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2021-05-23

Liu , X 2021 , ' Ethnic minority students' access, participation and outcomes in preparatory classes in China : a case study of a School of Minzu Education ' , *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* , vol. 43 , no. 1 , pp. 173 188 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1926918>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/354181>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1926918>

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To cite this article: Xiaoxu Liu (2023) Ethnic minority students' access, participation and outcomes in preparatory classes in China: a case study of a School of Minzu Education, Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 43:1, 173-188, DOI: [10.1080/02188791.2021.1926918](https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1926918)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1926918>



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Published online: 21 May 2021.



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Ethnic minority students' access, participation and outcomes in preparatory classes in China: a case study of a School of Minzu Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how educational equity is applied in university preparatory classes from the perspective of minority students. It explores minority students' access to, participation and outcomes in preparatory classes, as well as the factors that influence their experience and attitude. Using a mixed research method, 320 students from a School of Minzu Education were surveyed and further in-depth interviews were conducted with seven respondents. This study finds that minority students from cities and towns are more likely to get into preparatory classes. Moreover, the fairness of the access to preparatory classes is questioned between various ethnic minority groups and even within the same ethnic group. In terms of participation in preparatory classes, preparatory classes play a positive role in promoting integration between Han and ethnic minorities and educational equality. However, minority students in preparatory class lack a sense of belonging to the affiliated university due to insufficient recognition of their cultural and linguistic background in class and community activities. The findings indicate that the outcomes of preparatory classes were mainly reflected in minority students' academic performance and perception towards preparatory classes. The outcomes differed depending mainly on the family income, ethnic origins and the high schools they attended.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 June 2018
Accepted 3 May 2021


KEYWORDS

Preferential policies; preparatory class; educational equity; Chinese minority education; student experience and attitude

Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural country. Ethnic minorities are an essential part of the Chinese population, and according to the Sixth National Population Census of the People's Republic of China (PRC), published in 2011, ethnic minorities account for 8.5% (more than 100 million people) of the total population of China. In addition, there are great differences among the population of the different ethnic groups, varying from 1.22 billion (Han) to 3,682 people (Luoba).¹ Since the early 1950s, the Chinese government has been sending teams of ethnologists across the country to identify the diversity of ethnic groups in China. Eventually, it officially recognized 56 ethnic groups (*minzu* 民族²) in the early 1980s, including the Han majority and 55 ethnic minority groups. Ethnic identity in China is still an official category defined by the state and appearing on all identity cards (Ma, 2014).

To improve ethnic minority education in China, the central government has further implemented a series of preferential policies to aid ethnic minorities in education since the mid-1980s. Among preferential policies, the bonus points for ethnic minority students' higher education enrolment has

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been discussed most widely by researchers (Ma, 2007; Teng & Ma, 2005). This paper intends to fill a gap by providing a nuanced analysis of an equally important but less talked-about preferential policy, the university preparatory class for minority students.

Meanwhile, most research on university preparatory classes for ethnic minorities in China are from the macroscopic point of view, focusing on theoretical research or teaching and learning in preparatory classes. Microscopic research about ethnic minority students' experience and attitude is rarely conducted. This paper intends to answer the following questions: Students with what background can gain access to preparatory classes? How do minority students participate in teaching and learning (curriculum, instruction and assessment), and community activity in preparatory classes and the affiliated universities? How do preparatory classes influence students' academic achievement and perception of fairness towards preparatory classes and preferential policies? What are the key factors that influence students' access, participation and outcomes in preparatory classes? Do preparatory classes contribute to the goal of educational equality for minority students, and if so, how?

Ethnic minority education in China

After the establishment of the PRC, the government paid considerable attention to the development of education for ethnic minority groups. At a policy level, in the Constitution, the Ethnic Regions Autonomy Law (1984) and the Education Law (1995), clauses supporting and helping ethnic minorities to develop educationally have been clearly stipulated (Sautman, 1999). Since the founding of the PRC, the central government has implemented preferential policies to aid ethnic minorities in education, including setting up Minzu institutes and university preparatory classes that enrol only students from ethnic minorities. Preferential policies were further standardized and legitimated in 1980s after the Cultural Revolution (Wang, 2007). Lowering the standard required to gain admission at all school levels, especially university and college (as a type of tertiary institution), was also introduced (Postiglione, 1992). Special subsidies are offered by the government to develop minority education every year, including the Ethnic Minority Education Aid Special Fund and the Border Areas Construction Aid Fund. Moreover, stipends are awarded to minority students in boarding schools.

At a practice level, administrative organs were specially set up in the educational departments at both the central and local levels. Bilingual education systems were established in autonomous regions. Furthermore, various types of schools ranging from basic education to higher education were set up to meet the needs in different areas, including ethnic minority primary and middle schools, universities and colleges for ethnic minority groups, ethnic boarding classes in regular primary and middle schools both in Xinjiang and interior areas, preparatory classes for higher education, etc. At postgraduate level, 'the plan for high-level cadres of ethnic minorities' (少数民族高层次骨干人才计划³) for master and doctoral students has also been adopted since 2005. The plan for 2020 is to recruit 1000 doctoral minority students and 4000 master-level students.⁴ According to current statistics, 19,722 primary schools, 5,136 middle schools and 192 universities and colleges have been built in the five autonomous provinces (China Statistical Yearbook 2016, 2017). Finally, in autonomous regions, the exhibition of ethnic particularities is encouraged in teaching. Eight provinces and autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Jilin, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi) have established special offices for compiling and translating textbooks. Supervising committees for teaching materials have been established in the Mongolian, Korean, Tibetan, and Yi languages (Zang, 2015; Zhao, 2007).

