

The Current Situation of Educational Equity Between Urban and Rural Areas in China: An Analysis of Literature Review

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Abstract: Since the fifth plenary session of China's 19th Five-Year Plan introduced the objective of "promoting educational equity and driving the balanced development in compulsory education, as well as urban-rural integration", the unequal development of compulsory education between urban and rural areas has been widely discussed by Chinese scholars as a crucial topic of educational equity. This study found through a literature review that the rate of urbanization among students during their compulsory education years surpasses that of the general population, which is related to the uneven distribution of educational resources between city and countryside, namely the phenomenon of "underdeveloped rural regions and overcrowded urban regions". Numerous scholars have analyzed the influencing factors of this disparity and proposed relevant policies and solutions, broadening public awareness about issues related to fairness in rural-urban compulsory education and promoting research work in this field. However, there are still unsolved difficulties in optimizing the urban-rural educational pattern and achieving educational equity, which are problems that China needs to address in its economic-social development processes and educational reform.

Keywords: Education urbanization, Rural-urban compulsory education, Balanced development, Educational equity, Literature review.

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, China has witnessed two significant phases: the initial phase, spanning from 2001 to 2012, focused on attaining preliminary balance by successfully accomplishing the "double basics" task and making notable progress. Subsequently, during the second phase from 2013 to 2020, the state paid more attention to accelerating the integration of urban and rural educational resources, renovating weak schools, and promoting information and standardized management. It can be said that China is currently in the basic balance stage of urban and rural compulsory education[1], but with the advancement of urbanization in China's education, a significant issue currently faced is the uneven distribution of compulsory education resources between rural and urban regions. In rural regions, although there may be a relatively sufficient quantity of educational resources, their quality is low; whereas in urban areas, despite higher quality educational resources being available, there exists an insufficient quantity, which poses a huge challenge to the current urban-rural education equity [2]. Therefore, since 2019, the pursuit of high-quality and balanced urban-rural education has received

widespread attention from scholars. This study utilizes the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database to search for literature on "urban-rural equity in compulsory education" from 2006 to 2024, conducts an in-depth analysis of relevant literature, systematically summarizes the basic status and main influencing factors of urban-rural equity in compulsory education in China, and summarizes the targeted suggestions put forward by scholars. Urban-rural equity in compulsory education is the most crucial issue of fair education in contemporary China, accurately reflecting changes in social development and fairness, thus attracting global attention.

2. The Current State of Equity in Compulsory Education Between Urban and Rural Areas

There is an imbalanced distribution of compulsory education in city and countryside at present, primarily evident in the following aspects: with the increasing proportion of migrant workers' children attending school in cities and more rural residents' children entering urban compulsory education, education urbanization has arisen. This has resulted in a discrepancy between the supply and demand of educational resources in urban and rural regions. Through analyzing existing literature, it can be found that the fairness disparity in compulsory education between urban and rural regions in China mainly manifests itself in two aspects: disparities at the beginning of education and inequity during the educational process [3]. The current basic situation of the problem of compulsory education equity in urban and rural regions of China will be systematically sorted out and analyzed from the two aspects of unfairness at the starting point of education as well as through the educational process.

2.1. The Inequity Inherent in the Starting Point of Education

The fairness in the initial stages of education is the pursuit and guarantee of the quality of compulsory education, which is the prerequisite and foundation of educational equity. However, there are several issues at the beginning of China's education system. Firstly, the distribution of educational resources between urban and rural regions is unbalanced. With the acceleration of urbanization, an increasing number of migrant workers' children and foreign laborers' children into cities, resulting in insufficient and uneven distribution of educational resources in cities, which cannot meet the demands brought by the new type of urbanization. Secondly, there is a dual urban-rural difference in the administrative division system, where residents are divided into urban residents and rural residents based on their place of residence, and there is a significant difference in access to resources when receiving primary education.

2.2. The Inequity Inherent in the Educational Process

Equity in the educational process means that students are treated fairly when they receive education. The inequities within the educational system are primarily manifested through the uneven distribution of urban and rural teachers, as well as disparities in school resources and facilities.

