

Education Inequality Between Rural and Urban Areas in China

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Abstract: Educational inequality is one of the significant societal challenges currently facing China. In particular, the educational disparity between rural and urban areas constrains rural students' development and opportunities and negatively impacts overall socioeconomic progress. Through a comprehensive study, this article seeks to elucidate the definition of developmental imbalance, understand the underlying causes of such disparity, and delve deeper into the roots, effects, and solutions of educational inequality between rural and urban areas in China. It also explores the potential of online education (MOOCs) as a solution. This paper summarizes and highlights the educational inequality problems in urban education in terms of enrollment indicators and school funding support. Through data investigation and analysis, we can discover the causes of educational inequality in implementing compulsory education and the issue of academic immigration. People have also found innovative education models such as MOOCs can provide rural students with more educational opportunities and resources. However, challenges related to interactivity, personalized learning environments, and communication between learners and teachers must be addressed. The paper also acknowledges the need to tailor MOOC course design to meet students' needs and improve learning outcomes in different educational contexts.

Keywords: Inequality, Urban Education, Chinese Education

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, China has experienced rapid economic growth, characterized by an average annual GDP growth rate of over 10%, which is three times the average growth rate of member countries in the organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Consequently, since 2011, China has become the world's second-largest economy, trailing only the United States.[1]

Despite this remarkable economic success, China's level of human capital accumulation has not kept pace with its economic development. According to the 2005 1% population sample survey data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the average years of education for the national workforce are 8.6 years, with only 25% of the workforce (aged 15 to 65) possessing at least a junior high school or higher level of education. Educational inequality between rural and urban areas may be a significant factor affecting the national-level accumulation of human capital. However, there has been limited understanding of the evolution of rural-urban educational inequality over time, and research on the education of migrant children remains scarce.[2]

Educational inequality has become a crucial issue in China's education sector. Due to the uneven development of the economy and society, rural areas face relatively scarce educational resources, and the rural-urban education gap continues to widen compared to urban areas. This problem has profound implications for China's sustainable development and social stability. The aim of this research is to delve deeply into the issue of rural-urban educational inequality in China. Through literature review and analysis, a comprehensive understanding of the current status and root causes of this issue will be sought, along with potential solutions.

The paper will construct a theoretical framework based on relevant theories and research on educational inequality to explain the origins and potential solutions to the problem. Educational inequality is influenced by multiple factors, including the allocation of educational resources, socioeconomic disparities, and family backgrounds. By studying and analyzing relevant theories and research findings, the paper will establish a theoretical framework to help explain the root causes of educational inequality and explore pathways to address this issue.

Next, the paper will proceed to elucidate the concept of educational inequality, the analytical direction and findings regarding rural-urban development disparities, and the reasons for unequal educational development between urban and rural areas derived from data research and surveys.

2. The Concept of Inequality

The pursuit of equal opportunity has been a longstanding theme in human civilization. Ancient philosophers such as Confucius, Plato, and Aristotle had already put forth ideas about educational equality. In modern times, American philosopher John Rawls emphasized the principles of equal opportunity in education, which include providing equal educational facilities, ensuring that everyone receives a minimum level of education, and giving special attention to marginalized groups. The multidimensional nature of educational equality encompasses aspects such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and geographical location. In the specific context of educational development in China, the paper focus on the rural-urban dimension.

3. Unbalanced urban-rural development

Inequality issues can be analyzed from two perspectives: education inputs and education outcomes. For instance, when studying inequality in education inputs, one needs to consider differences in government education spending and the unequal distribution of non-government (private) educational resources. When analyzing education outcomes, the focus typically centers on inequalities in education quality, academic achievements, and performance.

4. Inequality in Enrollment Rates and Academic Performance

In the context of China's basic education, rural-urban inequality is particularly noticeable in two aspects. The first aspect is the inequality in enrollment rates and academic performance between rural and urban areas. In this regard, there are significant disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of basic literacy rates and educational achievements. Illiteracy rates in rural areas are almost three times higher than in urban areas. In terms of educational attainment and enrollment rates, rural areas have an average duration of education per person that is three years less than urban areas, especially at the high school level and above, where the rural-urban disparity is substantial. This inequality aligns with the pattern of rural-urban economic inequality, indicating that rural-urban educational inequality plays a critical role in overall inequality in China.[3]

5. Inequality in Education Funding

Another crucial aspect is the inequality in education funding between rural and urban areas. Fiscal inequality between rural and urban areas is considered a key reason for the rural-urban inequality in basic education in China. Per capita spending on primary education in urban areas is nearly double that in rural areas, with an even larger disparity at the secondary education level. Even in China's most developed urban regions, there are substantial rural-urban disparities in school expenditures. [3] Empirical research suggests that rural-urban educational inequality exhibits different trends in different time periods, with economic reforms emphasizing efficiency over equality, exacerbating rural-urban educational inequality.

These two aspects of rural-urban educational inequality have far-reaching implications for China's basic education and necessitate action by policymakers and educational institutions to address the issue.

6. Discover urban-rural education inequality through data research

6.1. Differences in the implementation of nine-year compulsory education

According to the 2005 1% population sample survey data, the average education duration for rural laborers increased from 4 to nearly 8 years, while urban laborers' average education duration increased from 7 to 12 years. However, the average educational duration gap between the two did not decrease over time, maintaining the status of urban laborers having more years of education than their rural counterparts.

