How Does Nine Years of Compulsory Education in China Impact the Rural Area People's Living Condition?

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Abstract: Nine years of compulsory education, a concept introduced by the Chinese government in 1986, provides complimentary education by the state from primary school (Grade 1-6) through junior high school (Grade 7-9) across the entire society. This paper reevaluates the widely accepted view that China's nine-year compulsory education policy is universally beneficial. It aims to shed light on the challenges and limitations of the policy, particularly in rural areas, and seeks to move beyond the uncritical acceptance of this educational system. Employing a comprehensive methodological approach, the analysis integrates an extensive review of both domestic and international literature, media reports, and a rigorous evaluation of data reliability. Through comparative and refined analytical techniques, the paper presents trustworthy findings. The results indicate that the policy does not uniformly serve all families, especially in rural contexts where the costs—including material, living, and opportunity costs—often surpass the benefits. These expenses can deepen economic hardships for some households, although, at a broader level, the policy significantly boosts educational quality and societal awareness, providing a strong foundation for China's future growth. The conclusion suggests that despite its successes in enhancing literacy rates and access to education, the policy requires targeted adjustments to effectively address the persistent economic and gender disparities in rural communities.

Keywords: Compulsory Education, Rural China, Socio-economic Impact, Educational Equity, Gender Disparities

1. Introduction

This essay examines how China's nine-year compulsory education policy, implemented in 1986, has impacted the socio-economic landscape of rural communities across the vast countryside. While the policy has led to praiseworthy gains in literacy rates, significant obstacles remain that hinder its complete success. The analysis unearths persistent financial barriers rooted in economic hardship, uneven dispersal of educational investment, and issues of quality that risk stunting growth in rural academics - all overshadowed by the lingering blight of gender inequalities that can choke off girls' educational prospects.

By using a combination of statistical data and scholarly research, the essay identifies key areas where the policy has succeeded and other improvements which are necessary. Recommendations include enhancing financial support for rural families, improving the quality and relevance of

education in rural areas, involving community stakeholders in educational planning, and developing robust support structures within schools. These strategies aim to refine the policy framework and ensure that the benefits of compulsory education are equitably extended to all segments of rural China, and then could intend to contribute to broader socio-economic development.

2. Overview of Nine years compulsory Education

Nine years of compulsory education has been in practice for over three decades, this policy aimed to universally enhance educational access and quality, especially in underserved rural areas. This paper delves into the dual facets of this significant educational reform: its benefits and the burdens, like potential fee charging, it imposes on rural communities.

Initially, the policy has fostered notable successes, such as dramatically improved literacy rates, higher educational attainment, and enhanced socioeconomic conditions in rural regions. These achievements underscore the transformative impact of accessible education on rural populations, propelling them towards better economic opportunities and social outcomes.

However, the implementation of this policy is not without its burdens. Rural populations often face unique economic challenges, including the high indirect costs of schooling, such as transportation, uniforms, and supplies, which extend beyond the free tuition covered by the state. Additionally, cultural factors and entrenched traditional values in rural areas can impede educational progress, particularly affecting gender parity.

3. Data Illustration: Changes in Education Outcomes in Rural China

3.1. Educational Attainment and Literacy Rates

In rural China, while the overall adult literacy rate is high at 96.8%, only 87.13% of the rural population is literate, with a significant portion of China's 80 million illiterate individuals residing in rural areas. [1] Rural households spend a considerable portion of their income on education, yet face persistent literacy challenges due to economic disparities and inadequate local resources.

3.2 High School and College Enrollment Rates

Rural areas have seen a dramatic increase in school enrollment rates from 49% in 1987 to 94% in 2015, yet only a fraction of rural students' progress to higher education due to resource limitations and the quality of available schooling. The average high school enrollment rate was only 6% in rural areas compared to 63% in urban areas, highlighting a stark disparity. [2]

3.2. Reduction in Educational Gaps

In an effort to enhance educational efficacy and reduce compulsory education costs, China has implemented a strategy to consolidate smaller rural schools into larger institutions. This approach, however, has yielded mixed results; while some students have experienced benefits from increased access to resources, others have encountered decreased completion rates as a consequence of these mergers. As such, the overall impact of this initiative on the quality and accessibility of rural education in China remains a topic of ongoing evaluation and discussion within the broader context of educational policy and reform. In order to fix that problem, China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010 – 2020) established several strategic objectives, including, (a) advancing early education by ensuring universal access to preschool as a foundation for compulsory nine-year education; (b) promoting fair access to educational resources; (c) improving educational quality; and (d) developing a model for lifelong learning. [3]

3.3. Economic Impact of Compulsory Education

Educational qualifications among teachers have seen significant improvements. To qualify for teaching, individuals must meet the national educational standards. Furthermore, the rate at which teachers meet these standards serves as a key measure of the teacher population. From 1985 to 2002, the percentage of teachers meeting qualifications in primary and lower secondary schools increased by 36.79% and 62.78%, respectively.