After more than 60 years of development, the education of ethnic minority groups has witnessed great achievements at all levels and categories. Although inequalities have been reduced in terms of overall education in China, there is broad consensus among Chinese scholars that gaps between Han and other ethnic groups still exist and have even grown (Chen, 2016; Gustafsson & Shi, 2003; Hannum, 2002). The literacy rates of most ethnic minority groups are still below that of the Han majority, and it is difficult to improve them (Guo & Tynen, 2015).

Literature review on adoption of the preparatory class

Preferential policies⁵ play an important role in ethnic minority education in China. Among all the educational preferential policies, the most significant policies are lowering entry requirements for ethnic minority students at all school levels and provision of preparatory classes by universities and colleges. Preparatory classes normally last one or two years and aim to enable ethnic minority students to develop further in terms of moral education, intellectual education and physical education, to lay a good foundation for their higher education (Hui & Jiang, 2004; Ma, 2007; Tao & Wang, 2012; Teng & Ma, 2005; Yi, 2010; Yuan, 2012).

In research, preparatory classes are mainly discussed as an aspect of educational history research or preferential policy research. Literature about preparatory classes for ethnic minorities focuses on three areas: the historical and current situation of preparatory classes, including educational models and management; teaching and learning in preparatory classes (Chinese/English learning, learning strategy, curriculum); and psychological and cultural adaptation of students in preparatory classes (Zheng, 2011).

Research on the curriculum of preparatory classes accounts for almost half of the literature on preparatory classes. Reform ideas from the macroscopic point of view mostly focus on curricula centred on Chinese-language learning, which cannot make up for the defects of minority students' knowledge structures (Dou, 2011). Dong (2013) stated that the teaching method used by most teachers in preparatory classes is the traditional teacher-centred teaching method, which cannot fully motivate students. Therefore, teachers should give students more space to think and express themselves in order to enhance their subjective initiative and achieve the effect of curriculum reform.

Moreover, the status of ethnic minority students regarding mental health, self-confidence and adaptability in preparatory classes was examined by researchers based on questionnaires and interviews (Ma, 2010). The learning adaptability of minority students from preparatory classes is the focus of the three aforementioned research topics. Schis (2009) surveyed the use of learning strategies by minority students in preparatory classes in Inner Mongolia and proposed how to intervene in order to improve learning efficiency. Many ethnic minority students have experienced learning burnout during preparatory studies.

Heated discussions about preparatory classes have been raised in society and academia since its implementation. Some scholars believe that preparatory classes have some negative consequences. One major argument against positive discrimination⁶ is that the favouring of ethnic-minority students may disadvantage Han students (Teng & Ma, 2005). Also, problems associated with the preparatory class system have gradually emerged. The major problem is that, at access standard, these classes enrol more children of local officials and children from the socioeconomic upper class than students from the disadvantaged families in ethnic minority communities, which is against the aim of the preparatory classes (Teng & Ma, 2005; Zheng, 2011). Meanwhile, challenges have also emerged in the processes of and participation in preparatory classes. The quality of teachers in preparatory classes is relatively poor and they are marginalized by the university or college that the classes are affiliated with. Budget restrictions make it difficult for young teachers in preparatory classes to be further trained.

Existing literature is mostly written from the macroscopic point of view, focusing on theoretical research or teaching and learning in preparatory classes. Microscopic research about ethnic minority students' participation and attitude is rarely conducted, and this study aims to fill this gap.

Theoretical base: equity in education

Equity is considered as one of the paramount concerns in education both in the East and the West, in ancient and modern times (Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012). The concept of equity is associated with fairness and justice in the provision of education and it takes individual circumstances into consideration (Espinoza, 2007). The concept of educational equity was first raised and practiced by Confucius two thousand years ago in China. "You Jiao Wu Lei" (有教无类) and "Yin Cai Shi Jiao" (因材施教) are the concepts most often used to represent Confucius' thoughts on

education (Yu, 2013). “You Jiao Wu Lei” refers to providing equal education for all people without considering their social status and economic situation (Analects of Confucius, Wei Ling Gong; Qian, 2002). “Yin Cai Shi Jiao” means to provide appropriate education to individual students based on their needs and learning abilities (Analects of Confucius, Xian Jin; Qian, 2002).

Over the past forty years there have been a number of controversies in discussing the concepts of “equity”, which are often invoked by policy analysts, policy-makers, government officials and scholars to justify or criticize resource allocation to different levels of the educational system. Different conceptions of equity in education have been formulated. According to Benadusi (2006), equity can be interpreted as six different ideas: pure meritocracy, equal treatment, inter-individual equality, minimum threshold, equality between social groups and advantages for the disadvantaged. Moreover, Maiztegui Oñate and Santibanez-Gruber (2008) considered equity in their debate on the school which included opportunity or legally recognized rights, access to school, treatment or educational models and measures, and results or opportunity for success. Tomlinson (2001) also proposed a view of the definition of equity based on a case study regarding the application of equity in the school system. According to this study, equity can be seen as equal opportunities for all, equal treatment for all and equal results for all. Despite the debate on the conception of equity, three principles of equity are summarized, namely horizontal equity: equality of treatment for those who start from the same point; vertical equity: the series of compensatory measures directed towards disadvantaged groups; equal education opportunity: the series of initiatives designed to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities for success, starting from different conditions and resources (Chu, 2006; Maiztegui Oñate & Santibanez-Gruber, 2008).

