

# ***Analyzing the Education Gap Between Rural and Urban Environments in China***

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**Abstract:** Three major issues that widened the Education Gap in rural and urban environments in China are, 1) the lack of financial support in governmental funding, 2) the lack of qualified teachers in rural education systems, and 3) barriers in education after the National Curriculum Reform towards *suzhi jiaoyu*, human quality education. This paper provided details on the influences of educational investments and funding on reported rural school dropout rates, misconceptions about rural students' ability and competence swayed by negative stereotypes, neglected rural students' feelings and issues in rural ideology and values as burdens on rural students, and the mismatch in curriculum with examination as an assessment tool in the current education system. Along with current educational efforts at the core to increase literacy rates, quality of population, and promote human modernization, suggestions were offered on how society, government, and the field of education can take positive actions that have profound impacts on rural students' life, such as to increase educational investments toward rural education in the maintenance of school functioning, hiring qualified teachers as well as raise their wages, and effective use of the internet as the access to high-quality courses to prepare rural students for future assessments. Doing so would help them attain quality education, have better academic, health, and life outcomes, and contribute to society.

**Keywords:** Rural-Urban Education Gap, National Curriculum Reform, Quality Education, Rural-urban differential, School dropout, Rural Education

## **1. Introduction**

Spending on education constituted 4.22 percent of China's 2021 GDP, yet the Rural-Urban Education Gap was still prominent[1]. Two-thirds of China's children population live in rural areas, where there were limited opportunities for students to reach their full potential academically or in the work field[2]. Students in rural areas struggled in education because of financial shortages that widened the Education Gap. In Wang's book, *Education in China Since 1976*, she also identified that the biggest challenge in Education in China is the lack of funding in rural areas which resulted in poor treatment of educators and poor conditions in schools[3]. There was a huge disparity in urban and rural education, the overspecialization of educators is common in urban areas as students who can afford education continue to seek more opportunities and specialized courses that enhance their proficiency in academics and build up their personal portfolios. There were also duplications and more educational programs offered in urban areas that promote students' academic growth, yet

rural students still face difficulties in pursuing basic and even their nine-year compulsory education[3].

Despite the Nine-year Compulsory Education Policy in China, the dropout rate for students in rural areas in China is much higher than their peers who reside in urban environments. In 2005, The Central Committee of China Association for Promoting Democracy suggested that the cumulative dropout rate for middle school students was nearly 40 percent in rural areas[4]. In 2013, 13 percent of rural students in 7th grade dropped out of school[5]. In 2015, the dropout rate for rural students in China receiving secondary education was conservatively estimated to be 59 percent[5]. Rural students dropped out of school at a younger age to help support their families, while this was less frequently seen for students in urban schools when more than 90 percent of students attended secondary education[5].

The significance of the dropout rate highlighted another serious issue in rural education: differences in belief about the value and purpose of education. As the rural population had limited financial support from local governments, they relied on manual labor for survival. Parents in rural areas had a more fixed mindset of social status, they could not view education as career advancement for their children and their children can hardly depart from poverty. Instead of reaching and being satisfied with the general targets of at least 95% of students enrolling in compulsory education, the Ministry of Education should focus on finance as it is shadowing rural education, and draft supporting policies so the education system would no longer fail any of our students[6].

The purpose of this paper is to explore three causes that are of great concern about the Rural-Urban Education Gap in China. The method in the literature review is the basis of the Education Gap as an Opportunity Gap, in which collective effort and positive progress in resolving current educational controversies could close the gap because what is lacking is opportunity and equality in rural support. Suggestions and future provisions discussed necessary actions to help the disadvantaged rural student population thrive as active agents and human capital in Chinese society.