Table 1: Percentage of teachers qualified to teach in rimary and secondary school nationwide(%)

	Year				
Items	1985	1990	1995	2000	2002
Primary school	60.6	73.9	88.9	96.9	97.39
Lower secondary school	27.5	46.5	69.1	87.0	90.28

Source: State Education Commission (China), Department of Planning and Construction 1986, 1992: 1990, 2003: 2002

In table 1, the percentage of qualified teachers who benefited from the compulsory education system gradually went up through 1990s and arrive the summit in the 2003 arrived at 97.39% in Primary schools and 90.28% in lower secondary schools. In China, every qualified teacher has to fulfill the state's educational requirements.

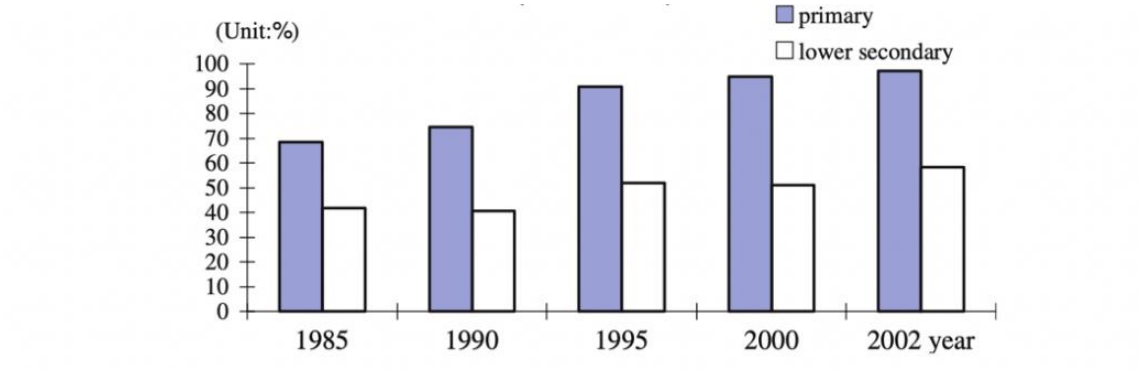

Figure 1: Graduation rate of Primary and Lower secondary schools nationwide(1985-2002)

Source: State Education Commission (China), Department of Planning and Construc- tion 1985, 1992: 1990, 1998: 1995, 2001, 2003: 2002.

As Figure 1 showing, with quality enhancing of teaching power, the graduation rate of primary and lower secondary schools is also increase though this period respectively. The implementation of this educational policy has had a significant impact on the quality of education in China. By altering the structure of the country's educational system, the initiative has led to notable improvements in overall educational standards. Moreover, these enhancements in educational quality have had far-reaching effects on the development of China's labor force, with the potential for continued intergenerational impact as the workforce evolves in response to a more highly educated population.

3.4. Gender Disparities

A joint survey conducted in 2006 by the China Economic Research Center of Peking University and the School of Economics and Management of Nanjing Agricultural University in rural Jiangsu revealed disparities in educational attainment. On average, women in the rural labor force had received 5.2 years of education, significantly less than the 7.7 years their male counterparts had completed. Additionally, women working in agriculture had an even lower average educational attainment of just 3.5 years. [4] Besides that, the dropout rate of boys at 8.96% is obviously lower than girls 11.63% at 2003. agricultural research center of the Ministry of Agriculture in 2003. [5], which could be also conducted by the gender disparities.

4. Issue addressed by Nine years Compulsory Education

4.1. Issue in Educational Attainment and Literacy Rates

The largest issue in literacy in rural China is the significant disparity between urban and rural literacy rates. While the overall literacy rate is high, rural areas lag significantly behind urban areas. A major factor contributing to this gap is the economic barrier; rural residents earn significantly less than their urban counterparts, making educational investments more burdensome. This economic strain influences the rural literacy rates as families prioritize immediate financial needs over educational expenses, leading to a cycle of continued illiteracy and poverty. Beyond the coverage of tuition by government policies, families often face substantial indirect costs associated with schooling. Wang (2019) points out that expenses for transportation, school supplies, and uniforms can deter continuous enrollment, especially when coupled with the potential earnings a family forgoes when a child attends school instead of contributing to household income [6].

4.2. Problem Caused by High School and College Enrollment Rates

The biggest issue regarding high school and college enrollment in rural China is the extremely low enrollment rates compared to urban areas. Despite efforts to improve access to education, the enrollment rate of high school students in rural areas is just 6% compared to 63% in urban areas, with only a fraction of rural children being able to pursue higher education. To be more specific, the opportunities available in urban and rural areas are also different. The disparities cause the rural area's student to become less likely to take further education and this situation shows the difference in the rate and number. This stark difference highlights the significant urban-rural divide in educational opportunities, influenced by both resource allocation and socio-economic factors. [2]

4.3. Reduction in Educational Gaps

Despite policy efforts, the persistent educational gap between urban and rural areas remains a critical issue. Rural areas struggle with inadequate educational funding and a lack of quality teachers, which are compounded by a county-based management system that often fails to meet the financial demands of rural education. This leads to inequities in educational quality and access, perpetuating the rural-urban educational divide. Instead of traditional small class teaching, the local rural government started to promote "The Big Class Education", which will take over the small class education to give more students a chance to be educated at the same time, but this could also mean that each student will have less time individually study with their teacher, which cause the quality of education goes down. Besides the big class education, the lack of quality teacher is another serious issue. The great teachers will be less willing to go to rural areas and enjoy less salary and heavier work than teaching in urban areas. [7]