This paper is concerned with how educational equity is implemented in China’s preparatory classes in terms of access, participation and outcome standard. The participation standard, namely minority students’ participation and experience, is the particular focus of this research. The standards of equity in education – equity of access, equity of participation, and equity of outcomes – serve as a foundation for an equity-based accountability system for creating an equitable school for all students. Specifically, equity of access assures access to educational facilities, resources, as well as programmes and services for all individuals, and removes barriers to educational access. It also corresponds to Confucius’ concept of “You Jiao Wu Lei”. Equity of participation assures that programmes and pedagogy promote and guarantee equal participation by all, and considers diversity a defining factor in what is equitable in terms of process and participation, in particular with respect to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The goal of participation equity is to ensure that students reach their potential, which can also be interpreted using Confucius’ “Yin Cai Shi Jiao”. Equity of outcomes standard assures that educational outcomes will not be correlated with gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic circumstances, and eliminates barriers that construct achievement gaps (Alford et al., 2009). Based on the theory of educational equity and previous research, we shall explore the access to, participation in and achievement of preparatory classes from the perspective of minority students.

Method and data

Context and participants

A mixed method research involves both quantitative survey and qualitative interviews was designed for data generation (Creswell & Clark, 2017). A questionnaire survey was firstly conducted for an overview of students’ experiences and perspectives. Then, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were further employed to cross-examine and enrich the results of statistical findings. The data were collected in an anonymous School of Minzu Education (SME民族教育学院) that provides preparatory classes in 2017. This SME is affiliated to a top Normal University⁷ in China. The SME under study has been providing preparatory training for minority ethnic groups since the 1980s and is responsible for teaching and educational management. Additionally, as is the norm in the PRC, the institute

has the mandate of carrying out the national policy in maintaining national harmony and unity. This SME offered four types of preparatory classes: a one-year preparatory class for students going into a vocational institution; a one-year preparatory class for students going into university and college; a two-year preparatory class for students going into university and college; and a one-year intensive class for students to qualify for master programmes that are part of the “plan for high-level cadres of ethnic minorities”. Preparatory classes for vocational institution were cancelled in 2014, and 716 students joined the preparatory class in 2016.

Obtaining the approval of SME to conduct the survey took much more time than expected. However, once we obtained approval, we were able to reach a response rate of 99% with SME’s assistance. A paper-and-pencil version of the survey was distributed to 320 random selected minority students (105 = male, 202 = female, 13 missing). The number of females was almost double the number of males due to the fact that Normal University often attracts more female than male students. For the qualitative data, interviews were conducted with seven minority students who were randomly selected based on their initial participation in the survey and willingness to take part in sharing their thoughts with the author (see [Table 1](#)).

Ethical issues were fully considered in the process of designing the questionnaire and interview outlines as well as during data collection and analysis. The National Advisory Board on Research Ethics in the country where the author works defines the scope of ethical review, and this research does not include any features that would require ethical review. However, an affiliated faculty in the university where the author works was responsible for ensuring that this study complies with ethical principles. Both the faculty where the authors work and the dean of the surveyed SME in China approved the questionnaire and interview outlines. Participants who replied to the questionnaire and participated in interviews were all informed in advance that all questionnaires and interviews would be anonymous and that they had the right not to answer any question that they did not feel comfortable with. The research purpose and the anonymous data, used only for scientific research, were introduced in both oral and written forms while interviews were and questionnaires delivered.

Data collection instruments and data analysis

Ethnic minority students filled a questionnaire that was designed by the author. The questionnaire was used to measure the access, participation and outcome of ethnic minority students in preparatory classes. The questionnaire consists of 32 items divided into three sections: 11 items for access to preparatory classes, 12 items for participation in preparatory classes and 9 items for achievement and attitude towards preparatory classes. The first section is demographic information that includes gender, ethnicity, mother tongue, religion, hometown, family income and high school they graduated. In this section, students were also required to report how many bonus points they got to get into preparatory classes. The second section examines students’ class and community participation in preparatory classes. An example of the questions is “Do you agree that teachers’ teaching methods stimulate your learning interest and motivation?” The third section of the questionnaire explores the influence of preparatory classes on students’ academic achievement and attitude towards the fairness of preferential policies. Sample items are “Is preparatory education helpful for

Table 1. Demographic profile of the interviewees.

	Type of preparatory class	Gender	Ethnicity	Hometown
Student A	Two-year class	Female	Mongolian	Inner Mongolia
Student B	One-year class	Female	Tujia	Hubei
Student C	One-year class	Female	Uighur	Xinjiang
Student D	One-year class	Female	Tibetan	Qinghai
Student E	One-year class	Male	Tibetan	Gansu
Student F	One-year class	Male	Tibetan	Sichuan
Student G	One-year class	Female	Tibetan	Sichuan

your academic development?" and "In your opinion, are preferential policies fair among different ethnic groups?" Students responded to each question in the second and third section by using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree). The validity and reliability of the questionnaire have been tested and confirmed before the formal survey. It has good reliability with the Cronbach's alpha score of 0.704 for the participation subscale and 0.817 for the achievement and attitude subscale (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

Descriptive statistics were employed to report participants' background information and an overview of participants' experience and perception. After testing the homogeneity of the variances, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to determine whether ethnic minority students' participation, academic achievement as well as attitude towards the fairness of preparatory classes differed by gender, ethnicity, mother tongue, hometown, high school graduated and family income. Further comparisons among different groups were also made through post hoc (Tukey) tests.

