds often have limited opportunities to participate in systematic dance education. This inequality extends beyond artistic development and influences children's cognitive growth, emotional well-being, social competence, creativity, confidence, and long-term life opportunities. This article argues that access to dance education should be understood as an issue of educational equity rather than merely a matter of extracurricular enrichment. Drawing upon theories of educational equity, cultural capital, capability development, and children's cultural rights, the paper examines how unequal access to dance education reinforces existing educational and social inequalities in contemporary China. The article further reviews China's evolving policies on aesthetic education, analyzes structural barriers that continue to restrict equitable access, and discusses why disadvantaged children are often excluded from meaningful participation in arts education despite national commitments to educational modernization. To complement policy analysis, this study incorporates professional observations derived from more than fifteen years of practice in children's dance education in China. These observations illustrate how disparities in family resources, geographic location, and educational infrastructure shape children's opportunities to engage in high-quality arts education. Based on these findings, the paper proposes policy recommendations emphasizing stronger governmental investment, rural arts education capacity building, teacher preparation, community-based arts programs, and cross-sector collaboration. Expanding access to dance education, the article concludes, is not simply an investment in artistic talent but a strategic investment in educational equity, children's capabilities, and long-term social development.

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1. Introduction

Education has long been recognized as one of the most effective mechanisms for reducing social inequality and promoting sustainable human development. Over the past four decades, China has achieved remarkable progress in expanding access to compulsory education, increasing school enrollment, and narrowing disparities in basic educational opportunities. National initiatives such as the Rural Revitalization Strategy, targeted poverty alleviation, and continuous reforms in compulsory education have substantially improved educational participation across the country. Nevertheless, equal access to education does not necessarily translate into equal access to all dimensions of educational development. Significant disparities remain in the distribution of educational resources beyond the core academic curriculum, particularly in the field of arts education.

Among the various forms of arts education, dance occupies a unique position. Unlike classroom-based subjects that are generally incorporated into compulsory schooling, systematic dance education often depends upon family financial capacity, community resources, availability of qualified instructors, and local cultural infrastructure. Consequently, participation in dance education in China has increasingly become concentrated among children from urban middle- and upper-income families, while children from economically disadvantaged households, rural communities, migrant families, and underdeveloped regions encounter considerable barriers to participation. For many of these children, opportunities to experience structured dance education remain extremely limited or entirely absent.

This disparity deserves greater scholarly and policy attention because dance education contributes to far more than artistic performance. A growing body of interdisciplinary research demonstrates that participation in dance supports children's physical development, executive functioning, emotional regulation, creativity, social interaction, self-confidence, cultural identity, and overall psychological well-being. Dance education also promotes collaboration, perseverance, communication skills, and self-expression—competencies increasingly recognized as essential for success in the twenty-first century. When disadvantaged children are systematically excluded from these developmental opportunities, educational inequality extends beyond academic achievement into broader aspects of human capability and lifelong development.

Despite China's increasing emphasis on aesthetic education (*meiyu*) as an integral component of quality-oriented education (*suzhi jiaoyu*), substantial implementation challenges persist. Schools in economically developed urban areas often provide diversified arts programs, extracurricular clubs, specialized teachers, and abundant cultural resources. In contrast, many rural schools continue to experience shortages of qualified arts educators, limited instructional time, inadequate facilities, and insufficient financial investment. Dance education is particularly vulnerable because it frequently receives lower institutional priority than music or visual arts and often relies upon private training institutions beyond the financial reach of disadvantaged families. As a result, arts education itself has become another dimension through which socioeconomic inequality is reproduced.

This article argues that access to dance education should no longer be viewed as a private consumption choice or a luxury educational service available only to affluent families. Rather, it should be recognized as an issue of educational equity, children's cultural participation, and social justice. Equal opportunities to participate in meaningful arts education constitute an important component of children's comprehensive development and align with China's broader educational goals of fostering well-rounded citizens capable of creativity, innovation, and social responsibility.

