

Educational Inequality Between Urban and Rural Areas in China

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Abstract: China has achieved remarkable economic expansion and progress over the past few decades, but the long-standing huge urban-rural education gap remains a bottleneck for the development of education in China, greatly affecting the progress of society as a whole. The education gap between urban and rural areas in China can be seen in several ways, including resource allocation, teacher forces, and student achievement. This essay focuses on the education inequality between urban and rural areas in China caused by inadequate policy implementation and a lack of high-quality teachers in rural areas. In response to these problems, the essay argues that China needs to adopt a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach, with policy reforms and increasing the number of quality teachers in rural areas as the main areas of endeavor. The essay highlights the urgent need for China to consider educational equality and narrow the urban-rural education gap in the rapid development of the economy.

Keywords: urban-rural gap, educational inequality, China's education system

1. Introduction

Education can be seen as the key to people's success, and theoretically, it contributes to poverty reduction and can help to minimize social stratification, but because of the inequality of resources and opportunities, education can also be one of the main factors of social reproduction and broaden the gap between the rich and the poor. Since China's reform and opening up, the country has enjoyed tremendous economic expansion, increasing infrastructure development, and access to quality education in urban centers. However, because China's binary economic structure of urban and rural areas has not yet fundamentally changed, rural communities still face the problem of limited educational resources and opportunities [1]. This dichotomy has created a serious educational divide, with rural children's educational performance found to be significantly lower than that of their urban counterparts, perpetuating the disadvantaged position of rural residents in a vicious circle [2]. By revealing this problem, this essay hopes to provide some insights into the solution of this problem.

2. The Problem of the Education Gap Between Urban and Rural China

2.1. Situation Overview: Urban-Rural Disparities in Education under the Hukou System

China's urban-rural gap began with the urban-rural split management system, and it has also been conceptualized by some scholars as an urban-rural household registration (hukou) dichotomy [3]. With the enactment of the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Registration of Households* in 1958, China's urban-rural dichotomy of household registration was formally established [4]. This regulation also marked the establishment of a barrier between urban and rural China based on the hukou system. Since then, Chinese residents have been distinguished into two different social identities: rural and urban hukou. Based on this system, citizens with rural hukou are subordinate to those with urban hukou in the exercise of their civil rights and interests, creating inequality in the allocation of resources and social positions, which in turn results in educational inequality [5]. Educational inequality under the hukou system focuses on two main areas, the first being the unequal distribution of educational resources between urban and rural regions. Compared with urban schools, rural schools are found to be inferior to urban schools regarding the quantity of schools, the quality of instruction, and the teaching environment [6]. China's system of "key schools" also reflects a serious inequality in resource distribution between urban and rural areas. In the Chinese context, key schools are more like elite schools, usually selected from schools with a track record of educational achievement, allocated higher quality resources and teachers, and allowed to recruit elite students for better training to prepare them for the next level of key schools. This inequitable distribution of educational resources has also led parents to do everything possible to send their children to the key schools. Such schools have also been found to be urban-oriented, as the great majority of key schools are concentrated in urban areas, widening the urban-rural divide [7]. The second inequality under the hukou system is reflected in the educational inequality caused by the mobility barriers. Uneven economic development in China has led to a trend of population mobility from rural to urban regions, with more and more migrant farmers sending their children to urban schools to escape poverty through better education [6]. However, China's hukou system imposes many restrictions on the migrant population (migrant registration and temporary residence permits, etc.), and the access of migrant children to basic schooling in the cities is also limited by the hukou system [1]. As a result, the education gap between urban and rural areas in China is a deeply entrenched problem, with urban hukou holders often enjoying superior educational opportunities compared to rural hukou holders.

2.2. The Specific Manifestations and Reasons of Educational Inequality

2.2.1. Inadequate Implementation of Policies: One-size-fits-all Approach

The school consolidation policy, for example, from the time it was introduced to the time it was suspended, used a one-size-fits-all approach, which has led to the policy not achieving its desired results but, on the contrary, widening the educational divide between urban and rural China. When the State Council promulgated The Reform and Development of Compulsory Education Decision in 2001, the "school consolidation policy" was formally implemented in a wide range of rural areas. The policy abandons the "one primary school in one village" approach and combines the resources of neighboring schools with the desire to optimize educational resource allocation and improve teaching and learning quality [8]. The school consolidation policy appears to be a response to changes in the rural education environment. It aims at restructuring the education management system, prioritizing quality over universality, and addressing the government's financial pressures as well as the declining number of rural students [9]. This policy aims to ensure that rural schools can continue to provide effective and quality education under changing conditions. Specifically,