Survey data indicates relatively high dropout rates at the primary and junior high school levels, ranging from approximately 40% to 50%. For every 100 rural children, only six have the opportunity to enter high school, and only three of them are able to graduate. This implies that ultimately only 1 to 2 rural children have the chance to pursue higher education.

In contrast, almost all urban children can complete junior high school education, with 63% of them enrolling in high school. For urban children who complete junior high school, more than half (54%) go on to attend university for higher education. Those urban students who do not enter high school typically have opportunities to enroll in vocational or technical schools.[4]

6.2. Education of Migrant Children

Over the past 20 years, approximately 160 million people have migrated from rural areas to cities in China, constituting one-third of the urban non-skilled labor force. However, the children of these rural migrants face educational inequality. Migrants struggle to integrate into the urban social welfare system, and their children have limited access to the educational system. They typically study in rural schools, urban informal educational institutions, or a combination of both, which results in an unstable educational experience that impacts their academic performance. As migrant children make up a significant portion of rural children, the rural-urban educational inequality becomes even more pronounced. Migrant worker parents have the option to leave their children behind in rural areas or bring them along, but the educational opportunities for these children vary. Due to work demands, migrant children often cannot receive adequate care, leading to potentially inconsistent academic performance. Approximately 36% of migrants leave their children in rural areas, with 26.5% citing childcare issues. This discrepancy leads to different educational outcomes for migrant children in rural and urban areas, as they often face significant stress while working in urban areas, making it challenging to provide sufficient care for their children.[4]

6.3. Education Spending

Recent research has emphasized the inequality in education between rural and urban areas in China and the performance of migrant children. Two notable arguments have emerged. Firstly, unlike some other Asian countries, the Chinese government has historically exercised relative restraint in education spending, especially for rural residents. Research indicates that education spending in China accounts for about 2.5% of the GDP, significantly lower than other developing Asian countries (around 4%-5%) and the global average (5.2%). Most of the expenditure primarily supports compulsory education for urban residents. Secondly, private and social returns related to rural education in China are relatively low, discouraging private investment. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the average return on education in rural areas of China did not exceed 5%, significantly lower than the averages in other Asian countries and globally (10%)[3]. Due to the relatively low returns on education, there is a high dropout rate among rural residents at the high school level, making the rural-urban education gap more pronounced.

6.4. Education of Internal Migrant Children

Most research focuses on international migration, while research on the internal migration of the rural population to cities and its impact on the education performance of migrant children is limited. Existing studies have found that the children of internal migrants in China face issues such as lack of family support, psychological stress, and insecurity, resulting in poor academic performance and lower enrollment rates. As a result, rural migrant children do not seem to perform as well in education as local urban children. While the literature on educational inequality in China and the issues faced by migrant children have made significant contributions, the opportunity and necessity to study these two issues together remain, and this is a crucial area that this paper attempts to re-examine from the perspective of migration in understanding the impact of educational inequality in China.

7. MOOCs as a Potential for Educational Development

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), commonly referred to as such, have gained momentum since 2012. Internet companies with online courses at their core have emerged and experienced rapid growth. Public online education platforms like Coursera and edX have aggregated a wealth of free, high-quality courses from prestigious international institutions. They provide online support to learners, including course assignments, learning assessments, interactive communication between instructors and students, and peer-to-peer interactions.

In China, rural areas often have limited educational resources, and school facilities and educational quality are generally inferior to urban areas. This restricts educational opportunities for rural students and has adverse implications for their future development. Therefore, investigating the educational inequality between rural and urban areas is paramount for enhancing China's education system.[5]

As a novel educational model, massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offer rich educational resources through large-scale online courses, enabling students to transcend geographical and school limitations and enhance the quality of learning. The response to MOOCs underscores their significance and potential in education. While this approach may provoke certain controversies, these issues have been addressed.[5]

Within the design of MOOCs, detailed consideration is given to factors related to instructional design in large-scale open online courses. Factors such as the course objectives, learners' needs, openness of educational resources, and interactivity must be considered. Emphasizing technology-supported learning tools and environments is crucial for enhancing students' learning outcomes and satisfaction.[6]

As this innovative educational model provides large-scale online courses, MOOCs can offer rural students more educational opportunities and resources. However, many aspects still require improvement, such as how to provide a more interactive and personalized learning environment and how to address communication and interaction issues between learners and instructors. Furthermore, it is necessary to research how to design MOOC courses tailored to different educational backgrounds to meet students' needs and enhance learning outcomes. Continued refinement of MOOC instructional design can be achieved through further research and practice to foster educational development.

8. Conclusion

Through a review and analysis of educational inequality issues, this study delves deeply into the educational inequality between rural and urban areas in China. It begins by discussing the definition and concepts of educational inequality. Subsequently, it highlights the emergence of educational inequality in urban education in terms of enrollment indicators and school funding support. Through data surveys and analysis, the paper can identify the causes of educational inequality stemming from the implementation of compulsory education and issues related to education migration. People have also discovered that innovative educational models such as MOOCs can offer rural students more educational opportunities and resources. However, challenges related to interactivity, personalized learning environments, and communication between learners and instructors must be addressed. The paper also acknowledges the need for tailored MOOC course design to meet students' needs and enhance learning outcomes in different educational contexts. Through this research and practice, the paper has gained a more comprehensive understanding of educational inequality issues in China, offering insights and directions for future research. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that the current research has limitations, and further in-depth exploration and improvements are required. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in providing more research support for the equitable distribution of educational resources and reducing income disparities, offering reference and improvement strategies for future research and reforms.

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