Unlike many previous studies that primarily examine the pedagogical benefits of dance education, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates education policy, child development, cultural rights, and social equity. The analysis is situated within the contemporary Chinese context, where rapid economic development has significantly expanded educational opportunities while simultaneously generating new forms of educational inequality associated with family income, urban-rural disparities, migration, and uneven regional development.

The article is guided by three research questions:

1. How do socioeconomic and regional inequalities influence disadvantaged children's access to dance education in China?
2. What are the developmental consequences of unequal access to dance education for children's long-term capabilities and life opportunities?
3. How can educational policy better promote equitable access to dance education as part of China's commitment to educational modernization and social equity?

To address these questions, the article combines policy analysis with practice-based observations derived from over fifteen years of professional experience in children's dance education. Rather than treating dance solely as a performing art, the paper conceptualizes dance education as a developmental resource that contributes to children's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social well-being. Ultimately, the article argues that expanding access to dance education should become an integral component of educational equity policy in China, transforming dance education from an educational privilege enjoyed by relatively few into a public good accessible to all children regardless of socioeconomic background.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Dance Education and Children's Holistic Development

Over the past three decades, a growing body of interdisciplinary research has demonstrated that arts education contributes substantially to children's cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development. Rather than functioning merely as an extracurricular activity, dance education has increasingly been recognized as an important component of holistic education that supports multiple dimensions of child development (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013).

Dance integrates movement, music, creativity, communication, and emotional expression into a unified learning experience. Unlike many traditional academic subjects that primarily emphasize cognitive achievement, dance education simultaneously promotes physical coordination, executive functioning, self-regulation, interpersonal communication, and creative thinking. Neuroscientific research suggests that coordinated movement activates multiple regions of the brain responsible for memory, attention, emotional processing, and motor control, thereby strengthening children's overall learning capacity (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Research has also demonstrated significant relationships between dance participation and children's socio-emotional development. Regular engagement in dance activities enhances self-confidence, emotional regulation, resilience, empathy, and collaborative skills while reducing anxiety and social isolation (Burkhardt & Brennan, 2012). Group dance activities further encourage cooperation, mutual respect, leadership development, and collective problem-solving, all of which are increasingly recognized as essential twenty-first century competencies.

Educational psychologists further argue that dance creates learning environments where children develop self-expression beyond verbal communication. This function is particularly important for young children, whose emotional experiences frequently

exceed their linguistic capacities. Through movement, rhythm, and performance, children acquire alternative means of expressing identity, emotion, and imagination, thereby supporting psychological well-being and healthy personality development.

Consequently, international organizations including UNESCO (2006), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization have repeatedly emphasized that arts education should not be regarded as an optional enrichment activity but rather as an integral element of quality education and sustainable human development.

Despite this growing international consensus, participation in dance education remains highly uneven across socioeconomic groups, particularly in developing and rapidly transforming societies.

2.2 Educational Inequality in Arts Education

Educational inequality has traditionally been examined through disparities in school enrollment, academic achievement, teacher quality, and educational financing. However, recent scholarship argues that educational equity should also encompass unequal access to enrichment opportunities, including music, visual arts, theatre, and dance (Reardon, 2011).

In many countries, arts education has gradually shifted from being publicly provided within schools to becoming increasingly dependent upon private markets. Dance education exemplifies this trend. Participation often requires families to invest substantial financial resources in tuition, transportation, costumes, examinations, competitions, and performance opportunities. Consequently, children from affluent families benefit from significantly greater exposure to systematic dance training than children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

This phenomenon contributes to what educational sociologists describe as the "opportunity gap," whereby disparities in children's developmental experiences accumulate over time. Rather than reflecting differences in innate ability, unequal participation frequently results from structural inequalities associated with household income, parental education, neighborhood resources, and school quality.

Studies conducted in both developed and developing countries consistently indicate that disadvantaged children participate less frequently in extracurricular arts programs despite often expressing comparable levels of interest and motivation. Financial constraints, limited availability of qualified instructors, inadequate transportation, and competing family responsibilities all reduce opportunities for sustained engagement in arts education. Consequently, arts education has become another mechanism through which broader patterns of social inequality are reproduced across generations.

