The Island Equity Paradox: Capability, Governance, and Educational Reform in Peripheral Contexts

Li Chan
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1672-4038
Zhejiang College of Security Technology, China
895223055@qq.com

Qiongping Wang (Corresponding Author)
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1851-8946
Shanghai Normal University Tianhua College, China
a27310075379@outlook.com

Mei Xiaoyu (Corresponding Author)
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4626-1815
Central University of Finance and Economics, China
MMxiaoyu8@163.com

Abstract

This study examines how China's common prosperity reforms reshaped educational equity in two island counties of Zhejiang Province between 2020 and 2025. Addressing the dominance of cross-sectional approaches, it draws on a six-wave longitudinal qualitative study conducted from 2020 to 2025 with a 54-member core cohort of teachers and parents. Using the Island Capability–Equity Paradox Framework (ICEPF), the study traces how reform intentions were interpreted and enacted over time. The findings reveal a dynamic process of fragility, consolidation, and tensioned achievement: Digital infrastructure and staffing improved, yet reforms also intensified teacher workloads, heightened parental comparisons with mainland schools, and raised concerns about sustainability. The study develops the ICEPF to explain why equity-oriented investment may widen educational opportunities while also intensifying implementation pressures and exposing unresolved spatial inequalities.

Keywords: educational equity; common prosperity; capability approach; islandness; governance

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Introduction

Achieving educational equity in remote, peripheral, or island regions remains a persistent global challenge. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 highlights the imperative of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, regardless of geography (UN 2015). Many island states and archipelagic regions, such as those in the Pacific, the Caribbean, and among small island developing states (SIDS), have struggled to translate national education reforms into effective local practice due to persistent constraints in connectivity, resource mobilisation, and human capital (Crossley, Bray, and Packer 2011). In these contexts, geography itself operates as a structural determinant of unequal educational opportunity.

Marginalised students in remote regions are least likely to access effective remote learning, demonstrating how spatial disadvantage intensifies educational inequality during systemic shocks (Caplan 2024; World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF 2021). These experiences have renewed calls for place-sensitive, longitudinal, and qualitative research to capture how reform trajectories unfold over time in geographically constrained settings.

China's recent common prosperity policy, revitalised since 2021, constitutes a distinctive national experiment aimed at narrowing inequalities in income, public services, and opportunity, thereby promoting balanced regional development (Li 2023). Education was identified as a core mechanism within this agenda, as it could simultaneously redistribute opportunity and expand human capability. Empirical research is emerging. For instance, a recent study finds that improvements in education development significantly contribute to "shared prosperity" in China, though persistent educational inequality acts as a hindrance (Fan et al. 2023; Li 2023). Yet most existing work remains cross-sectional or macro-quantitative, focusing on province-level measures or aggregate indicators. Such research tends to underplay local heterogeneity, implementation dynamics, and the temporal evolution of reforms.

Two gaps remain. Theoretically, prior work often treats equity as a static outcome through redistribution or human-capital lenses. Although capability-based analyses have grown (Gale and Molla 2015; St. John 2023) and island studies have shown how smallness and isolation shape institutional capacity (Baldacchino 2007; Crossley, Bray, and Packer 2011), these strands are rarely integrated to explain how multilevel governance mediates capability expansion over time in island education systems, including under China's common prosperity reforms. Empirically, common prosperity evaluations focus mainly on urban or mainland contexts, leaving island counties underexamined despite constraints in staffing and connectivity that can reshape implementation and reproduce inequality.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the evolution of educational equity in two island counties of Zhejiang Province, one of China's official demonstration zones for

common prosperity (Yu et al. 2025). Drawing on a six-wave longitudinal qualitative study conducted from 2020 to 2025, it examines how reforms were enacted and experienced under conditions of geographic constraint, and how local actors interpreted and negotiated these changes. The 2020 wave captured the COVID-related digital transition and provides a baseline for interpreting the subsequent common prosperity reform agenda, which became more prominent in Zhejiang from 2021. Specifically, the study asks:

RQ1: How did educational equity evolve across six annual waves between 2020 and 2025 in two Zhejiang island counties under the common prosperity framework?

RQ2: How did island-specific constraints, such as isolation, resource scarcity, and digital access, mediate the processes through which equity reforms expanded residents' capabilities?

RQ3: How did local actors, particularly teachers and parents, perceive and negotiate the relationship between educational equity and common prosperity across different phases?

This research offers both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it proposes an Island Capability–Equity Governance perspective by integrating capability, spatial, and governance lenses into a dynamic analytical framework. Empirically, it yields rare longitudinal evidence from China's peripheral island settings, illuminating how geography mediates reform outcomes and highlighting risks of policy drift, exclusion, or unintended inequality reproduction. Beyond China, this work offers insights for other countries confronting equity challenges in geographically isolated settings, offering a comparative lens for equity reforms in islands, archipelagos, and remote peripheries.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Education Equity in Global and Chinese Contexts

The pursuit of educational equity has long been central to sociology, education, and development studies. Classic theoretical works, such as Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* and Bourdieu and Passeron's *Les Héritiers* (*The Inheritors*) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* laid the foundation for debates between redistributionist and reproductionist perspectives (Broadfoot 1978; Coleman 1968). These debates emphasised how schooling may reproduce social structures. Subsequent empirical research shows that geographic remoteness and socio-economic background remain strong predictors of learning opportunities and outcomes even after access expansion. Cross-national evidence highlights persistent rural/remote learning gaps and capacity constraints in policy implementation (Burns and Köster 2016; World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF 2021), while China-focused studies similarly document durable urban–rural and regionally stratified patterns in educational development (Guo and Li 2024; Lin 2024).