Participants' experiences in preparatory classes and perception on preferential policies were also examined through nine open-ended interview questions, which were consistent with questionnaire questions. Sample questions are "What are the biggest challenges in terms of studying in this university and preparatory class? Why?" and "What is the role of preferential policies in your life? Why?" Twenty students expressed their interest in being interviewed. As we spent much more time than expected before conducting the survey and our limited funding did not permit the extension of our data collection period, we could not interview all twenty potential interviewees. Eventually, seven of them were selected randomly and interviewed in Chinese. Each interview lasted for 30 to 50 minutes and all interviews were audiotaped. Furthermore, all interviews were transcribed in Chinese and the transcriptions were then translated into English. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data and focused on examining themes of meaning within data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After the initial coding of the interview data, codes were allocated to three pre-identified themes: the access to the preparatory classes, the participation in preparatory classes and the outcome of preparatory classes. Then extracts of interviews were included to supplement and enrich the survey results and current literature. Meanwhile, in the process of analysis, the interpretation of interviews did not only rely on participants' discourses, but more importantly included an understanding of the societal structure the participants involved in (Fairclough, 2009).

Empirical findings

With regard to empirical findings, both the survey and interview results were drawn consistently to explore minority students' access, participation and outcome in preparatory classes. This section begins with the demographic profiles of the respondents and is then followed by three sections that tackle the research questions in order.

Demographic profiles of respondents

The respondents come from 31 ethnic groups, and the dominant ethnic groups are Uighur (15%), Mongolian (15%), Hui (14%) and Kazak (13%). Among those who did indicate their religious affiliations, the majority (71% of respondents) are atheists, while 20% believe in Islam. The other 9% of the students believe in Christianity, Buddhism and Communism. From the returned questionnaires, we observed that some students initially filled in the religion part but crossed it out later. This phenomenon may be related to the sensitivity of religious issues in China. Despite this, it is remarkable that 87 % of the participants actually revealed their religious affiliations.

In terms of political affiliation, only 5% of respondents are members of the communist party, but 13% of them had applied to join the communist party. Regarding their economic situation, the monthly family income of 31% of the students was 2,500 to 6,700 Yuan (around 376 USD to 1,009 USD); the families of about 18% of the respondents earned 6,700 to 10,000 Yuan monthly (around

1,009 to 1,505 USD), and 17% of respondents came from families with an income of less than 2,500 Yuan (around 376 USD) per month.

Students' access to preparatory classes: equity of access standard

Most of the students (72%) who received access to preparatory classes were from minority areas, including autonomous villages, towns, cities and provinces. However, around 70% of them were from cities and towns, and the lowest number of students (26%) came from rural areas. Meanwhile, although most students (72%) came from areas inhabited mainly by ethnic minorities, only 17% of them graduated from ethnic minority high schools, where the instructing language is an ethnic minority language. About 83% of the students had attended a mainstream high school where the instructing language is Chinese. Students in mainstream high schools normally have better access to educational facilities, resources, and qualified teachers compared with students in minority high schools, which may explain the lower participation rate in minority high schools (Gao, 2014). What is interesting is that 58% of students in preparatory classes stated that their mother tongue is Chinese, although the respondents are from 31 ethnic groups.

Bonus points are important for minority students to get into a good university. Only 21% of respondents said that the score they obtained in the College Entrance Exam (CEE) was enough to get into their target university, and half of them could get into a better university with extra points. Minority students can get enrolled in preparatory classes with either added scores or lower requirements. The extra scores they were given to enter preparatory classes varied from 0 to 50. According to Figure 1, ethnicity is an important predictor of how many extra points they receive. Most Uighur and Kazak students received 50 points. In contrast, most Mongolian, Tibetan and Tujia students received 10 extra points, and students of other ethnic groups received fewer than 10 points. This is because different access criteria can be adopted according to the regions they come from (urban area/rural area)⁸ and different languages they are educated in (ethnic minority language/Chinese)⁹ (Wang, 2007).

The principle of vertical equity is adopted in the access standard between the Han and ethnic minorities, including a series of compensatory measures directed towards ethnic minority groups. However, the fairness between different ethnic minority groups in terms of access to preparatory classes is doubted by minority students. One interviewee expressed the following view:

Our faculty recruits too many students from Xinjiang and other students feel that there is an imbalance. There are more preferential policies for Uighur students than students from other ethnic groups. They not only enjoy the "added score policy" in preparatory class but also receive bonus points when choosing majors at universities. (Student F)

Ethnic minority groups other than the Han may benefit from preferential policies, but different ethnic minority groups are not treated equally when it comes to policy implementation (Chen, 2016). The hidden in-group inequality between ethnic minorities is revealed in this study.

Students' class and community participation: equity of participation standard

SME has the autonomy to design its own curriculum, and the curriculum in the preparatory class is hard to decide on because students will go on to be distributed among more than 100 majors after finishing the preparatory class, according to the interview with the dean of the SME. The main subjects of preparatory classes for undergraduate students are Chinese, mathematics, English, computer science, ethnic theory and fundamentals of law. For postgraduate students, there are modern and contemporary literature, classical literature, English and other elective subjects.