2.3 Arts Education and Educational Equity in China

China has experienced remarkable expansion in educational access since the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education system. Government investment has significantly reduced disparities in school enrollment and basic educational attainment. Simultaneously, national educational reforms have increasingly emphasized quality-oriented education (*suzhi jiaoyu*) and comprehensive student development.

In recent years, aesthetic education (*meiyu*) has received unprecedented policy attention. The Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era, jointly issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council in 2020, identifies aesthetic education as an essential component of cultivating morally, intellectually, physically, aesthetically, and labor-competent citizens. The policy

calls for strengthening arts curricula, improving teacher preparation, expanding cultural resources, and narrowing regional disparities in aesthetic education.

Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven across China. Numerous studies have documented persistent shortages of qualified arts teachers in rural schools, insufficient instructional time allocated to arts subjects, limited facilities, and disparities in educational funding between urban and rural regions (Ministry of Education of China, 2023). Dance education faces particularly severe challenges because many schools lack teachers with specialized dance training and because systematic dance instruction often depends upon private extracurricular institutions.

Furthermore, household socioeconomic status continues to influence children's participation in dance education. Families with greater financial resources are more capable of investing in long-term dance instruction, competition participation, and professional certification. In contrast, children from rural households, migrant families, and economically disadvantaged communities frequently encounter significant barriers to sustained participation.

These inequalities suggest that while China has made substantial progress toward universal access to compulsory education, equitable access to high-quality arts education remains an unfinished policy agenda.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Cultural Capital Theory

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital provides an important framework for understanding inequalities in arts education. According to Bourdieu, families transmit not only economic resources but also cultural knowledge, dispositions, experiences, and social networks that influence children's educational success. Participation in dance education represents one form of embodied cultural capital, contributing to children's confidence, communication skills, aesthetic appreciation, and social competence.

Children from affluent families typically accumulate greater cultural capital through sustained participation in arts education, while disadvantaged children often lack comparable opportunities. Over time, these differences reinforce educational inequalities beyond traditional academic achievement.

Capability Approach

Amartya Sen (1999) argues that development should be evaluated according to people's capabilities rather than solely their economic resources. Martha Nussbaum (2011) further identifies opportunities for imagination, creativity, play, and cultural participation as essential human capabilities.

Within this framework, dance education should not merely be evaluated according to whether children become professional dancers. Instead, dance education expands children's capabilities by strengthening creativity, emotional expression, bodily autonomy, social participation, and personal agency. Unequal access therefore represents not only educational inequality but also unequal capability development.

Educational Equity

Educational equity extends beyond providing identical educational inputs to ensuring that every child has meaningful opportunities to achieve his or her developmental potential. OECD (2018) distinguishes equality from equity by emphasizing that equitable education recognizes differing needs and seeks to reduce structural disadvantages rather than merely distributing identical resources.

Applied to dance education, educational equity requires ensuring that children's opportunities to experience high-quality arts education are not determined primarily by birthplace, family income, or regional economic development.

2.5 Research Gap

Existing scholarship has made important contributions to understanding the developmental benefits of dance education, the implementation of aesthetic education policies, and broader issues of educational inequality. Nevertheless, three significant gaps remain.

First, most research on dance education focuses primarily on pedagogical outcomes, including motor development, creativity, academic performance, and psychological well-being. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding dance education as an issue of educational equity and social justice.

Second, although China's aesthetic education reforms have attracted increasing scholarly interest, relatively few studies examine how structural socioeconomic inequalities continue to shape children's access to dance education, particularly among disadvantaged populations such as rural children, migrant children, and children from low-income households.

Third, policy discussions often emphasize curriculum reform and teacher preparation while paying insufficient attention to how unequal access to dance education may influence children's long-term capabilities, cultural participation, and social mobility. Consequently, existing research rarely integrates educational policy, child development, and social equity within a unified analytical framework.