2.2.1. The Structure of Urban and Rural Teachers is Unbalanced

In terms of the imbalance of faculty structure in compulsory education for primary and secondary schools in urban and rural areas of our country, the main problems are imbalances in age and specialty matching. Firstly, the proportion of energetic and well-specialty teachers in city schools is significantly higher compared to countryside schools. The aging problem in rural schools is even more serious than that in urban areas. Older teachers in rural areas often struggle to adapt to new curriculum standards and incorporate information technology into their teaching methods, resulting in students learning in outdated ways. Generally speaking, the age of 30-40 is the peak period of a teacher's career, during which they possess both energy and experience. According to relevant data,

the proportion of teachers aged 30-40 in urban and rural areas of the four western provinces is 37.3% and 15.7%, respectively, indicating that the proportion of energetic and experienced teachers in urban areas is twice that of rural areas [4]. This imbalance in age structure affects the vitality and innovative ability of rural primary and secondary school students. Secondly, there is an imbalance in specialty matching, which refers to the ratio of the knowledge areas that teachers possess to the subjects they teach. The research results show that the rate of specialty matching in urban areas is significantly higher than that in rural and township areas. At present, there is a particularly prominent problem of mismatch between actual teaching subjects and professional qualifications in primary and secondary education in city and countryside schools, such as music, art, and physical education [5]. Compared to specialized and well-rounded teams in urban areas, in rural areas, it is mainly math, science, and English prodigies who take on the task of exploring related subjects. Therefore, it is difficult to provide authoritative guidance to those with exceptional talents, as the saying goes, "Thousand-mile steeds come up regularly, but not so with Bo Le." The lack of a sufficient number of outstanding subject-matter experts has a direct impact on the opening of various subjects and further increase the disparity between children in city and those in countryside _in receiving good quality education.

2.2.2. Educational Conditions in Urban and Rural Areas

In both urban and rural compulsory education stages, disparities in school facilities primarily exist in teaching and auxiliary rooms, sports and physical exercise grounds, the number of libraries per student, and the configuration of teaching equipment. In the past ten years, China has made significant progress in achieving a balanced allocation level, but there is still a large gap compared with the high standards set by the Ministry of Education in 2017 in the "Evaluation and Assessment Method for Achieving Balanced Development of Compulsory Education in Counties". Sports venues, including indoor gymnasiums and outdoor sports grounds, are indispensable places for school sports activities and play a key role in promoting students' physical and mental health and all-round development. However, according to the data from Qingdao in 2014, only 3.3% of the 242 rural small-scale schools surveyed reached the standard of provincial standardization, and 37.7% reached the standard of municipal standardization, showing that most schools still have a lot of room for improvement in standardization construction. Compared with urban schools, rural small-scale schools have a large gap in school facilities. For example, most schools still use sand and coal ash (37.1% and 20.4% respectively) for ground paving, and only 35.0% of the schools use more advanced plastic materials [6]. This phenomenon shows that the infrastructure construction of rural small-scale schools is relatively lagging behind.

3. Suggestions for Promoting Equal Access to Compulsory Education in Urban and Rural Areas of China

It can be concluded that the current inequality in compulsory education between city and countryside in China mainly manifests itself in terms of educational starting point and process. Overall, with the progress of urbanization, the disparity in compulsory education between city and countryside is gradually narrowing, but there still exists a clear situation of 'rural disadvantage and urban overcrowding'. In order to reduce this gap, scholars have proposed some beneficial suggestions such as adhering to diversification and balanced development to promote high-quality development of city and countryside education; insisting on systematic development and jointly promoting mechanism reform; strengthening teacher exchange and adjustment for compulsory education between urban and rural regions; optimizing school conditions, etc.