Global frameworks such as the United Nations' SDG 4 institutionalise the goal of inclusive and equitable quality education (UN 2015). But comparative analyses show that peripheral geographies, especially remote rural areas, island communities, and hinterlands, often lag behind in learning outcomes, infrastructure, and resource allocation, raising questions about whether centralised reforms truly reach marginalised populations. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly magnified such disparities: In many countries, students in remote or underprivileged areas were not only less likely to access online learning but also less able to benefit from it, thereby widening educational gaps (Jiang, Mo, and Kosar Altinyelken 2024; Sun et al. 2024). For example, a recent study found that online education tends to magnify inequalities tied to family socio-economic status (Sun, Tang, and Zhao 2024).

In the Chinese context, the "common prosperity" agenda has elevated educational equity to a national priority. Education is framed as both a right and a mechanism to narrow regional disparities. Recent reforms have increased fiscal input into basic education and attempted to rebalance the distribution of educational resources (Wu 2025). However, much of the existing empirical work remains macro-quantitative and cross-sectional, thus obscuring how equity is lived, negotiated, and transformed at the local level (Lin 2024; Wu 2025). Emerging case-based studies also suggest that coastal and urban areas tend to benefit disproportionately, while peripheral and island counties continue to confront deep structural constraints (Guo and Li 2024). This divergence prompts a key puzzle: How are ambition-laden national agendas translated into day-to-day educational realities in geographically disadvantaged settings, and how do these translation processes evolve over time?

Theoretical Perspectives: Capability and Islandness

The capability approach shifts attention from enrolment or funding metrics to substantive freedoms and agency, asking what individuals are effectively able to do and be (Gale and Molla 2015; Robeyns 2005). In recent years, scholars have increasingly applied the capability approach to argue that structural factors such as poverty, weak institutions, and social exclusion can severely limit how much schooling contributes to real capabilities (Nussbaum 2009; Sen 1999; St. John 2023).

However, scholars have cautioned that the capability approach can become overly abstract if insufficiently grounded in spatial, cultural, and institutional specificities. In geographically marginalised or remote settings, the constraints are not only socio-economic but also environmental, thus a purely "universalist" capability framing may underplay how place matters in shaping freedoms.

This is where the concept of islandness becomes analytically useful. Islandness refers to the distinctive spatial, infrastructural, and relational constraints associated with islands: smallness, isolation, dependence, fragility, and remoteness (Baldacchino 2006, 2007). These characteristics influence how policies made at the national level are interpreted, adapted, or distorted in an island context. Empirical studies in Pacific and

Caribbean settings document that shortages of qualified teachers, fragile information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, high costs of resource delivery, and intermittency of connectivity systematically undermine the capacity of islands to benefit from national reforms. More recent work suggests that even as digital technologies promise new opportunities, uneven connectivity means that adoption can exacerbate inequality in island settings; that is, the "digital divide" is not just between countries but within micro-spaces (Pierce and Cleary 2024).

By integrating capability and islandness, one can develop a dual framing: The capability lens foregrounds normative goals of expanding freedoms and opportunities, while the islandness lens attends to how geographic constraints, institutional fragilities, and infrastructural limits mediate those goals. Their synthesis helps to reveal paradoxes: Islands are not passive peripheries but active laboratories of reform, where national equity strategies must contend with place-based constraints. In contexts such as Zhejiang's island counties, where isolation is real and institutions lean, a longitudinal qualitative approach is indispensable to trace how educational reforms are reinterpreted, adapted, resisted, or stalled over time under the dual pressures of capability expansion and island constraints.

Inclusive Development and Governance

The discourse of inclusive development stresses that growth should reach marginalised groups and lagging regions, not just be measured by aggregate indicators (Bonilla et al. 2025). Scholars of inclusive development emphasise that inclusion is not merely a technocratic add-on but inherently political, arguing that reforms that ignore structural disadvantages risk reproducing inequality under the guise of expansion. In education, this tension often appears in the contrast between efficiency-oriented reforms, which emphasise aggregate performance, and equity-oriented reforms, which seek redistribution towards disadvantaged communities.

Governance plays a pivotal role in mediating these tensions. Sánchez-Soriano et al. (2024) argue that inclusive governance requires opening decision spaces, ensuring meaningful participation, and addressing structural exclusion. Mason (2016) notes that multi-level governance depends on coordination between central and local actors, but capacity asymmetries often undermine implementation. Comparative studies support this pattern: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with stronger institutional systems tend to better align governance structures with inclusive outcomes (Burns and Köster 2016).

Digital governance has gained prominence, particularly after COVID-19. While digital tools can overcome geographic isolation, uneven connectivity can exacerbate inequalities (Heeks 2021). These insights reinforce that inclusive development is not only about distributing resources but also about strengthening governance capacity to turn policy intentions into equitable outcomes.