To address these gaps, the present study conceptualizes dance education not merely as an artistic discipline but as a public educational resource closely connected to educational equity, capability development, and children's right to participate in cultural life. Focusing on the Chinese context and drawing upon more than fifteen years of professional practice in children's dance education, this article seeks to contribute an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges education, public policy, and social justice.

3. Dance Education in China: Policy Progress and Structural Inequalities

3.1 National Policy Commitment to Aesthetic Education

Over the past decade, China has significantly strengthened its commitment to aesthetic education (*meiyu*) as an integral component of quality-oriented education. National policy documents—including the *Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era* (2020)—emphasize that aesthetic education should contribute to students' moral cultivation, cultural literacy, creativity, and comprehensive development. These reforms reflect a broader shift away from examination-oriented education toward cultivating innovative, well-rounded citizens capable of meeting the demands of national modernization.

The policy framework requires schools to increase instructional time devoted to arts education, improve teacher quality, strengthen curriculum development, and promote equal access to educational resources across regions. More recently, the Ministry of Education has further incorporated aesthetic education into school evaluation systems and encouraged stronger collaboration among schools, cultural institutions, museums, and community organizations.

These initiatives demonstrate that arts education has become an increasingly important component of China's educational modernization strategy. Nevertheless, substantial implementation challenges remain, particularly regarding equitable access.

3.2 Persistent Urban–Rural Disparities

Although compulsory education has become nearly universal in China, educational opportunities remain unevenly distributed. Urban schools generally possess stronger

financial resources, more qualified teachers, better facilities, and greater access to extracurricular programs than schools located in rural and less-developed regions.

Arts education illustrates these disparities particularly clearly. Large metropolitan areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen often provide diversified arts curricula, specialized dance teachers, modern rehearsal facilities, and numerous extracurricular opportunities. By contrast, many rural schools continue to face shortages of qualified arts educators. Music and visual arts teachers frequently teach multiple subjects, while systematic dance instruction is often unavailable.

These differences reflect broader inequalities in educational resource allocation rather than differences in children's interests or abilities. Children living in rural communities therefore experience substantially fewer opportunities to participate in structured dance education throughout childhood.

3.3 Socioeconomic Barriers Beyond School

School-based inequalities represent only one dimension of unequal access. Outside formal schooling, dance education in China has increasingly become commercialized. Most systematic dance instruction is delivered through private training institutions, which require families to pay tuition, purchase uniforms and costumes, finance examinations and competitions, and provide transportation.

For middle-income and affluent families, these expenditures may be considered educational investments. For economically disadvantaged households, however, they represent significant financial burdens. Consequently, children's participation frequently depends less upon talent or motivation than upon household income.

This commercialization produces a paradox. Although national educational policies emphasize equal opportunities, high-quality dance education increasingly functions as a privately purchased educational resource. Children from wealthier families accumulate additional developmental opportunities while disadvantaged children remain excluded.

Such disparities are especially pronounced among rural children, migrant children living in urban areas, left-behind children, and children from low-income households, whose access to extracurricular cultural resources is significantly more limited.

3.4 Dance Education as a Dimension of Educational Inequality

Educational inequality has traditionally been measured through indicators such as enrollment rates, examination performance, teacher-student ratios, and school financing. However, contemporary educational research increasingly argues that enrichment opportunities constitute another important dimension of educational opportunity.

Dance education exemplifies this broader concept of opportunity inequality. Although participation does not directly determine academic examination outcomes, it influences children's creativity, communication skills, emotional well-being, confidence, leadership, and social participation. These competencies contribute to long-term educational attainment, career development, and civic engagement.

Consequently, unequal access to dance education should not be dismissed as a minor extracurricular issue. Rather, it represents a structural dimension of educational inequality that influences children's developmental trajectories over the life course.