3.1. Adhere to Diversified, Balanced and Systematic Development

The first principle is to adhere to diversified development, which means supplying educational resources according to the distinct needs of city and countryside regions. For instance, in urban areas experiencing a growing student population, there should be an increase in the supply of educational resources to cater to the needs of children from migrant families. Conversely, in rural areas, it is important to anticipate educational needs and avoid blindly expanding schools where student numbers are declining, in order to ensure the efficient use of educational resources. The second is to adhere to balanced development, which involves the adjustment of the allocation of urban and rural education resources, in order to eliminate the imbalance phenomenon of "weak quality and surplus" in rural areas and "strong quality and lack of quantity" in urban areas. Through policies and practices, such as the construction and evaluation of indicator systems, to facilitate the integration and balanced advancement of compulsory education in city and countryside regions. Finally, we must persist in systematic development, which includes enhancing policies for middle and high school entrance exams for students from other regions, addressing the issue of migrant workers' children attending school, and advancing equal access to educational services through reforms in household registration and public service systems.

3.2. Improve the Teacher Exchange Rotation

Teacher exchange rotation is an important measure aimed at addressing the shortage of educational resources in countries and promoting equitable development of compulsory education in city and countryside regions. The flow of urban educators can alleviate the shortage of teachers in rural primary and middle schools, and can promote the development of these schools through the exchange and rotation of urban high-quality teachers. Yang Weian mentioned that Jiashan County in Zhejiang Province took the lead in implementing reforms for the exchange of principals and teachers in compulsory education schools in 2010. Due to the positive results achieved in the early practice of Jiashan County, the introduction of this guiding document provided practical experience and reference for other regions, and then in 2013, the Zhejiang Provincial Education Department officially issued a guiding document on this reform and expanded the scope of the reform pilot. After the relevant policies issued by the Ministry of Education of Zhejiang Province, some provinces also began to actively follow up and gradually established institutionalized and normalized teacher exchange rotation policies [7]. These provinces have fully implemented teacher exchange rotation policies within their counties to achieve a more balanced distribution and improve overall educational quality.

3.3. Improve the School's Facilities and Equipment

Good educational conditions are a prerequisite for achieving high-quality compulsory education in countryside regions and an important guarantee for promoting educational equity in rural-urban areas. Rural compulsory education should be constantly improved to achieve the goal of 'accessing quality education' after ensuring 'access to education' and 'opportunities to access education'. In fact, many rural schools face problems such as harsh environment and imperfect facilities, which leads to a gap in infrastructure between rural students and urban students. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously improve the learning environment and living conditions of rural students. In Langcao, Henan Province, a plan has been put forward to increase fiscal funding and improve the school conditions of all primary and middle schools in the county. The plan will invest 34.15 million yuan to maintain and renovate the classrooms, roofs, roads, drainage networks, and other ancillary facilities of 38 primary and secondary schools in the county, with a focus on solving safety hazards and improving hardware facilities [8].

4. Conclusion

This research paper conducts a review of existing literature to examine the current state of educational equity in urban and rural regions of China. It highlights the unequal distribution of educational resources and unfairness in the beginning and process of education. The study reveals that despite the reduced disparity between urban and rural compulsory education due to educational urbanization, there still exists a phenomenon of "weak rural areas and overcrowded urban areas. To solve this problem, scholars have proposed diversified, balanced, and systematic development strategies: enhancing interaction and exchange between city and countryside teaching staff, elevating the standard of rural teachers; improving the construction of rural schools and providing better educational environments; increasing investment to guarantee that every child has access to equitable and high-quality compulsory education resources.

The above measures are important approaches that must be taken to promote the equitable development of urban and rural compulsory education. This article has room for improvement in exploring the current situation and realizing educational equity in urban and rural areas. Firstly, in analyzing the balanced allocation of urban and rural resources, specific quantitative analysis is needed, such as considering the differences in per capita educational investment and teacher salaries between urban and rural areas to have a clearer understanding of the severity of the problem. Secondly, when analyzing the challenges and countermeasures of policy implementation, it is important to conduct a detailed discussion on potential difficulties that may arise, such as resistance to policy implementation and obstacles in resource allocation, and specific strategies should be proposed to deal with these challenges.

In summary, promoting educational equity in urban and rural compulsory education in China is the key to achieving overall national development. We should further strengthen relevant research and explore more solutions to strive to build a unique and high-quality education system that provides equal and accessible education opportunities for all students.

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