China's common prosperity agenda exemplifies these global debates with distinct national features. Education is viewed as a pillar of inclusive development, yet outcomes remain uneven: Provinces with stronger fiscal and administrative capacities tend to execute national strategies more effectively, while peripheral regions lag behind (Yu et al. 2025). Some analysts see common prosperity as a compelling political narrative that risks remaining rhetorical unless grounded in local governance realities (Sun 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Four interrelated gaps emerge from the literature. Methodologically, most studies on educational equity in China are cross-sectional and quantitative, providing little insight into how reforms evolve over time. Spatially, peripheral and island counties remain underexamined, even though geography and digital connectivity critically shape access and learning experiences (Guo and Li 2024). Theoretically, few studies integrate the capability approach, islandness, and governance theory to explain how equity is produced through multilevel processes (Li et al. 2023). Comparatively, research seldom connects China's reforms with global debates on inclusive development and spatial justice, limiting cross-context understanding.

To address these gaps, this study proposes the Island Capability–Equity Paradox Framework (ICEPF) (see Figure 1). The framework combines capability, islandness, and inclusive governance perspectives to explain how aspirations, structures, and agency interact in reform contexts. The capability approach (Nussbaum 2009; Sen 1999) views equity as the expansion of real freedoms rather than resource distribution; recent applications highlight the importance of agency in translating schooling into meaningful outcomes. The concept of islandness emphasises how isolation, smallness, and infrastructural fragility constrain reform implementation (Baldacchino 2007). New evidence from small-island states shows that weak digital infrastructure continues to mediate policy success. Finally, multilevel governance theory explains how coordination across state, provincial, and local institutions determines whether policy goals are realised or distorted (Fan et al. 2023).

The capability approach, islandness, and multilevel governance theory were used as sensitising perspectives at the outset of the study rather than as a fixed explanatory model. They informed attention to resources, spatial constraint, and policy enactment during sampling and early coding. Their integration into the ICEPF was refined through comparison across the six annual waves, particularly as recurring links emerged between capability expansion, implementation pressure, and the persistence of spatial inequality.

Within the ICEPF, national reforms under the common prosperity agenda set strategic goals and resources; islandness filters these inputs through geographic and institutional constraints; and multilevel governance shapes how local actors interpret and adapt them. Outcomes appear both in measurable indicators and in residents' perceived

opportunities. Feedback between results and governance capacity generates iterative reform cycles.

The ICEPF reframes educational equity as a dynamic interaction among human capability, spatial constraint, and institutional process. It advances theory by integrating normative, spatial, and governance dimensions; strengthens methodology through a longitudinal, qualitative lens; and enhances global relevance by offering a transferable model for geographically marginalised regions.

In this study, the Island Equity Paradox refers to the process through which equity-oriented investments expand educational opportunities while simultaneously increasing implementation burdens, accountability demands, and awareness of remaining spatial inequalities. The ICEPF advances three propositions: (1) in island contexts, spatial constraint mediates capability expansion and heightens dependence on governance capacity; (2) reforms that widen formal access often reorganise inequality into new forms rather than erase it; and (3) visible success can amplify accountability and sustainability pressures, reshaping professional autonomy and household expectations.

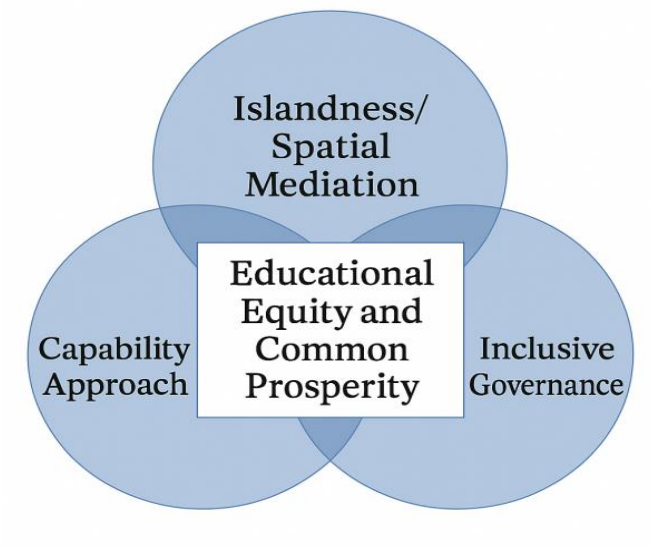


Figure 1: The Island Capability–Equity Paradox Framework (ICEPF)

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a six-wave longitudinal qualitative design and was conducted from 2020 to 2025 to examine how China's common prosperity reforms interacted with the evolving realities of education in island counties. A longitudinal approach was essential for capturing temporal dynamics, continuities, turning points, and adaptive processes in

the lived experiences of educators, parents, and communities. In contrast to cross-sectional studies that offer static snapshots, this design allowed the tracing of processual change and contextual adaptation over time (Grossoehme and Lipstein 2016).

The study was initially informed by the capability approach, islandness, and multilevel governance theory; the ICEPF was subsequently refined through the longitudinal analysis. The framework directed attention to: (a) how reforms expanded or constrained individual and collective capabilities; (b) how geographic isolation mediated opportunities and access; and (c) how governance processes facilitated or hindered the translation of national policies into local practice.

Teachers were selected as the core longitudinal cohort, given their central role in implementing reforms and interpreting changing policy expectations. Parents were included to capture household perspectives on fairness, aspiration, and perceptions of common prosperity. To ensure multi-actor triangulation, local officials and students were engaged at selected intervals, contributing governance-level and experiential insights without fragmenting the longitudinal narrative.

By embedding inquiry within the evolving context of 2020–2025, the study addressed a major methodological gap in the literature, the scarcity of longitudinal qualitative research in geographically marginalised settings. This layered design provided a robust basis for analysing how reforms were experienced, negotiated, and contested in peripheral island regions.