4. Why Unequal Access to Dance Education Matters: Long-Term Consequences for Disadvantaged Children

4.1 Beyond Artistic Skills: Dance Education as Human Development

Public discussions of dance education frequently emphasize artistic performance, physical coordination, or extracurricular enrichment. Such perspectives, however, underestimate the broader developmental functions of dance. Contemporary educational

research increasingly recognizes dance education as a multidimensional learning experience that contributes to children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Consequently, unequal access to dance education should not be interpreted merely as unequal participation in an artistic activity; rather, it represents unequal access to developmental opportunities that shape children's life trajectories.

Within the framework of human development, education is intended not only to transmit academic knowledge but also to cultivate the capacities necessary for individuals to participate meaningfully in society. Dance education provides children with opportunities to solve problems creatively, communicate through non-verbal expression, collaborate with peers, regulate emotions, and develop confidence through repeated practice and performance. These competencies extend well beyond the dance classroom and influence children's educational experiences throughout their lives.

For disadvantaged children, these opportunities are particularly significant. Children growing up in economically disadvantaged households often experience limited access to extracurricular learning environments that encourage exploration, creativity, and self-expression. As a result, the absence of dance education represents not merely the loss of an artistic experience but the loss of developmental resources that contribute to lifelong capability formation.

4.2 Cognitive Development and Learning Capacity

Research in developmental psychology and neuroscience suggests that structured movement activities stimulate multiple domains of cognitive functioning. Dance integrates memory, rhythm, spatial awareness, attention, coordination, and decision-making into complex learning processes. Unlike passive instructional methods, dance requires children to interpret information, adapt movements, respond to music, and coordinate actions with others simultaneously.

These experiences strengthen executive functions, including working memory, inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and sustained attention. Executive functioning has consistently been identified as a strong predictor of later academic achievement across subjects, including mathematics, reading, and science.

Moreover, dance encourages divergent thinking by allowing children to generate multiple expressive solutions rather than seeking a single correct answer. This process strengthens creativity, imagination, and innovative thinking—competencies increasingly valued within China's transition toward an innovation-driven economy.

When disadvantaged children lack access to these learning experiences, developmental inequalities begin to accumulate from an early age. While academic instruction may remain broadly comparable under compulsory education, opportunities to cultivate higher-order cognitive skills become increasingly unequal.

4.3 Social and Emotional Development

The long-term value of dance education extends equally to children's social and emotional development. Participation in dance requires cooperation, trust, empathy, discipline, and communication. Children learn to perform within groups, respect differences, support peers, and develop a sense of shared achievement.

These experiences contribute to emotional intelligence and resilience. Performance-based learning also provides repeated opportunities to overcome fear, manage anxiety, and build confidence through mastery. Such experiences are particularly valuable during childhood, when self-concept and emotional regulation are rapidly developing.

For disadvantaged children, emotional development often occurs within environments characterized by financial stress, parental absence, migration, or reduced

access to supportive educational resources. Under such circumstances, arts education may provide one of the few structured environments in which children experience encouragement, recognition, and positive social interaction.

Importantly, dance education offers an inclusive form of communication that does not depend exclusively on verbal ability or academic performance. Children who struggle in conventional classroom settings may discover alternative pathways for self-expression and achievement through movement and performance. Such experiences strengthen children's sense of competence and belonging, both of which are associated with improved educational engagement and lower rates of school disengagement.

4.4 Cultural Participation and Social Inclusion

Access to arts education also represents an important dimension of cultural participation. Cultural experiences allow children to understand traditions, appreciate diversity, and develop a sense of identity within society. Through dance, children engage with history, music, aesthetics, and collective cultural memory while simultaneously expressing their own experiences and creativity.

However, opportunities for cultural participation remain unevenly distributed. Children from affluent urban families frequently encounter museums, theatres, concerts, dance schools, and community cultural activities throughout childhood. By contrast, disadvantaged children often experience substantially fewer opportunities to participate in organized cultural life.

This disparity extends beyond artistic appreciation. Limited cultural participation may reduce children's confidence in unfamiliar social environments, restrict opportunities for social networking, and weaken their sense of belonging within broader society. In this respect, unequal access to dance education contributes to wider patterns of social exclusion.