## 2. Literature Review

In their book, *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance*, Carter and Welner argued that current education policymakers should also view the Education Gap not merely as an Achievement Gap that was based on students' achievements and performance in school and examination, but to view it as an Opportunity Gap that resources of students in rural areas were not distributed evenly compared to urban students[7]. The idea of the Opportunity Gap also applies to the global context. Instead of focusing on the outcome of current education, scholars need more effort to understand the input we have for our students is determining their later success. This is not a problem of rural students being low achievers. Still, there were deficits in the rural school systems, whether it is the lack of funding for maintaining facilities and condition of the school and qualified teachers. Basic social support systems such as students' physical and mental health, nutrition, necessities, and safety[7]. The authors also challenged ideas of high-stake testing as an assessment tool for selection, that is excluding and polarizing disadvantaged student populations when they were not educated to the same degree[7]. Few attempts were taken to ensure their success. Disadvantaged students would feel left behind as they were forced to fail and move on to a settled path when their life outcomes such as careers and social status are reserved. This once affected the students' family members when they had scarce resources and continued to isolate the students. The concept of the Opportunity Gap suggests that rural students are as competent and successful as urban students if resources are available for them to the same extent as urban students. It also raised concerns for the field of education, is our society really emphasizing students' efforts and achievements, or are we putting more importance on

opportunities that students don't have control over? Denying the possibilities of rural students is a negative response to narrowing the Education Gap and limited funding.

As our country treated increasing enrollment and completion rate of the nine-year compulsory education as a success and improvement to our current education system, Gubbels et al. proposed increasing educational funding is more prominent. They analyzed dropout rates in the Netherlands after recent funding arrangements are applied to disadvantaged students. They concluded that if more funding became available, dropout rates decreased in both primary and secondary education[8]. In the context of China, Diyu's article stated similar family reasons for dropping out from school, that severe financial difficulty is the overarching shadow over students' success[9]. Besides, rural families were more likely to send boys to schools than girls because it was harder for girls to find employment, suggesting that if rural students have the same competence in the job market regardless of gender, they are more willing to support their children in receiving more education. The belief that studying is useless was caused by financial shortages, and it was detrimental to students as they were brain-washed because funding and rural educational resources are so scarce[9].

### **3. Major Issues Revealed by the Rural-urban Education Gap in China**

#### **3.1. Lack of Financial Support in Governmental Funding**

Teachers reported that many rural students weren't prepared for higher education such that they are not ready to work harder and have not been able to be self-disciplined which is one of the most important aspects of being a high school student. Nor did these rural students who seemed less likely to master harder coursework obtained adapted studying strategies[9]. Indeed, these were true when we compare the rate of rural students entering college to that of urban students. Many studies like Zhao et al. discussed the 17 percent cognitive ability gap in the two environments, that average rural students had lower cognitive skills than average urban students[10]. Yet this is less of a problem with rural students' intelligence and cognitive ability when it revealed misleading attitudes that stemmed from environmental differences and the lack of proper education in rural conditions. For example, many rural teachers lacked professional training and ethics and they appeared to be arrogant when they have poor teaching abilities. Moreover, rural teachers had lower satisfaction with their job as they had minimal income and may not be treated with respect, due to the most influencing belief among the rural population that studying is useless when they experienced long-term financial shortages.

In Sargent and Hannum's study, they identified teachers' dissatisfaction in their careers as a problem in our current education system, because the distribution of economic and educational resources is unequal in different locations in China[11]. They believe that when schools had more support, teachers would have higher salaries and were more likely to be treated with respect by students and families because they don't experience financial struggles to believe and express that education is useless. Teachers would also have higher flexibility at work as well as promotion[11]. In this case, teachers have increased satisfaction at work, and it would be easier for them to establish bonds with their colleagues and students. Without struggling with survival and the cost of attending school, students could be less worried about their families and focus on schoolwork, thus having better relationships with their teachers and peers, and having enhanced academic performance.

As our country proceeds to promote every student's participation in the current education policy of the nine-year compulsory education, Diyu argued that it is not possible to achieve this goal in rural conditions because education is waged[9]. In our current society, the rural population could only support their child to attend school if there were a surplus in wages so that they at least can

make a living. In the condition that the families are experiencing financial adversities, they would persist and pass the idea that education is useless to their children and send their children to work. As Diyu's study reported that besides the 27% of students who dropped out of school to work on farms and 39% of students who went to other areas for work, the rest and most girls stayed at home for housework[9].