Research Sites and Participants

Fieldwork was conducted in two island counties in Zhejiang Province, purposively selected to capture variation in geographic isolation, socio-economic development, and governance capacity. These sites provided contrasting contexts in which the central objectives of common prosperity intersected with local structural barriers such as transportation constraints, fragile digital infrastructure, and uneven teacher distribution.

The two counties shared the structural features of island schooling but differed in the intensity of these constraints. County A was more remote, with stronger dependence on ferry transport, weaker fiscal and governance capacity, and greater teacher mobility. County B was relatively closer to the mainland, with better transport and digital infrastructure and more stable fiscal and staffing conditions. These differences were treated as contextual variation within a shared island setting rather than as a basis for separate case comparison.

Participants were drawn primarily from two key groups. Teachers constituted the core longitudinal cohort, as their professional trajectories reflected systemic changes in resource allocation, pedagogy, and perceptions of equity reform. Parents formed a complementary longitudinal group, providing insights into household experiences of fairness and the intergenerational implications of policy change.

Additional perspectives were strategically incorporated. Local officials were interviewed periodically, and relevant policy documents were analysed to contextualise governance practices. Students, engaged in rotating cohorts during selected years, contributed to understanding how reforms were perceived and experienced in everyday school life. This core supplementary design balanced analytical depth with longitudinal continuity. Sampling combined purposive and snowball strategies to recruit participants who were directly involved in island schooling and could speak to reform experiences over time. Inclusion criteria for the core cohort required (a) continuous employment/residence in the county since at least 2020, and (b) willingness to participate in annual follow-ups. To enhance transparency while protecting anonymity, teacher participants are reported by gender and years of experience in aggregate, and parent participants by caregiver role. Across the six waves, 49 of the original 54 teachers and parents remained involved through the final wave. Five participants who relocated or became unavailable were replaced by participants with comparable roles and local experience. The core cohort provided sustained longitudinal coverage, although it should not be interpreted as a fully unchanged panel at every wave.

In total, the study followed a 54-member longitudinal core cohort across the two sites, supplemented by rotating student cohorts, as summarised in Table 1. Student participants were recruited in selected waves, and their accounts are used to illuminate cross-sectional learner experiences at different stages of reform, rather than to make individual-level claims about change over time.

Table 1: Overview of participants and longitudinal structure

Category	Number of Participants	Longitudinal Engagement	Notes	Identifier Format
Teachers	34	Annual follow-up across six waves (2020–2025)	Core analytic group; primary focus of longitudinal analysis	T01–T34
Parents	20	Annual follow-up across six waves (2020–2025)	Complementary group; household and relational perspectives	P01–P20
Local Officials	6	Periodic interviews; non-longitudinal	Governance and policy interpretation	O01–O06
Students	≈ 40 (rotating cohorts)	Selected waves; rotating samples by year	Experiential accounts across different grade levels	S01–S40 (by wave)
Total (core cohort)	54	Sustained engagement across six waves	Longitudinal core cohort with limited replacement	—

Data Collection, Analysis, and Research Integrity

Teachers and parents were re-interviewed as the same core cohort each year, while student participants were recruited as rotating cohorts in selected years to capture learner

experiences at different stages. Semi-structured interviews enabled comparability across years while allowing participants to articulate evolving concerns about pedagogy, governance, and household expectations. Focus groups examined collective challenges such as workload intensification and digital transitions, while document analysis of policies, school reports, and budgets provided institutional context. Classroom and community observations captured the enactment of reforms in daily practice. All quotations are anonymised to protect participant identity. Interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and were conducted primarily face to face, with online interviews used as a supplementary mode during the early 2020–2021 period. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, mainly Mandarin, with occasional use of local dialects. Audio-recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim in Chinese; quotations used in this article were translated into English by the research team and checked against the original transcripts for meaning. The 12 focus groups included within-county teacher groups, parent groups, and a small number of mixed groups involving participants from both groups.

Fieldwork in each county lasted two to three months per year, generating over 200 interviews, 12 focus groups, and 60 policy and budget documents. By the fourth year, key themes had stabilised, suggesting theoretical saturation. Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation across data sources and time points, peer debriefing, member checking, in which participants were invited to comment on the accuracy of summary interpretations, and reflexive journalling (Nowell et al. 2017). NVivo supported iterative coding and retrieval, combining inductive and deductive analysis. Inductively, emerging patterns reflected participants' lived experiences; deductively, categories from the ICEPF guided interpretation of capability expansion, spatial mediation, and governance dynamics (Braun and Clarke 2021). Analysis proceeded in three steps. First, open coding generated initial codes grounded in participants' accounts. Second, focused coding consolidated codes into higher-order themes mapped to ICEPF dimensions (capability expansion, spatial mediation, governance pressure). Third, longitudinal coding compared themes across waves to identify continuities, turning points, and phase-specific novelties. Coding memos and an audit trail documented refinements, and discrepant interpretations were discussed between the authors to enhance dependability.

The three phases reported in the findings were not predetermined. They were identified through annual thematic comparisons and interpreted alongside relevant policy developments: The dominant tension shifted from infrastructural fragility in 2020–2021, to implementation pressure and differentiated household capacity in 2022–2023, and then to sustainability and psychosocial strain in 2024–2025.