Recognizing children's right to participate fully in cultural and artistic life therefore requires attention not only to legal guarantees but also to the practical availability of educational opportunities that enable meaningful participation.

4.5 Educational Inequality Across the Life Course

Educational inequality is cumulative rather than episodic. Small differences in childhood experiences frequently expand over time as children accumulate different forms of knowledge, confidence, social networks, and learning opportunities. Scholars increasingly describe this process as the accumulation of developmental advantages and disadvantages across the life course.

Dance education illustrates this cumulative process. Children who participate regularly in high-quality arts education often develop stronger communication skills, greater self-confidence, enhanced creativity, and broader social experiences. These attributes support subsequent educational achievement, leadership opportunities, university applications, and career development.

Conversely, disadvantaged children who never receive comparable opportunities may experience widening developmental gaps despite similar levels of talent or motivation. The resulting inequalities cannot be explained by individual effort alone but instead reflect structural differences in access to educational resources.

From this perspective, unequal access to dance education should be understood as an overlooked mechanism through which broader educational inequalities are reproduced in contemporary China. Addressing these disparities therefore represents not merely an investment in arts education but an investment in children's long-term capabilities, social mobility, and national human capital.

5. Policy Barriers and Reform Strategies: Expanding Equitable Access to Dance Education in China

5. Policy Barriers and Reform Strategies: Expanding Equitable Access to Dance Education in China

5.1 From Individual Choice to Public Responsibility

For many years, participation in dance education in China has largely been perceived as a matter of individual family choice rather than public educational responsibility. Unlike mathematics, Chinese language, or science, dance has traditionally been categorized as an extracurricular activity that families voluntarily pursue according to their financial capacity and personal interests. Consequently, access to dance education has increasingly become determined by household income rather than children's developmental needs.

This market-oriented model has contributed to rapid growth in China's private arts education sector. Thousands of commercial dance studios now provide high-quality instruction, examination preparation, and competition training throughout major cities. While this expansion has diversified educational opportunities for many families, it has simultaneously widened inequalities in access. High-quality dance education has become increasingly concentrated among children from middle- and upper-income households, whereas disadvantaged children often remain excluded because of financial and geographic constraints.

From the perspective of educational equity, this outcome raises an important policy question. If dance education contributes significantly to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, should access to such opportunities depend primarily upon a family's purchasing power? This article argues that the answer should be no. Similar to access to libraries, sports facilities, and public cultural institutions, meaningful opportunities for dance education should increasingly be regarded as part of the public educational infrastructure rather than a private consumer service.

5.2 Structural Challenges within the Current Education System

Although China has introduced a series of reforms promoting aesthetic education, implementation continues to face several structural challenges.

First, disparities in educational financing remain substantial. Schools in economically developed urban districts generally possess stronger fiscal capacity to employ specialized arts teachers, maintain performance facilities, and organize extracurricular arts programs. By contrast, many rural and underdeveloped schools continue to prioritize core academic subjects because of limited financial resources and staffing constraints. Under such circumstances, dance education often receives relatively low institutional priority.

Second, shortages of qualified dance educators present another significant obstacle. While music and visual arts teachers are increasingly available in many regions, professional dance instructors remain unevenly distributed. Rural schools frequently rely upon general classroom teachers to deliver arts education despite limited professional preparation. This shortage affects not only instructional quality but also the sustainability of school-based dance programs.

Third, educational evaluation systems continue to emphasize measurable academic outcomes. Although recent reforms seek to strengthen aesthetic education, schools often allocate greater instructional time and financial resources to subjects directly associated with high-stakes examinations. Consequently, arts education may receive less attention despite national policy commitments promoting comprehensive development.

These structural factors collectively limit opportunities for disadvantaged children to receive continuous, high-quality dance education.

5.3 Rethinking Dance Education as a Public Educational Good

One of the central arguments of this article is that dance education should be reconceptualized as a public educational good rather than a privately purchased enrichment activity.

