

Impacts of Economy, Systems and Regional Inclusiveness on Rural-Urban Inequality of English Education in China

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Abstract. Since the 21st century, China has made great efforts in education, and the overall cultural level of the people has been significantly improved. However, with the improvement of people's living standards and the country's degree of openness, the issue of large regional differences in English education has gradually attracted the public's attention. This article aims to analyze the impact of economy, system, and regional inclusion on the inequality of English education between urban and rural areas in China and put forward relevant suggestions to alleviate or change these negative impacts. The author employs a literature analysis approach and concludes that economic, systemic, and regional inclusiveness have profound and interactive effects on rural-urban differences in teacher quality, students' English acquisition ability, and access to quality English-language instructional resources. Finally, this paper suggests using the central government's direct investment in education and teacher allocation, improving the household registration system and related laws, and increasing students' exposure to English in rural areas to alleviate the urban-rural disparity in English education in China.

Key Words: Educational inequality, English education, regional disparities.

1. Introduction

English education is universally considered fundamental and noteworthy in almost all communities regardless of their economic development status because education can bring civilization and flourishing social development to communities. There are four times as many English language learners as native English speakers worldwide, or more than 1.5 billion people, or more than 20% of the world's population [1]. With the globalization of English as the main communication medium and the deepening of people's pursuit of equality, the inequality in English education has gradually become a focus of attention for parents and, educators, even policymakers. Resolving or alleviating the inequality of English education can address educational inequality and benefit society and the economy, especially for developing countries.

In China, the most obvious inequality in English education occurs between urban and rural areas. China is one of the largest developing countries in the world, and its globalization is rapidly progressing. In this process, the importance of English education and the popularity of English has become particularly noteworthy. However, from some actual situations, although the Chinese government and its education departments are using the college entrance examination, the "double reduction" policy, and some local level Education reforms to make up for the further deterioration of education inequality, China's English education inequality is still significantly obvious.

This study will focus on how economic development status, policy and regulation systems, and inclusiveness between urban and rural areas influence English education inequality in China. Based on the analysis and the causes of the influencing factors above, this article will provide viable solutions from the perspectives of the governments at all levels, policies and systems, and International communication.

By analyzing the impacts of the economy, systems, and regional inclusiveness and addressing them with several feasible measures, relevant departments and officials expect to notice the importance of eliminating English education inequality. Moreover, the study also provides some

suggestions and countermeasures to help people avoid negative influences that may cause English education inequality, especially for educators and education departments to diminish it.

The author applies documentary analysis to demonstrate the impacts of economy, systems, and regional inclusiveness on rural-urban inequality of English education in China. The main section of this paper contains two parts addressing the impacts and their countermeasures, respectively. The first part comprises major influencing factors that, to some extent, cause an urban-rural gap in English education equality. They are an economic and social development imbalance, imperfect policies and systems, and disparity of openness and inclusiveness. Finally, the author will give practical recommendations on alleviating the negative impacts caused by the above issues.

2. Influencing Factors

2.1. Imbalance in Economic and Social Development

Advanced education needs sufficient educational investment to guarantee its efficiency and sustainability. According to the statistics published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, only about 7.67% of local education investment comes from the central government [2]. This means that the amount of education investment in various regions of China largely depends on the tax revenue collected by local governments. Therefore, the level of local economic development is a major influencing factor for the development of local education. Among them, English education, as one of the three main subjects (Chinese, Mathematics, and English), is also deeply influenced by local economic development.

The basic economic impact of the urban-rural gap in English education is the quality of teacher resources. Most rural areas belong to areas with relatively weak and imbalanced education development in China, and there is still a significant gap between the construction of their teaching staff and the requirements of economic and social development in the new era [3]. Before this, many organizations and scholars have explored the factors that appeal to teacher resources. In these studies, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Greenberg, McCall, and CarolCurtis all unanimously pointed out that salary is an important factor affecting schools' ability to attract teacher resources [4]. Thus, local investment in education, mainly from regional taxes to some extent, decides its schools' attractiveness to teacher resources. However, urban areas in China usually have better economic development than rural areas, resulting in more education investment than in rural areas. Consequently, schools in urban areas in China are usually more capable of attracting higher-quality teacher resources.