under the impact of the one-child policy and urbanization, there has been a decline in the fertility rate of the rural population and an increase in the number of rural families migrating to the cities [8]. These changes have exacerbated the hollowing out of the countryside and have led to a problem of excess educational resources in rural regions, where the former practice of “one primary school in one village” no longer applies. The emergence of school consolidation aimed at solving this problem by integrating and optimising educational resources, so that its introduction was appropriate at the time. However, the policy has not achieved its objectives and has been found to have had many negative impacts that have increased the disadvantage of rural students. According to the research, most of the newly constructed school buildings funded by the government and non-governmental organizations during the 1990s were abandoned and left unused after the school consolidation, resulting in a serious waste of resources [8]. The removal of a large number of schools has also led to the concentration of students in fewer township schools, the consequence of which is the emergence of oversized and overcrowded classes. As a large number of studies have shown, excessive class sizes hurt student achievement [10]. School consolidation has also been shown to have a considerable detrimental influence on the educational outcomes of children affected by rural school closures [11]. In addition, the school consolidation also implies an increase in the distance traveled to school by rural students. Studies have found that the average distance traveled to school by primary school students in rural areas is more than 5 kilometers, while the average distance traveled by junior high school students is even closer to 200 kilometers [8]. The long distances lead to more traffic accidents for rural students, for example, students have to walk to school in some mountainous areas where transportation is not available. Even in some rural areas where transportation is available, students experience many traffic accidents due to overloading or lack of safety equipment [8]. Increased commuting distances also mean that rural students have to spend longer time commuting, reducing study time and increasing time costs. Rural families also have to spend more money on transport, accommodation, food, and accompanying students due to increased commuting distances, increasing economic costs [8]. As a result, school consolidation has not fulfilled its original purpose and has made it more difficult for rural students to attend school. The Chinese government has also realized that this policy has deviated from its original intent, affecting the long-term growth of compulsory education in rural areas. The General Office of the State Council published the Opinions on Rural Compulsory Education School Layout and Adjustment in 2012, suspending the policy of school consolidation, so that localities are no longer permitted to consolidate rural compulsory education schools [8]. Therefore, China has adopted a “one-size-fits-all” approach in the implementation of this policy, from its initial release to its finalization. Although the original intention of the school consolidation policy was good, there was a lack of consideration in the implementation process, so negative effects have occurred.

2.2.2. The Dilemma of Teacher Quality and Quantity

With the establishment of the new China, the improvement of teachers’ salaries has encouraged a significant number of great talents to join primary and secondary school teachers, enhancing the quality and quantity of the teaching force [12]. However, this improvement may be limited to the developed areas of China, and the unequal distribution of teacher resources and the overall weakness of the teacher force in rural schools have not yet been fundamentally changed or improved. In terms of the quantity of teacher supply, rural schools are still found to face teacher shortages, especially for some specific subjects (e.g., English, music, art, information technology) [13]. In general, the number of teachers supplied determines the classroom teacher-student ratio; the more adequate the number of teachers, the smaller the teacher-student ratio, and vice versa. Therefore, classrooms in rural schools in China are usually overcrowded and each student cannot be assigned too much attention by the teacher [14]. In the face of a shortage of teachers, rural schools

in China have employed the practice of lowering the quality of teachers to compensate for the quantity of teachers to meet the demand for education. In other words, unqualified teachers are recruited for educational needs [14]. Therefore, the teaching force in rural areas reflects a lack of quality and professionalism. It has been found that the percentage of rural teachers whose professional qualifications do not match the subjects they teach is more than twice as high as that of their urban counterparts [13]. The proportion of teachers with senior titles in rural areas was also found to be very low [15]. As a result, rural teachers in China face a shortage in both quantity and quality. This can largely be explained by the fact that rural teachers are required to do more work for less pay in poor working environments. Although the salaries of rural teachers have improved in recent years with the help of poverty alleviation subsidies from the Chinese government, there is still a huge difference in salaries compared to those of urban teachers. In addition to basic salaries, there are also disparities in social security and living allowances. Despite the low salaries and benefits, rural teachers are required to spend more time working because of overcrowding in schools and a shortage of teachers. Combined with the underdevelopment of rural areas and the lack of financial resources, school conditions, and teaching facilities are still very poor, putting the working and living environments of teachers in need of improvement [16]. Consequently, it remains very hard to attract and keep sufficient numbers of qualified teachers in rural areas, and rural schools are also faced with the dilemma of balancing the quantity and quality of teachers.

3. Suggestions

3.1. Perfecting the Relevant Policies

Perfecting the relevant policies can be used as a solution to inadequate policy implementation. This essay uses the school consolidation policy as an example to describe how the policy fails to serve its desired purpose due to its implementation from simple start to finish. This policy was developed in response to changes in the rural educational environment, despite the problems caused by its cursory implementation, the policy itself is not meaningless or should be abolished, but on the contrary, it can save and optimize educational resources when properly implemented. In other words, the failure of the policy in practice can be attributed to the oversimplification of its implementation and the lack of supporting policies. The policy was implemented without considering the specific situation of each village in China to determine whether the policy applied to that village. In addition, school consolidation was not accompanied by other supporting measures, such as the provision of a school bus system and residential services. Overall, the straightforward abolition of the policy is unfortunate in terms of reducing the rural-urban education gap, as the policy, when properly implemented, can contribute to the optimization of rural educational resources.

3.2. Improving the Quantity and Quality of Teachers

In response to the dilemma of balancing the quantity and quality of teachers in China's rural areas, it is essential to improve both the quantity and quality of teachers to fundamentally solve the problem. China can approach this problem from both internal and external perspectives. Internally, the government can provide continuous professional development programs for rural teachers to help them enhance their teaching abilities. and equip them with the latest modern teaching methods to raise the professional standards of existing teachers in rural areas. Externally, the government should invest more in rural areas to improve the environment in rural areas and provide rural teachers with more competitive salaries to attract good teachers from urban areas to work in rural areas. In this way, the quality of existing teachers in rural areas can be improved and more quality teachers can be attracted to move from urban areas to rural areas.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, there is serious educational inequality in China between urban and rural areas, and having an urban hukou will always provide better educational opportunities than having a rural hukou. This essay explores the various factors contributing to this inequality, including differences in the distribution of educational resources, the quality of teachers, and the teacher-student ratios. It also reveals the two main causes of this inequality - inadequate policy implementation and the dilemma faced by rural areas in terms of the quantity and quality of teachers. To address these problems, policy implementation needs to be more comprehensively considered and perfected, and the Chinese government should invest more in increasing the number of quality teachers in rural areas. Ultimately, narrowing the gap between urban and rural educational inequality is not only an educational challenge but also a critical step in China's efforts to achieve sustainable development.

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