The concept of a public educational good does not imply that every child should receive identical dance training or become a professional performer. Rather, it suggests that every child should have equitable opportunities to experience meaningful arts education regardless of family income, geographic location, or social background.

This distinction is important. Equity does not require identical educational experiences; instead, it requires that structural barriers preventing disadvantaged children from participating in developmental opportunities be reduced. In this context, public investment in dance education should be understood as comparable to investments in libraries, sports facilities, science laboratories, or digital learning resources. Each contributes to children's comprehensive development, even though participation may vary according to individual interests and abilities. Recognizing dance education as a public educational good also aligns with China's broader educational modernization agenda, which emphasizes balanced development across intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and moral domains.

5.4 Policy Recommendations

Addressing unequal access to dance education requires coordinated action across multiple levels of governance. Rather than relying primarily on private markets, future policy should strengthen public provision while encouraging collaboration among schools, universities, cultural institutions, and civil society organizations.

Strengthening School-Based Dance Education

The first priority should be expanding dance education within compulsory education itself. Increasing school-based opportunities would reduce children's dependence upon commercial training institutions and lower financial barriers for disadvantaged families. Rural and under-resourced schools should receive targeted financial support to develop basic dance education programs appropriate to local contexts.

Expanding Teacher Preparation

Teacher shortages remain one of the principal barriers to equitable implementation. Universities, particularly normal universities and institutions specializing in teacher education, should strengthen interdisciplinary preparation combining dance pedagogy, child development, and inclusive education. Incentive programs could encourage qualified arts educators to serve in rural and less-developed regions through scholarship schemes, salary supplements, and career advancement opportunities.

Increasing Public Cultural Partnerships

Schools alone cannot provide all opportunities for children's artistic development. Local governments should therefore encourage partnerships among schools, museums, community cultural centers, performing arts organizations, and public libraries. Community-based dance programs can extend educational opportunities beyond the classroom while reducing regional disparities in cultural participation.

Supporting Low-Income Families

Financial assistance mechanisms should be expanded to ensure that economic hardship does not prevent children from participating in arts education. Local governments and charitable foundations may consider scholarship programs, tuition

subsidies, transportation assistance, and equipment support for disadvantaged children who demonstrate interest in dance education.

Promoting Digital Inclusion

Digital technologies offer additional opportunities to reduce regional disparities. High-quality online dance instruction, virtual teacher training, and digital educational resources may complement face-to-face instruction, particularly in remote areas where professional dance educators remain scarce. While digital learning cannot fully replace in-person artistic instruction, it can substantially expand educational access and improve instructional quality across geographically isolated communities.

5.5 Implications for Educational Equity in China

Improving access to dance education represents more than an investment in artistic development. It reflects a broader transformation in how educational equity is conceptualized within contemporary China.

Historically, educational equity has focused primarily on equal access to compulsory schooling. As China's education system continues to develop, however, policy attention must also consider equality in developmental opportunities. Access to creativity, cultural participation, aesthetic learning, and self-expression should increasingly be recognized as essential components of children's comprehensive education rather than optional educational luxuries.

Viewed from this perspective, expanding access to dance education contributes simultaneously to educational modernization, cultural development, rural revitalization, and long-term human capital formation. It also reflects a broader commitment to ensuring that children's future opportunities are determined by their abilities and aspirations rather than by the socioeconomic circumstances into which they were born.

6. Conclusion

China has made remarkable achievements in expanding access to compulsory education and reducing disparities in basic educational opportunities over the past several decades. Nevertheless, educational equity in the twenty-first century extends beyond school enrollment and academic attainment. It also encompasses children's opportunities to participate in the broader educational experiences that foster creativity, emotional well-being, cultural literacy, and lifelong capability development. Dance education represents one such opportunity.