Concerning minority students' class participation in preparatory classes, most students (83%) reported strong study motivation in that they wanted to study hard to lay a good foundation for their university study, while 11% just wanted to pass to enter the university, and 6% did not take it seriously. Students exhibited different levels of class participation in preparatory classes resulting

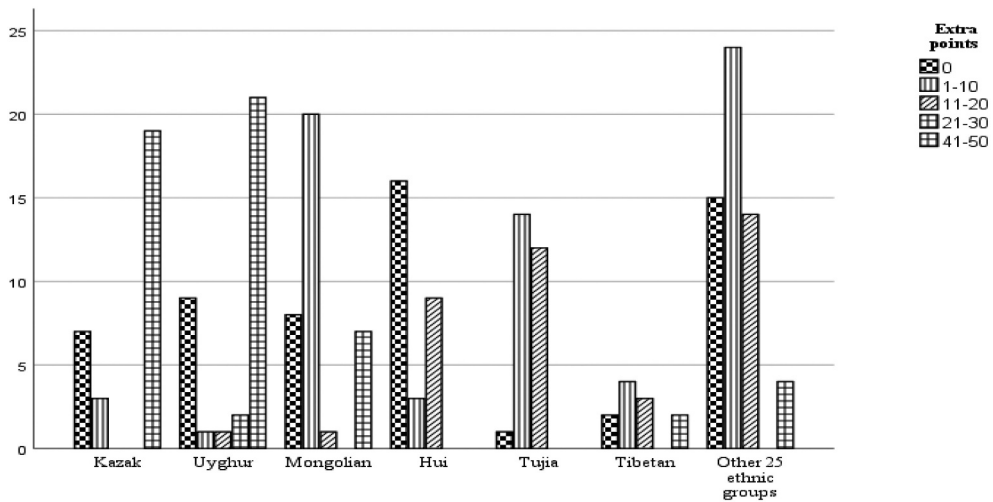


Figure 1. Extra scores received by minority students, based on ethnic group.

from students' individual academic standard as well as the curriculum structure of the preparatory class. Additionally, according to interviewees, the study atmosphere is different from high schools in that high schools are far stricter than preparatory classes in terms of academic requirements. Thus, students with relatively lower scores in CEE and students with good self-discipline would find preparatory classes helpful and necessary academically. However, students who already had a good understanding of all subjects at high school or students having problems in adapting to the free academic environment would not find it very helpful.

Furthermore, the teaching methods of preparatory class teachers are thought by 66% of respondents to stimulate learning interest. While 23% of respondents agreed that the teachers should lower the academic standard for them, half of the respondents did not agree with that statement. In particular, more than half of the students from municipal and provincial key high schools did not agree that teachers should lower academic standards. Respondents were asked about the factors that they considered challenges while studying in a preparatory class. "Academic performance" was ranked first, followed by "interpersonal relations", "long distance from home", "tuition fees" and "habits and customs". Interestingly, "language" was considered to be the least challenging for them, which contradicts many university teachers' belief that Chinese is the main challenge for minority students (Dou, 2011).

Language is considered the most important element in the composition of ethnicity and also a vehicle for inheriting culture and a communication tool among ethnicities. Much research has demonstrated the strong relationship between ethnic identities and academic achievement. Minority cultures and languages have been pinpointed as pressing core themes in analysing inequality in minority education (Chen, 2016; Cherg, Hannum, & Lu, 2014). Preparatory classes' response to minority languages and cultures affects minority students' identities and further affects their educational achievement in preparatory classes. Thus, minority students' cultural and linguistic differences should be considered in both teaching and learning, as well as community participation. However, according to the survey, about half of the respondents do not use the languages of their ethnic groups as the common language; 30% of them speak the minority languages occasionally, and only 20% speak the minority languages as the common language. In line with the interviews, minority languages are mostly used with family members and students from the same ethnic group, while Chinese is mostly used in classes and with teachers and students from other ethnic groups. Chinese characters are used by 83% of ethnic minority students in preparatory classes in daily life, and only 17% of them use both Chinese characters and minority language scripts.

Table 2. Descriptives for class participation.

		Academic development <i>M(SD)</i>	Teaching method <i>M(SD)</i>	Academic standard <i>M(SD)</i>
Mothertongue	Mandarin	2.33 (1.008)	2.37(.879)	3.52(1.047)
	Kazakh	2.09 (1.121)	1.83(.822)	2.97(1.114)
	Uyghur	2.12 (1.005)	1.98(.839)	3.00(.900)
	Mongolian	2.13 (.885)	2.33(1.047)	3.00(1.317)
	Others	2.37(1.165)	2.16(.765)	3.17(1.150)

Table 3. ANOVA results for class participation and mother tongue.

	F	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Academic development	.802	.525	.006
Teaching method	4.170	.003	.052
Academic standard	4.150	.003	.052

According to [Tables 2](#) and [Tables 3](#), there is no significant group difference by mother tongue in terms of preparatory classes promoting the academic development of minority students ($F(4, 303) = .802, p > .05$). However, students' attitude towards teachers' teaching methods ($F(4, 303) = 4.170, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .052$) and teacher lowering academic standard ($F(4, 301) = 4.150, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .052$) differ significantly depending on mother tongue. The results of the Tukey test, which is used to determine differences among groups, reveal that participants with Chinese as mother tongue are more likely to agree that teachers' teaching methods stimulating learning interest compared to participants with Kazak as mother tongue. Moreover, participants with Chinese as mother tongues tend to agree that teachers should lower the academic standard compared to participants with Kazakh and Uyghur as mother tongue.

Concerning ethnic minority students' awareness of the culture of their ethnic groups, 15% of respondents agreed that they know their culture very well, and 57% of them claimed that they know some of it. Participants' response to the understanding of their culture and history varies across ethnicity, residential location as well as high school they attended. Most Uighur, Kazak and Tibetan students believe that they have a good understanding of their culture and history. In addition, more students from minority areas as well as students from minority high schools claimed that they know about the culture and history of their ethnic groups than students from mainstream high schools and non-minority areas.

