

Reproducing and Buffering Early-Childhood Inequality in China

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How socioeconomic advantage is reproduced before formal schooling remains central to social stratification research, yet theories of cultural reproduction, family investment, and neighborhood effects are rarely examined together in early childhood. This study investigates how developmental inequality is reproduced and potentially buffered in China, where near-universal kindergarten enrollment coexists with hukou-based sorting, rural-urban stratification, and distinctive community structures. Using data from the Survey of Early Education, Development and Strength (SEEDS), we analyse approximately 8,800 children aged 2 to 6 in three counties of Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. We examine disparities by parental education, household income, and rural-urban residence across three measures of child development: ECDI, ASQ-3, and ASQ:SE-2. We apply generalised Kitagawa–Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition models, reported both as share-based contributions and in original outcome metrics, to assess the roles of kindergartens, extracurricular activities, caregiving arrangements, parenting practices, and neighbourhood social environment. Tentative findings suggest that kindergarten peer composition is the most consistent contributor to explained SES disparities, supporting a cultural reproduction perspective in which inequality is maintained through sorting into differentiated institutional environments. Family investment mechanisms appear more dimension-specific. By contrast, neighbourhood collective efficacy partly buffers developmental disadvantage, suggesting that community social organization may also function as an equalizing force in early childhood.