This article has argued that unequal access to dance education constitutes an overlooked dimension of educational inequality in contemporary China. While national policies increasingly recognize aesthetic education as an essential component of quality-oriented education, significant disparities remain in the distribution of dance education resources across regions, schools, and socioeconomic groups. For many disadvantaged children, particularly those living in rural communities, migrant families, and low-income households, opportunities to participate in systematic dance education remain limited despite broader educational reforms.

Importantly, the consequences of unequal access extend well beyond artistic learning. Drawing upon theories of educational equity, cultural capital, and the capability approach, this article has demonstrated that dance education contributes to children's cognitive development, emotional resilience, social competence, creativity, cultural participation, and long-term human development. When disadvantaged children are systematically excluded from these experiences, inequalities accumulate throughout childhood and continue to influence educational achievement, social participation, and future opportunities across the life course.

The analysis presented in this paper also suggests that the current organization of dance education in China reflects an increasing dependence on market-based provision.

Although private dance institutions have expanded educational opportunities for many families, they have also reinforced socioeconomic inequalities by making access to high-quality dance education increasingly dependent upon household financial resources. Consequently, children's participation in dance education is often determined less by their interests or potential than by the economic circumstances of their families.

Addressing this challenge requires a fundamental shift in policy thinking. Rather than viewing dance education solely as a private extracurricular activity or cultural consumption choice, policymakers should recognize it as an important component of public education and children's comprehensive development. Such a shift does not imply that every child should receive identical dance instruction or pursue professional artistic training. Instead, it requires ensuring that every child has a genuine opportunity to experience meaningful arts education regardless of family income, geographic location, or social background.

Achieving this objective will require coordinated efforts across multiple sectors. Government investment should continue to strengthen school-based arts education, particularly in rural and under-resourced communities. Teacher education institutions should expand the preparation of qualified dance educators capable of serving diverse educational settings. Partnerships among schools, universities, cultural organizations, and community institutions can further broaden children's opportunities for artistic participation beyond the classroom. In addition, digital technologies may complement traditional instruction by expanding access to high-quality educational resources in geographically disadvantaged areas.

More broadly, this study contributes to ongoing international discussions regarding educational equity by emphasizing that unequal access to enrichment opportunities deserves greater scholarly and policy attention. Educational inequality should not be evaluated solely according to standardized test scores or years of schooling. Opportunities for creativity, cultural participation, artistic expression, and aesthetic learning also represent valuable educational resources that shape children's capabilities and future life trajectories. As societies increasingly recognize the importance of innovation, collaboration, emotional intelligence, and creativity, equitable access to arts education becomes not less important but more essential.

This article also extends the discussion of educational equity by proposing a conceptual shift from equal schooling to equal developmental opportunity. Traditional measures of educational equality focus primarily on access to schools and academic instruction. However, children's development is shaped by a much broader ecosystem of learning experiences. Dance education exemplifies how opportunities beyond the traditional curriculum influence confidence, imagination, interpersonal skills, and cultural engagement. Ensuring equitable access to these developmental opportunities should therefore become an integral objective of educational policy.

The Chinese experience offers important lessons for other countries undergoing rapid educational and socioeconomic transformation. As governments invest in expanding educational access and improving academic quality, equal attention should also be devoted to ensuring that disadvantaged children can participate fully in arts education and cultural life. Educational modernization should not merely increase the quantity of schooling but also enhance the quality and inclusiveness of children's developmental experiences.

Ultimately, the central question raised by this article is not whether dance education is valuable. A substantial body of educational research has already demonstrated its developmental significance. Rather, the more important question is whether access to these opportunities should continue to depend primarily upon family income and regional advantage. If education is intended to promote equal opportunities for every

child, then meaningful participation in arts education—including dance—should be understood as an essential component of educational equity rather than an educational privilege reserved for those with greater economic resources.

Transforming dance education from a privately purchased advantage into a more accessible public educational resource will not eliminate all forms of educational inequality. However, it represents an important step toward a more inclusive understanding of educational justice—one that recognizes every child's right not only to learn, but also to create, to express, to participate in cultural life, and to develop the full range of human capabilities necessary for a flourishing life.

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