Given the policy sensitivity, reflexivity was built into fieldwork and analysis. The researchers maintained reflective journals on positionality, access dynamics, and potential social desirability effects, and interviews emphasised confidentiality to reduce participant risk and encourage candid accounts. Ethical integrity was maintained under

university approval and international standards for human research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental consent and student assent for minors. Pseudonyms protected confidentiality, and all data were securely stored on encrypted drives. Reflexive memos and an audit trail enhanced dependability and confirmability, while thick description supported transferability to comparable island contexts. Integrating these procedures with the ICEPF strengthened explanatory depth, revealing how educational equity was experienced and negotiated in Zhejiang's island counties over time. To enhance clarity regarding temporal change, Table 2 summarises annual waves, policy emphases, governance shifts, and dominant equity tensions across the six annual waves.

Table 2: Six-wave timeline of policy emphases, governance features, and dominant equity tensions, 2020–2025

Year	Wave	Reform/Policy Focus	Governance Features	Dominant Equity Tension
2020	Wave 1	COVID-triggered digital shift; rapid platform rollout	Emergency coordination; limited local capacity	Connectivity fragility; teacher overload
2021	Wave 2	Initial stabilisation; subsidy adjustments	Policy normalisation; uneven training support	Persistent digital instability; parental scepticism
2022	Wave 3	Infrastructure upgrades; device distribution	Expanded reporting systems; administrative consolidation	Workload intensification; uneven household digital capacity
2023	Wave 4	Resource consolidation; cross-county differentiation	Diverging fiscal and staffing capacity	Inter-county divergence; relational comparison with mainland
2024	Wave 5	Pilot programmes; "model island" visibility	Heightened accountability; performance evaluation	Achievement with pressure; rising expectations
2025	Wave 6	Sustainability focus; institutional consolidation	Governance strain; fiscal and staffing concerns	Psychosocial fatigue; long-term sustainability uncertainty

Findings

This section reports findings from a six-wave longitudinal study conducted from 2020 to 2025 in two island counties of Zhejiang Province, tracing how perceptions and practices of educational equity evolved under China's common prosperity agenda. Guided by the ICEPF, the analysis follows three temporal phases to reveal continuities and turning points. Teachers emerge as key interpreters and implementers of reform, with perspectives from parents, officials, and students providing context. Across phases, the expansion—or constraint—of capabilities reflects the interaction of policy intentions, governance capacity, and the lived realities of islandness.

Phase I (2020–2021): Initial Adjustments under the Common Prosperity Agenda

The first stage of reform unfolded as a period characterised less by transformation than by expectation, uncertainty, and adaptation. Although common prosperity policies aimed to reduce disparities, their translation into island contexts was mediated by fragile infrastructure, staffing shortages, and limited governance capacity. Teachers and parents consistently described the early adjustments as an exercise in coping with disruption rather than implementing reform. Analytically, this phase foregrounds fragility: Reforms were experienced primarily as disruption and coping under infrastructural and staffing constraints.

Teachers frequently described new digital platforms as sources of disruption rather than support. One middle school teacher explained:

> The internet cuts out … sometimes three, four times in a single lesson. And by the time it reconnects, the students are laughing, moving around, you lose the class completely. (T03)

A newly appointed teacher reflected on the lack of preparation:

> We were told, "just use the new platform". But nobody showed us how. I spent nights, really, watching tutorials on my phone, trying to figure out what to do the next morning. (T11)

Parents echoed these frustrations from the household side. A father with two children remarked:

> We only had one smartphone in the house. My son would use it in the morning, my daughter in the afternoon. Sometimes we had to borrow from neighbours. It was exhausting. (P04)

A mother from a fishing village described the emotional toll:

> They say online classes are fair for everyone. But here, the signal just drops, sometimes even when the wind is strong. My children cried because they missed half of their lessons. (P09)

These accounts reveal how connectivity gaps and uneven digital literacy transformed reforms designed to narrow disparities into new burdens, reinforcing rather than reducing marginality.

Teachers also reported intensified workloads that undermined reform goals. A high school physics teacher noted:

> I teach three grades at once. The reform says we should give students personalised learning, but I barely finish marking papers. How can we talk about equity like this? (T18)

A younger colleague added:

> They want us to innovate, but when one teacher covers five subjects, innovation becomes impossible. (T07)

Local officials acknowledged these systemic constraints. As one county education officer admitted:

> We received instructions to reduce disparities, but the allocation formula is still population-based. For small islands, that means fewer teachers, fewer resources. We want to do more, but the structure is not in our hands. (O02)

Parents evaluated reform outcomes through comparisons with mainland cities. A mother of a middle-school student asked:

> They talk about equal education, but my cousin's child in Hangzhou has better teachers and better books. How can my daughter compete? (P13)

Others expressed cautious optimism. A mother from a fishing community reflected:

> At least now we don't pay extra for exercise books. It may be small, but it shows the government is thinking of us. (P02)

Even students articulated frustration. A 14-year-old boy explained:

> When the signal was bad, I just copied from classmates later. It felt like we were always behind. (S06)

Taken together, these findings portray Phase I as a period of tension rather than transformation.

Phase II (2022–2023): Consolidation and Emerging Tensions

By the mid-point of the study, reforms began to assume a more consolidated form. Infrastructure improved modestly, and teachers reported that the initial turbulence had settled into more predictable routines. Yet beneath the appearance of stability, new tensions surfaced. Analytically, this phase differs from Phase I by shifting from infrastructural breakdown to consolidation-driven divergence and workload intensification.