4.4. Impact of Economic Impact of Compulsory Education

Even though the graduate rate of the nation rate is increasingly getting upper, the greatest challenge in linking compulsory education to economic outcomes in rural China is the inability to fully quantify and realize the economic benefits. While education can theoretically enhance employability and income, the actual economic upliftment from compulsory education is challenging to measure and has been uneven, with many rural areas not experiencing significant economic improvement. This scenario arises because it is difficult to closely link educational outcomes with employment opportunities in rural towns and villages. A student with nine years of education often struggles to secure a well-paying job, as high-tech companies and some enterprises require mature, skilled workers. [8]

4.5. Issue Addressed by Gender Disparities

Gender disparity remains a significant problem in rural education, where traditional views and socio-economic conditions heavily favor males over females in educational investments. Rural girls face higher dropout rates and lower literacy levels compared to boys, which are reflective of broader societal norms that prioritize male education. This gender gap not only affects immediate educational outcomes but also has long-term impacts on women's economic and social status. [9]"In some rural Chinese families, particularly during the 1980s, girls were often regarded as less valuable, sometimes they called girls as a 'failed try.' This was largely due to the perception that men were the primary contributors to household agriculture, wielding significant influence as the primary earners and decision-makers. This gender disparity was even more serious in old time China, when girls received even less attention and lower status so current situation could be seen a historical impact.

5. Conclusions

The implementation of nine years of compulsory education in China has marked a significant step toward educational equity and socioeconomic development, particularly in rural areas. This policy initiative has undeniably made strides in enhancing literacy rates and school enrollment, creating pathways to higher education that were previously unattainable for many rural families. However, the journey towards truly equitable education in these regions remains fraught with challenges. Economic barriers still significantly hinder educational advancement. The indirect costs associated with schooling, such as transportation and materials, coupled with the opportunity costs of foregone child labor, continue to pose substantial obstacles for rural families. Additionally, investment disparities between urban and rural schools exacerbate educational inequalities, limiting the effectiveness of national educational reforms. The quality of education, although improving, has not uniformly reached the level needed to fully bridge the gap between rural and urban educational outcomes. Furthermore, entrenched gender disparities continue to affect educational access and completion rates for girls, reflecting broader societal norms that value male education more highly. These issues suggest that while compulsory education has laid a foundation for improvement, there is a critical need for targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by rural communities. Policies must go beyond ensuring access to also enhance the quality and relevance of education offered in rural areas. This includes investing in teacher training, improving school facilities, and integrating technology into rural classrooms. Additionally, cultural transformations are necessary to dismantle the gender biases that limit educational opportunities for girls.

In the conclusion, the nine years of compulsory education policy in China has initiated important educational reforms that have the potential to transform rural communities. However, realizing this potential fully requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy innovation with cultural change.

By continuing to refine and adapt educational strategies to the specific needs and circumstances of rural areas, China can move closer to achieve the real educational equity.

6. Recommendations for Government of China

6.1. Targeted Financial Support

Financial barriers significantly hinder the educational prospects of rural students. It is recommended that the government increase direct financial support to rural families for education-related expenses. This support could include subsidies for transportation, textbooks, and other school supplies, as well as scholarships specifically targeted at low-income rural students. Such measures would help alleviate the economic burden on families and reduce dropout rates due to financial constraints.

6.2. Enhance Quality and Local Relevance

To address the disparities in educational quality between urban and rural areas, focused efforts should be made to enhance the quality of education in rural schools. This can be achieved by ensuring that schools are well-equipped and that curricula are tailored to be relevant to local economic realities. Investing in technology infrastructure, such as providing reliable internet access and digital learning tools, can also help bridge the quality gap. Additionally, professional development for teachers in these areas should be prioritized to improve instructional quality and student outcomes.

6.3. Community and Cultural Engagement

Community involvement is crucial in shaping educational policies that are culturally appropriate and effectively implemented. Developing programs that actively involve community leaders and leverage local cultural elements can promote education and make it more relevant to rural students' lives. Furthermore, these programs should specifically aim to raise awareness about the importance of education for all children, regardless of gender, to combat the prevailing cultural norms that often favor boys' education over girls.

6.4. Policy Refinement and Community Feedback

A continuous feedback system involving rural communities in the policymaking process is essential. This approach would ensure that initiatives are responsive to the actual needs of these communities. Local education authorities should regularly assess the impact of existing policies and adjust them based on community input. This can lead to more sustainable and effective educational reforms that are more likely to succeed because they have the support and involvement of the local population.

6.5. Strengthen Support Structures

Creating robust support structures within schools can significantly impact students' ability to succeed. This includes the establishment of comprehensive counseling services to help students navigate academic and personal challenges. Additionally, mentorship programs involving educators and older students can provide guidance and encouragement to younger students, fostering a supportive learning environment.

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