In terms of the culture and history of the Han, 72% of students indicated that they know it well or some of it. The answer to the question "Do you celebrate traditional Han festivals?" may also provide evidence that most of them had at least a basic understanding of Han history and culture, in that 84% of students celebrated Han festivals. In particular, most Uighur, Hui, Tibetan and Kazak students claimed that they have a good understanding of Han culture and history. Based on minority students' experience in both Chinese and minority languages, culture and history of both Han and ethnic minority groups, 79% of participants believe that the experience in preparatory classes had enhanced their ethnic identity. This finding also echoes findings from [Zheng \(2011\)](#) that ethnic minority students in preparatory classes experience acculturation while studying in a Han-dominant area and Chinese-dominant environment. The process of acculturation in preparatory classes enhances minority students' ethnic awareness. Minority students who had not paid much attention to their ethnic culture before showed more enthusiasm to learn about their ethnic group's culture after entering preparatory classes.

What is interesting is that ethnic groups who claim to have a good understanding of their culture are also more likely to have a good understanding of Han culture and history. This indicates that ethnic integration and mutual understanding between the Han and other ethnic groups is enhanced during participation in preparatory classes.

Furthermore, I also asked participants to evaluate their state of life as well as whether they consider the affiliated university as their alma mater to examine their community participation and

sense of belonging to the preparatory class. More than half of the students (64%) said that they were satisfied with their study and life in the preparatory class, and 74% of them think of the university as their alma mater. However, based on the data collected through interview, many students still lack a strong sense of belonging to the affiliated university due to different reasons:

I feel a little bit isolated that our faculty is not allowed to participate in sports competitions organized by university and that we can only participate in a few student associations in this university. (Student F)

The colour of the student card for both ethnic minority students in preparatory class and foreign students is red. But other undergraduate students hold blue student cards. We feel that we are more like those foreign students and also outsiders at this university. (Student G)

Therefore, from the perspective of equity in education, preparatory classes on the one hand enhance integration between the Han and ethnic minorities, as well as national identity through speaking Chinese as the national interethnic common language and learning about Han culture. The integration between the Han and ethnic minorities benefits the equal education for minorities. However, on the other hand, minority languages and cultures are gradually marginalized and not fully recognized in class and community activities in schools (Ma, 2007).

Students' academic achievement and attitude: equity of outcome standard

From the view of outcomes of preparatory classes, preparatory classes should ensure that all students with different conditions and resources experience the same opportunities for success. However, equity assessments are complicated because people differ in the meaning that they attach to the concepts of fairness and justice, and knowledge of equity-related cause-and-effect relationships is often limited. It was difficult to explore the outcomes of preparatory classes in this study, as all participants were attending preparatory classes for the first or second year. However, ethnic minority students' access to and participation in preparatory classes directly impact the outcomes of preparatory classes. In this section, the outcomes of preparatory classes are explored from the perspectives of minority students' academic performance and attitude towards fairness in preparatory classes and further preferential policies. Factors that may influence students' academic performance and views are also explored (see Table 4).

Firstly, with regard to students' academic achievement, despite some students viewing the study in preparatory classes as too easy, most of the respondents (73%) agreed that the preparatory class was helpful for their academic development. Interestingly, refer to the correlation analysis, it is indicated that students' academic development was only statistically related to the high schools they

Table 4. Descriptives for the attitude towards the fairness of preparatory classes.

		Fairness for all <i>M(SD)</i>	Han fairness <i>M(SD)</i>	Minority fairness <i>M(SD)</i>
Ethnicity	Kazak	1.70 (.758)	1.90(.982)	1.95(.932)
	Uyghur	1.71(.913)	1.82(1.054)	1.88(.754)
	Mongolian	2.41(1.127)	2.33(.944)	2.24(.743)
	Hui	2.46(1.026)	2.59(1.147)	2.52(.960)
	Tujia	2.42(1.205)	2.26(1.094)	2.16(.735)
	Tibetan	2.07(.884)	2.60(1.121)	2.20(.676)
	Others	2.49(1.119)	2.43(1.074)	2.31(.830)
	High school	Minority	1.86(.923)	2.02(1.036)
Normal Han		2.07(1.002)	2.19(.925)	2.10(.700)
Municipal key		2.55(1.123)	2.41(1.130)	2.38(.833)
Provincial key		2.35(1.215)	2.39(1.308)	2.24(.993)
Others		2.17(.753)	2.50(1.378)	2.50(.837)
Family income	<2500 yuan	1.93(.843)	1.94(.960)	2.19(.856)
	2500–6700	2.12(1.058)	2.23(1.073)	2.00(.736)
	6700–10000	2.27(1.130)	2.24(1.053)	2.24(.793)
	10000–17000	2.63(1.310)	2.63(1.310)	2.31(.946)
	Not sure	2.41(1.125)	2.46(1.109)	2.34(.833)

graduated from. The data imply that preparatory classes are more helpful to minority students from minority high schools than those from mainstream schools. If we explore the reasons for this, the teaching language may be the most important factor. Languages of instruction are normally minority languages in minority high schools, which means that students who graduate from such schools need to adapt to the Chinese teaching environment in preparatory classes. The interviewees stated that their Chinese had improved a lot through learning everything in Chinese although it was hard at the beginning. This contrasts with the experience of students who graduated from mainstream high schools, where Chinese is the language of instruction. Hence, students who graduated from mainstream schools found it difficult to improve their Chinese language skills.