Teachers welcomed the arrival of new equipment but described additional demands. A secondary-school teacher reflected:

> Yes, we got new computers, smart boards even. But with them came more tasks, extra reports, new teaching plans … I sometimes think the equipment is for the government's eyes, not for our teaching. (T21)

Another teacher emphasised contradictions between opportunity and inequality:

> The students can now access online libraries, which is wonderful. But the expectation is that we assign more homework using these platforms. Some families can manage, some cannot, it creates another kind of unfairness. (T09)

Parents voiced mixed reactions. A father described improvements with relief:

> At least the classes are smoother now, fewer interruptions. My son can watch a whole lesson without losing the signal. That feels like progress. (P06)

In contrast, another parent pointed to continuing inequities:

> My niece in Ningbo uses the same platform, but her teachers know how to guide them, step by step. Here the teachers just say, "read online". It feels like our children are practising alone. (P15)

Student voices reflected both enthusiasm and ambivalence. A high-school girl commented:

> We had tablets for every student, which was exciting. But honestly, many of us just used them to chat. Teachers didn't always know how to control the class. (S14)

Another student expressed appreciation:

> When the teacher shared videos, it made science easier. I started to understand experiments we could never do in our small lab. (S22)

Local officials portrayed progress but acknowledged divergence. One officer observed:

> We are proud that every classroom now has digital screens. But to be honest, the gap between our county and the next is growing. They have more stable funding, more trained staff. It is not just technology, it is people. (O05)

Viewed longitudinally, Phase II marked stabilisation without convergence.

Phase III (2024–2025): Turning Points and Long-Term Implications

By 2024, reforms reached a decisive juncture. Analytically, this phase marks a shift from access inequality to sustainability pressures and psychosocial strain.

Teachers acknowledged improvements but described rising pressure. One experienced secondary teacher reflected:

> We finally have stable internet, better labs, even visiting teachers from the mainland. But with every improvement comes new pressure. They say, "Now you have no excuse." It feels like the target is always moving. (T26)

A younger colleague shared:

> I thought things would get easier with the new resources. Instead, I spend more time writing reports, filling out evaluations. Sometimes I feel I teach less and monitor more. (T32)

Parents expressed ambivalence. A mother recounted:

> For the first time, my daughter had a science fair just like students in Hangzhou. She felt confident, like she belonged to the same world. (P10)

Another parent added:

> Yes, we have better schools now. But when my son applied for high school, the top places still went to mainland students. In the end, we are still second-class. (P18)

Students embodied this ambivalence. A 15-year-old girl described enthusiasm:

> I love that we can do experiments in the new lab. Before, we just watched videos. Now I feel like a real student of science. (S27)

Her classmate voiced fatigue:

> We study more hours than ever because everyone says this is our chance. But honestly … I feel tired all the time. (S33)

At the governance level, celebration coexisted with concern. A county education officer noted:

> The central government highlights us as a model island. We are proud. But maintaining this level—new staff, new facilities—requires money we do not always have. We fear the progress may not last. (O03)

Viewed longitudinally, educational equity in island contexts did not evolve linearly towards inclusion but cyclically through alternating phases of progress and contradiction, continually mediated by geography and governance. Zhejiang's islands emerged as both laboratories of reform and reminders of its incompleteness. Phase III crystallises the Island Equity Paradox: Reforms expand capabilities while simultaneously intensifying governance pressures and exposing the enduring structural limits of peripheral inclusion.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings through the lens of the ICEPF and situates them within broader debates on educational equity. The study addressed three questions: how teachers and parents experienced reforms under the common prosperity agenda, how these experiences evolved across 2020–2025, and how the island case contributes to international understandings of equity in peripheral contexts. The findings showed an arc of fragility, consolidation, and tensioned achievement, with teachers, parents, students, and officials negotiating both progress and persistent constraints. In what follows, the discussion links these insights to theory and highlights their implications for global debates on education and social justice.

Negotiating Equity in Practice: Teachers and Parents under the Common Prosperity Agenda

The findings reveal that teachers and parents in Zhejiang's island counties became the key mediators of the common prosperity reforms, translating national policy ambitions into local practice while exposing tensions between equity, governance, and geography. Teachers stood at the frontline of implementation, balancing the imperative to enhance student capabilities with intensifying accountability demands. Parents, meanwhile, evaluated the same reforms through the lens of everyday fairness—comparing local schooling with perceived mainland advantages. Together, their perspectives illuminate equity as a negotiated, relational, and evolving process rather than a fixed policy outcome.

Concerning teachers and capability constraints, teachers' narratives illustrated what Sen (1999) termed capability deprivation: Additional funding and digital resources did not necessarily expand their substantive freedoms to teach creatively. Recent research on novice teachers in low-resource contexts similarly shows that emotional strain and institutional expectations can constrain professional agency, particularly where reform intensifies accountability pressures (Li et al. 2024; Wu et al. 2025). Senior teachers described the reforms as deepening bureaucratic control, as new evaluation metrics and digital reporting systems replaced older forms of discretion. This aligns with Ball's (2003) theory of performativity, in which accountability regimes redefine professionalism through constant visibility and measurement. Similar dynamics have been documented in Chinese education reforms, where expanded resources have coincided with surveillance and emotional strain (Li and Tsang 2023). However, younger teachers interpreted digital reforms more ambivalently—acknowledging the steep learning curve but also valuing new recognition and technological fluency. Such generational divergence mirrors global research showing that teachers' adaptation to reform is mediated by digital competence, career stage, and local culture (Sahlén, Stålbrandt, and Åberg2020). Within the ICEPF framework, these patterns demonstrate how governance processes simultaneously enable and constrain capability expansion, with professional agency shaped by both institutional mandates and local adaptation. Parents judged equity not by abstract distribution but through relational comparison—a