Increasing citizens' literacy rates and levels of educational attainment is significant to our society, but it should not be done blindly. Diyu went into detail about the discrepancy in rural school authorities when they underreported dropout rates but doing so would never fix the problem in our education system[9]. Rural school authorities also announced that more students are participating in compulsory education, so our policy is benefiting more and is making unprecedented progress, yet their actions caused more harm than good, so the public and policymakers were unaware of the downside of current educational actions. It may be arguable that underreported dropout rates and overreported attendance were due to fear of criticism when these rates were highly valued by the Ministry of Education and continuous decrease in the number of students may lead to reduced funding to the school when the rural areas are already in poverty and schools rarely had any financial support[9].

### 3.2. Lack of Qualified Teachers in Rural Education Systems

Because rural students have a greater vulnerability, educational policies such as examination and higher education enrollment must take special account of this population. For them, these changes had significance and different meanings in life. In China, although the principle of *suzhi jiaoyu*, known as quality education, is of the greatest concern and is promoted in many schools, many teachers ceased to view themselves as intellectuals but as laborers. It is satirical that in schools, regardless of location, that placed higher *suzhi*, "human quality", as the most important need to cultivate their students and are conveying concepts of *suzhi* with proper education, the educators were not hired and assessed based on *suzhi*, and teachers apparently lacked what *suzhi* has implied and required: intelligence, passion, and morality in teaching.

It is more satirical that even for schools undergoing national curriculum reform from *yingshi jiaoyu* to *suzhi jiaoyu*, the means of education in the nation is still to achieve on the national examinations. Even if schools focused more on cultivating students' knowledge, abilities, and morality, educational outcomes were highly examination-oriented. Having better performance on the national examination, Gaokao, is the only way for rural students to pursue higher education and see the world outside of their villages. This opportunity for rural students is more of a privilege and a dream than the trajectory of life that urban students often take for granted.

Rural students were severely affected by negative stereotypes while a part of *suzhi jiaoyu* is commonly misinterpreted as extreme perfectionism. As Lin's study stated, rural students were stereotyped and often portrayed in media and viewed by society as poor, impolite, retarded, dirty, and dark[12]. These implied that rural students were far from and had no means of being perfect.

These general beliefs imposed harmful stereotypes on rural students as they shaped how they perceive themselves and their understanding of how society and other people are viewing them, especially when they are actively constructing their sense of self in adolescence, which is the years they spent in school. According to Townsend et al., for minorities, being able to feel a strong and positive connection to their identity is of great significance to well-being and is a predictor of success in school[13]. Failure of developing a healthy sense of self is also a contributing factor to poor academic outcomes which in turn was internalized in rural students that their identities and abilities are fixed and unchangeable, resulting in lower self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and problematic risky behaviors during their development that society deemed bad and intolerable.

These negative images also marginalized rural students and make them feel left out of education because the rules were not about their needs but to endorse false representations of their rural identities. It makes it harder for rural students to imagine a positive future self when they were exposed to so much information that is linked to being stuck in the rural environment. This was against their identities and limited their possibilities. If teachers in rural areas can succeed to act as support, it would be really empowering and can boost students' self-esteem. However, many rural teachers were not even qualified to teach and lacked awareness of mental health, care, and enthusiasm for teaching and connecting with students. This is supported by Lin that the higher achievement of schools and faculty members came from enthusiasm[12].