From a macro view, most of the participants (85%) agreed that preferential policies, including preparatory classes, promoted the development of higher education for ethnic minorities, and a similar proportion of them believed that preferential policies played a positive role in establishing harmonious ethnic relationships. Furthermore, most students (89%) hold the opinion that preferential policies were important for minority individuals. A female student from Tibet verifies this statement:

Had I not been given an extra 20 points at the CEE, I would not have been able to get into a top university, but only an ordinary university. Then I felt it was a turning point in my life and luckily, I am an ethnic minority student to have such a good chance. (Student D)

However, both previous research and data in this research indicate that debates still exist among minority students regarding the fairness of the implementation of preparatory classes and preferential policies. Group differences depend mainly on ethnic origins, the high schools from which the minority students graduated and family income. As indicated in Table 5, participants' perceptions on the fairness of preferential policies among different ethnic groups ($F(6,307) = 5.557, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .098$), the fairness for the Han students ($F(6,307) = 3.588, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .061$) and the fairness within the same ethnic group ($F(6,305) = 3.376, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .062$) all differ significantly depending on participants' ethnic origins.

The Tukey test results show that the mean score is higher among Kazakh and Uyghur ethnic groups compared to Hui groups in three questions. It means that participants from Hui ethnic origin are more likely to regard preferential policies fair for both the Han and ethnic minorities. However, students from other ethnic groups especially Mongolian and Tibetan doubt the equity of preferential policies between Han and ethnic minorities, and also within the same ethnic group. For instance, Student F and Student G both felt that Tibetans in Sichuan and in Tibet are treated differently. Also, different policies are applied to Tibetans from rural and urban areas. This phenomenon is related to the fact that different ethnic groups benefit from preferential policies differently and even the same ethnic group is treated differently in distinct areas (Wang, 2007).

Table 5. ANOVA results for fairness of the preparatory classes.

	F	p	η_p^2
Fairness for all	5.557	.000	.098
Ethnicity	4.716	.001	.058
High school	2.513	.042	.032
Family income			
Han fairness	3.588	.002	.061
Ethnicity	1.562	.184	.020
High school	2.439	.047	.031
Family income			
Minority fairness	3.376	.003	.062
Ethnicity	2.803	.026	.035
High school	2.275	.061	.029
Family income			

Moreover, as can be seen in Table 5, minority students' attitudes towards the fairness of preferential policies among all ethnic groups ($F(4, 309) = 4.716, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .058$) and the fairness within the same ethnic group ($F(4, 307) = 2.803, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .035$) do change significantly on the basis of high school they attended. The results of the Tukey test reveal that the mean score is higher among participants graduated from minority high schools compared to students graduated from municipal key high school. It indicates that students from municipal key high schools where more educational resources are available are more likely to consider preferential policies fair. In addition, participants' attitudes towards the fairness of preferential policies among ethnic groups ($F(4, 309) = 2.513, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .032$), the fairness for the Han ($F(4, 309) = 2.439, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .031$) also change significantly by the family income. And the fairness within the same ethnic group ($F(4, 307) = 2.275, p > .05$) do not differ significantly depending on family income.

Furthermore, a quarter of respondents claimed that some students benefited from preferential policies even though they were not entitled to them. For example, some Han students have changed their ethnicity intentionally for educational advantage, and some students, regardless of ethnicity, have migrated to provinces with comparatively lower CEE admittance requirements. This confirms the findings of a previous study by Yamada in 2012, in which she argued that although preferential policies are deemed to provide educational opportunities for ethnic minorities, these policies are resented by the Han majority. In order to gain a competitive edge, some Han thus try to manipulate structural, ethnic and societal positions to their own advantage (Yamada, 2012).

Conclusions and implications

This study explores minority students' access to, participation in and outcomes from preparatory classes from the perspective of educational equity. Principles of equity, including vertical equity, horizontal equity and equal education opportunity, are examined in this context. To begin with, we find that minority students who come from cities and towns and can speak fluent Chinese are more likely to get into preparatory classes. This result partly confirms the standpoints of some scholars who argue that preparatory classes enrol more children of local officials and children from the socioeconomic upper class than students from the disadvantaged areas and families (Teng & Ma, 2005; Zheng, 2011). Moreover, the principle of vertical equity is adopted in the access to preparatory classes in that different access criteria are adopted according to different regions, different teaching languages and different university admission scores (Wang, 2007). However, we discover that in-group equality between ethnic minorities is questioned and discussed by minority students.

Secondly, regarding students' class participation and community participation in preparatory classes, most participants have had a positive experience of the curriculum, teachers' teaching methods and assessment. Interestingly, one of the most important tasks of preparatory classes is to improve minority students' Chinese language skills. This study, however, finds that "language barrier" is considered the smallest challenge by minority students, which contradicts many university teachers' and policy makers' belief that language would be the main challenge for minority students. The analysis also shows that preparatory classes enhance integration between the Han and ethnic minorities, as well as national identity through speaking Chinese as the interethnic common language and learning about Han culture, which benefits equal education for minorities (Ma, 2007). However, minority languages and cultures are marginalized and not fully recognized in class and community activities in preparatory classes, which also leads to a lack of sense of belonging to the affiliated university. This phenomenon contradicts Confucius's "You Jiao Wu Lei" thoughts on equity.