sense of fairness shaped by visible differences between island and mainland contexts. For low-income families, the removal of ancillary fees, improved facilities, and distribution of digital devices represented tangible recognition by the state. Yet families with stronger connections to the mainland, especially those with children studying in urban centres, continued to perceive reforms as insufficient. One mother contrasted improved local infrastructure with "the difference in teachers' spirit and curriculum depth" in Hangzhou, reflecting a persistent belief that island schools remained second-tier. These perceptions echo findings that parental trust in educational reform depends on whether reforms visibly close the urban–rural gap (Zhong 2024). Island geography amplifies this comparative framing, as improved access does not erase symbolic hierarchies of centre and periphery. Within the ICEPF, this highlights how islandness mediates equity through both material constraint and social perception, reinforcing a governance trust deficit even amid local progress. Across the six annual waves, both groups showed evolving stances. Teachers initially resisted digital mandates (2020–2021), then gradually integrated them into routine practice (2022–2023), although concerns about workload and autonomy persisted into 2025. Parents, too, moved from scepticism towards cautious acceptance, recognising material gains while continuing to reference persistent spatial inequalities. This gradual recalibration supports Tikly and Barrett's (2011) view of equity as a process of ongoing negotiation rather than a static goal. It also resonates with recent studies showing that digital reforms in peripheral settings can reduce some inequalities while generating new exclusions tied to digital literacy and household capacity. In this context, "equity" is experienced less as parity and more as an ongoing calibration between aspiration, access, and capability.

Longitudinal Dynamics: Continuities and Turning Points (2020–2025)

Across the six annual waves, structural constraints persisted even as new opportunities emerged, indicating that capability expansion was continually mediated by governance capacity and spatial limitation. In the early period (2020–2021), fragility defined the reform landscape. Teachers often experienced digital platforms as disruptive rather than enabling—"The internet cuts out three times in a lesson; by the time it reconnects, I've lost the class"—while parents echoed similar frustrations, frequently benchmarking island schooling against perceived mainland advantages. These accounts suggest that reforms initially collided with the infrastructural and institutional limits of islandness, generating coping-oriented adjustments rather than transformation, consistent with observations that early digital reforms in peripheral settings can reinforce perceptions of marginality even amid resource improvement (Ye and Yang 2020).

As reforms moved into the middle period (2022–2023), infrastructure improved and teachers' digital competence increased, making instruction smoother and routines more predictable. However, consolidation also introduced new pressures. Teachers reported escalating administrative demands—"I teach less and fill out more forms"—and parents noted uneven benefits as some households struggled to support online learning. In this sense, stabilisation did not translate into convergence; instead, it reorganised inequality through differences in household capacity, local implementation resources, and the

forms of support available. This pattern aligns with arguments that in small or resource-constrained systems, reforms may reduce earlier inequalities while generating new exclusions linked to social capital and digital literacy (Kölling 2025). Within the ICEPF, the mid-period reflects a shift from infrastructural fragility to governance- and capacity-mediated differentiation.

By the late period (2024–2025), island schools gained heightened visibility and access to upgraded facilities and enriched programmes, which in some cases strengthened student engagement—"For the first time, I did real experiments, not just watched videos." Yet achievement was accompanied by fatigue and uncertainty: Students described intensified workloads, and officials expressed concern about sustaining resource-intensive initiatives. This reflects Tikly's (2024) notion of fragile equity, where visible gains coexist with persistent vulnerability, and it illustrates how progress can amplify governance strain by increasing accountability expectations and long-term maintenance burdens. Taken together, the six-wave trajectory highlights enduring continuities—especially teacher workload pressures, parental comparison with the mainland, and asymmetric governance structures—alongside clear turning points: early-stage fragility, mid-stage stabilisation with new contradictions, and late-stage achievement shadowed by sustainability and psychosocial strain. The longitudinal pattern shows how island geography shapes the conversion of new resources into substantive opportunities: Transport constraints, uneven connectivity, limited staffing pools, and dependence on external fiscal support continued to condition what schools and families could do with new provision.

The evidence also refines the three propositions of the ICEPF. First, spatial constraint did mediate capability expansion: Improved devices and facilities did not remove the effects of transport difficulty, unstable connectivity, and limited access to specialist teachers. Second, wider formal access did not simply reduce inequality; it shifted differentiation towards household digital capacity, access to mainland networks, and the ability to respond to rising expectations. Third, visible reform success increased reporting requirements, performance scrutiny, and concern about the continuity of externally supported initiatives. The framework is therefore supported by the data, but the findings also show that governance pressure and island constraint were intertwined rather than operating as separate forces.

Islands as Peripheral Laboratories: Global Implications

This section situates Zhejiang's island experience within global debates on educational equity, addressing the third research question. The findings show that islands, as peripheral contexts, magnify both the possibilities and contradictions of reform, functioning as laboratories where the tensions of equity are most visible. Teachers and parents framed fairness in relational terms—assessing improvement not solely by local gains but through continual comparison with the mainland. As one parent noted, "We are proud the island is on TV, but daily life is still hard for our kids." This dynamic captures the Island Equity Paradox: Reforms bring recognition and resources, yet each

success produces new anxieties about sustainability. Equity in island settings appears cyclical—a process of adaptation and redefinition rather than a linear path towards closure.