### 3.3. Barriers after the National Curriculum Reform to *suzhi jiaoyu*

Although *suzhi jiaoyu* has prominent influences under National Curriculum Reform, the heightened problem of rural education is that it did not change rural ideology. As Lin argued, the purpose of *suzhi jiaoyu* is for human modernization, with highlights for transform the rural population's "peasant thinking" towards broadened horizon and liberalization[12]. Peasant thinking is where rurality is rooted, that rural populations have fixed attitudes and ways of processing information. Lin considered rurality and modernity as separate concepts and modernization needed to take place through either education or mobility[12]. While mobility is rather fixed being a part of Chinese agrarian tradition, the transformation is more effective through education than mobility. *Suzhi jiaoyu* is supposed to be the current and ultimate tool to transform rural students in raising their global awareness, becoming educated and competent in the job market, and to exert their talents and contribute to society. However, biases severely affected rural and rural migrants in urban environments in terms of selection and exclusion. When enrollment exceeds the schools' intake capacity of students, those who have rural migrant status were the first to be excluded. The problem of non-local household origin, also known as hukou, still exists to this day. Having a migrant status means being a low-quality outsider, whereas urban dwellers feel more entitled to higher-quality education than those from rural settings[12].

*Suzhi jiaoyu* is crucial, but it did not capture what is expected and taught in schools nowadays to cultivate students' qualities to thrive as good people, including morality, health, aesthetic appreciation, and diligence. *Suzhi jiaoyu* is derived to combat cut-throat competition in limited opportunities and resources and it informs the importance of abilities outside of exam-taking. Therefore, *suzhi jiaoyu* could not be done when success is examination-orientated and determined solely by the Gaokao exam. It is problematic when Gaokao is becoming the centralized focus of media and public attention, and a part of Chinese culture to study for the sake of exam-taking. As a result, it is not necessarily students who have higher *suzhi* but students who perfected studying for exams achieved within the Gaokao system and entered university. Besides, even for prestigious urban schools that valued *suzhi jiaoyu*, their curriculum was centralized and narrowed to what is more likely to be tested on Gaokao[14]. In addition, this extends to schools that acted in the recent reduction policy to reduce students' workload when students' success was examination-oriented.

The public in China trusts the Gaokao system because of its fairness, and fairness is often referred to as equality or equity, while these two concepts were different in principles. Our nation's education apparently has not achieved true equality based on the unequal distribution of funding and profession, nor did it attain equity where all students can be supported and guaranteed to succeed based on their personal characteristics. Even after the national curriculum was reformed, rural students still did not attain the same level of *suzhi jiaoyu* compared to their urban peers, whether ascribed to peasant thinking, restricted curriculum, and the lack of socio-emotional support.



#### 4. Conclusion

When rural students experience poverty and lack financial support in education, the way to counteract can't simply be to adopt the false and forced belief that education is not important, and that they have no other choice than to quit school and start working as soon as possible. More educational investment should be put into establishing social support systems for rural schools' facilities maintenance, infrastructure construction for schools in terrible conditions, and students' basic needs, health, and education. Governmental funding should also directly support rural students as well as their families. Rural students need to survive and have a life in which they no longer worry about starving and lacking warm clothes to endure the winter. These factors are as important to consider as pushing more young citizens in our nation to complete the nine-year compulsory education. To foster *suzhi jiaoyu* and enhance *suzhi* in the rural population, teachers should be evaluated on both skills and expertise to teach and as qualified educators who have *suzhi* and are caring for students. More effort is needed to counteract and buffer the negative stereotypes about rural students, so they can have better mental health and higher self-esteem when they feel safer and more secure as citizens of our society.

The Education Gap should not be interpreted as rural students being less competent and low achievers, it is the lack of opportunity that hindered their academic performance and led to lower visibility of rural students in education. Similarly, urban students' success when having more resources and opportunities should not be viewed as a privilege or entitlement. Rural students' life outcomes of being stuck in underdeveloped rural areas and unable to navigate more alternatives should be resolved in a healthy and supportive way when our government and education system can offer them more scholarship opportunities during admissions and training towards better performance on national examinations or other professions that align with rural students' talents and interests. It is also worth consider bring technology into the classrooms so that through constructing online learning platforms, rural students could have access to high-quality classes taught by experienced teachers. They could also access a variety of courses that both spark their interest and broaden their horizon. This bridged rural-urban teaching and communication could be done in rather simple ways as our nation continue to make progress in improving the rural distribution network that benefits the rural population. All steps needed to be taken to envision and embrace a better world in the future where rural students are recognized and don't have live under the shadow. Rural students can also contribute to society as they attain quality education just like their urban counterparts.

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