Lastly, the outcomes of preparatory classes was reflected mainly in students' academic performance and attitude towards fairness in preparatory classes and preferential policies. According to the survey, preparatory classes play a positive role in enhancing minority students' academic

achievement, minority education and harmonious ethnic relations. This finding is consistent with the discourse from research that preparatory classes have been effective as a bridge for many minority students' smooth transition to a four-year college education, and contribute to promoting the equality of educational opportunity of minority students (Teng & Ma, 2005). Preparatory classes have also improved the quality of ethnic minority education and further narrowed the gap between the Han and ethnic minorities. (Hui & Jiang, 2004; Ma, 2014; Yi, 2010; Zheng, 2011). Furthermore, students with different ethnic, high school and economic backgrounds have significantly different views on the fairness of preparatory classes and further preferential policies between ethnic groups and within the same group.

This study also has implications for theory, policy-making and practice. Theoretically, this empirical research provides basic and fundamental feedback about the implementation of educational equity principles, which is also a signal for potential challenges and complexity related to research in the theory of educational equity (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). The implication for policy making, accordingly, is that more preferential policies should be provided to ethnic minority students from educationally backward areas, poverty-stricken regions and those whose mother tongue is not Chinese. Students' differences in culture, language, economic levels, and the extent of their integration into mainstream society should also be taken into account in policy design in order to achieve educational equity (Teng & Ma, 2005).

In addition, the finding that Chinese language learning is no longer the most difficult challenge for most minority students is consistent with previous research that has advocated for the transformation of the function of preparatory classes from Chinese language tutoring to a combination of basic knowledge tutoring and undergraduate education (Song, 2006; Xie, 2017). Specifically, the credit system may be applied such that students with a good grasp of knowledge in high school can select undergraduate courses related to their future major to prepare them for professional training in universities. Others can consolidate the content of high school courses to guarantee that they can pass the exams smoothly (Song, 2006).

Moreover, this study reveals that preparatory classes promote integration between the Han and minorities, and national identity at the cost of marginalization of minority languages and cultures. The educational reform carried out in Inner Mongolian in 2020 also confirms this finding. The Inner Mongolian education department has announced that Chinese textbooks for three subjects: language and literature, morality and law as well as history will be gradually introduced to primary schools after September 2020. The instruction language of three subjects will also be changed to Chinese.

Despite the benefits of integration in terms of enhancing the educational opportunities for minorities, minority languages and cultures being marginalized in class and community activities contradicts the principle of equal education opportunity (Chen, 2016). Thus, more measures which consider minority students' cultural and linguistic differences in curriculum design, instruction and assessment should be adopted. Furthermore, students' sense of belonging has positive relation with academic performance that affiliated universities should provide more support to involve minority students in the university life and enrich their extracurricular activities to increase their sense of belonging to both affiliated university and preparatory classes (Zheng, 2011). Finally, the limit of the small number of respondents (320 questionnaires and 7 interviews) is recognized. However, the data is valuable, and findings in this research reveal some important patterns which provide a baseline for tracking the implementation of preparatory classes from access, participation and outcome standard.

Notes

1. Population Census of the People's Republic of China (2011) <http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/Statisticaldata/CensusData/rkpc2010/indexch.htm>.
2. "Minzu" often translated into "ethnic group", "nation" or "nationality", became generalized to refer to all Chinese ethnic groups after the 1950s.

3. This project began in 2005 and aimed to train a group of elites from ethnic minorities. This project helped ethnic minority students to take master and doctoral degrees in so-called “211 project” and “985 project” universities where the government intends to strengthen the universities’ capacities in higher education. Most students in the project for “the plan for high-level cadres of ethnic minorities” were from the western provinces of China.
4. The plan for high-level cadres of ethnic minorities for 2020 was issued by the Ministry of Education and can be found at http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A09/moe_763/201909/t20190930_401889.html.
5. Preferential policy/affirmative action has been widely adopted worldwide to redress historic inequalities among ethnic/race groups to reduce potential conflict and enhance opportunities for the dominant group itself (Hawkins & Jacob, 2009). Preferential policies or affirmative action or positive policy has a number of different definitions, which usually point towards the same end – they are preferential policies. The term “preferential policy” is used in this paper as it is more accurate and closer to the Chinese term used in Chinese literature. Preferential policies generally refer to actions taken with the purpose of helping certain groups, even though such actions might be less advantageous to other groups. Several methods from recruitment campaigns to special timetables and quotas are practiced to reduce direct and indirect discrimination and increase cultural diversity in society. Preferential policies target different groups in society, including women, ethnic minorities and indigenous populations (Zhou & Hill, 2009).
6. Positive discrimination means policies and practices that seek to combat the inequalities and disadvantages that have been experienced, e.g., in education and employment, and it is targeted at certain sections of the population, usually minority ethnic groups and women. Positive discrimination sets aside some or all of the requirements in order to ensure that disadvantaged individuals can benefit.
7. Normal University in China mainly refers to universities and colleges that focus on the cultivation and training of future and existing teachers for all levels of education in China.
8. For instance, in Yunnan Province, minority students from border areas, mountainous highlands, nomadic pastoral areas and other compact ethnic minority communities can have 10 points added onto their CEE scores, while minority students from elsewhere enjoy only priority in university admission over Han Chinese students under identical terms and conditions.
9. For example, in 2019, Inner Mongolia sets up its admission line for first enrolment into Humanities and Science majors at 522 points and 477 points respectively whereas the line for students educated in Mongolian language was reduced to 398 and 348 respectively.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Vesa A. Niskanen for their insightful comments on earlier drafts. I am solely responsible for the views and analysis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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