The Zhejiang case resonates widely with international evidence. In the Caribbean and Pacific, educational reforms have expanded infrastructure yet remain vulnerable to external shocks and uneven adoption (Crossley, Bray, and Packer 2011). Across small island systems in Northern Europe, such as Iceland and Norway, schools balance innovation with demographic fragility, revealing how isolation fosters both resilience and dependence (Lauri and Põder 2013). These global parallels suggest that islands consistently expose the double-edged nature of inclusive reform: They showcase policy ambition but also highlight the limits of capacity, connectivity, and endurance. The Island Equity Paradox mirrors a broader condition of fragile equity (Tikly 2024), where visible progress coexists with structural vulnerability. Read comparatively, Zhejiang's trajectory resembles patterns observed in small island developing states where infrastructure gains coexist with dependence on external talent pipelines and fragile fiscal capacity (Crossley, Bray, and Packer 2011). It also parallels accountability regimes in OECD contexts where performance monitoring can intensify teacher workload and reshape professionalism, even when equity-oriented investments increase (Ball 2003; Burns and Köster 2016). These comparisons are analytical rather than institutional: Zhejiang's island counties operate within a sub-national Chinese fiscal and administrative system and should not be equated with independent small-island states facing different conditions of sovereignty, aid dependence, and national policy capacity. These comparisons nevertheless highlight the ICEPF's global relevance: Islands amplify how governance capacity and spatial constraint jointly condition whether equity reforms are sustainable.

Theoretically, Zhejiang's experience extends equity scholarship in two ways. First, by foregrounding equity's relational character, it demonstrates that fairness is judged not merely through distributional metrics but also through cross-scalar perception and comparison. Second, by emphasising its cyclical nature, it reconceptualises fragility as a persistent, systemic feature of reform rather than a transitional stage. Within the ICEPF, this paradox reflects the interaction between capability expansion, spatial constraint, and governance capacity—dimensions that collectively determine how inclusion is achieved or eroded over time.

It is important to distinguish between pressures generated by reform implementation and those arising from the local context itself. Reporting requirements, performance evaluation, and the accelerated introduction of digital platforms were primarily associated with the policy roll-out and its accountability mechanisms. By contrast, travel distance, limited staffing pools, intermittent connectivity, and reliance on external fiscal support were enduring conditions of island governance. In practice, the two sets of pressures overlapped: Policy demands became more burdensome where local capacity to absorb them was already limited.

For policymakers, two implications follow. Islands should not be treated as marginal anomalies but as strategic testbeds for inclusive reform: Their constraints reveal both the potential and the unintended effects of policy more clearly than in metropolitan contexts. Sustaining progress requires resilience strategies—enhancing teacher autonomy, building parental trust, and developing governance mechanisms to prevent reform fatigue. In this sense, Zhejiang's islands contribute not only to China's common prosperity agenda but also to global understanding of how inclusive and sustainable education can be pursued amid the enduring constraints of geography and governance. Taken together, the Island Equity Paradox indicates that equity reform in peripheral island settings tends to reorganise structural inequality—shifting its forms and burdens—rather than eliminating it outright.

Conclusion

This study advances scholarship on educational equity in peripheral contexts by offering both a theoretical intervention and rare longitudinal evidence. It develops the Island Capability–Equity Paradox Framework (ICEPF), integrating capability, islandness, and governance to explain how capability-expanding investment can coexist with the implementation burden and enduring spatial inequality. The ICEPF clarifies how capability-expanding reforms can coexist with intensified accountability, administrative load, and renewed stratification, and it positions islandness as an active mediator that shapes how policy is translated into lived opportunities.

Empirically, the six-wave qualitative study conducted from 2020 to 2025 traces how common prosperity reforms unfolded in two Zhejiang island counties through phases of fragility, consolidation, and tensioned achievement. Following teachers and parents as frontline interpreters shows that material improvements in infrastructure and staffing were accompanied by heavier workloads, persistent mainland benchmarking, and emerging concerns about sustainability and psychosocial strain. These dynamics underscore the Island Equity Paradox: Reform success can generate new pressures that reorganise, rather than resolve, structural inequality.

The findings carry policy implications beyond the island case. Equity-oriented investment needs to be paired with governance arrangements that protect teacher autonomy, reduce reform fatigue, and strengthen local implementation capacity, especially where geography raises costs and limits access to professional support. Islands and other peripheral settings can serve as early warning sites for unintended effects of reform and as testbeds for designing resilience-oriented equity strategies.

This study has limitations. It draws on two counties and qualitative accounts in a politically sensitive context, which may shape what participants were willing to disclose despite confidentiality safeguards. Student participants were recruited as rotating cohorts in selected waves, so their accounts provide stage-specific snapshots rather than evidence of individual change over time. The document analysis focused on formal policy texts, school reports, and budget materials; it may not fully capture informal

implementation practices or internal decision-making. Future research could extend the ICEPF through comparative multi-island designs, mixed-method studies, or cross-national analyses across different institutional environments.

Overall, common prosperity reforms in Zhejiang's islands reveal a paradox of progress and pressure: Each gain expanded opportunity while exposing new vulnerabilities. By showing how equity is continually renegotiated at the margins through the interplay of capability, geography, and governance, this study reframes the periphery as analytically central to understanding how inclusive reform is achieved, sustained, and sometimes undone.

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