English education has the characteristics of strong flexibility and subjectivity. The teaching methods of English teachers are not as fixed as those of teachers in other disciplines. Even if teaching the same course, different English teachers will likely use completely different teaching methods. This poses a greater challenge to the professional level of English teachers; otherwise, students may receive inefficient or even ineffective English education.

Zhang Yi, a scholar who took Lingxian County, Shandong Province, China, as an example to study the differences in English education between urban and rural middle schools. It has come to a refreshing conclusion: although in recent years, with the rapid development of the Chinese economy and the increasing emphasis on education by local governments, middle schools in Lingxian County, Shandong Province have spacious and bright classrooms, complete teaching aids, multimedia platforms, and other teaching facilities that are almost indistinguishable from urban middle schools. However, the situation where English education in junior high schools in Lingxian lags behind that in urban junior high schools has not significantly improved [5]. The above situation is because rural schools often cannot attract teachers of the same quality as urban schools due to differences in wages and treatment.

Scholar Sun Defang used the variance analysis method to analyze the teaching ability of urban and rural teachers. The results show that urban teachers' educational and teaching abilities are

significantly higher in China than rural teachers. Regarding teaching design, teaching operations, and class management, urban teachers are all higher than rural teachers [6].

Moreover, an unbalanced in age structure is a result of the relatively small number of English teachers in rural junior high schools, as well as the fact that more elderly and young teachers are present than young and middle-aged ones are. The educational attainment of English teachers in rural junior high schools is also generally low, with many of them not coming from a “specialized background” in English education. They lack an understanding of education, psychology, and other areas closely relevant to teaching English, and their professional knowledge of English is relatively weak. They also have limited teaching skills [5].

2.2. Imperfect Policies and Systems

The lack of, flaws in, or incompleteness of educational policies and the accompanying rules, procedures, and mechanisms that extend from them are the fundamental causes of educational disparity, not the educators and the educated themselves, nor natural causes [7].

In rural areas of China, the income of most households is lower than that of urban households. Therefore, their children have fewer opportunities to access online learning and English resources than urban children. In addition, due to the high degree of openness in cities, the frequency of English appearing in daily life will also be greater, further widening the English proficiency gap between urban and rural students. At the same time, this also leads to rural students relying more on English teachers than urban students if they want to learn English well.

However, the problem is that rural schools are also disadvantaged in attracting better teachers. This further exacerbates the consequences of insufficient openness.

2.2.1 Lack of Related Laws and Regulations

Developing laws to improve the salary and treatment of rural teachers is an effective means and legal basis for many countries to reduce educational inequality between urban and rural areas. However, relatively few relevant laws are enacted in China, only the Teachers Law [8]. This makes it difficult for small village teachers to ensure their tight budget and to effectively implement relevant policies.

In contrast, the United States, which has many rural schools, has enacted multiple laws and bills, forming a long-term effective legal system that guarantees subsidies for rural school teachers. For example, in the United States, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Rural Education Achievement Program, the Rural Teacher Retention Act, the US Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and the Addressing Teacher Shortages Act of 2018 [9-11].

An imperfect legal system can make it common to default or withhold rural teachers' salaries and subsidies. The common reason for this phenomenon in rural areas is that there is less education funding, and education supervision from central or provincial governments is not as strict as in cities. This further exacerbates the attractiveness of rural schools to excellent teachers while also widening the divide in the level of teachers between urban and rural areas.

2.2.2 Restraint of Household Registration

There are two types of household registration (also known as “Hukou”) in China, namely urban/rural household registration and non-agricultural/agricultural household registration. According to the Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China, local people’s governments at all levels should ensure that school-age children and adolescents enrolled in schools near their registered residence registration places, which legally forms a binding relationship between registered residence and education [12]. Due to the restrictions of registered residence, migrant children can not enter school as smoothly as local urban children, and there is a serious phenomenon of over-age enrollment; They are unable to enjoy the same teaching resources and treatment as local urban children; They are unable to smoothly enter the high school of their destination and continue their studies like local urban children [13].

Large-scale non-agricultural labor mobility in rural areas has led to the establishment of enrollment policies for migrant children based primarily on residence permits, which have clarified the equal right of residence permit holders to receive compulsory education in their place of residence under the law and created a unified national enrollment system for primary and secondary schools. The gap between urban and rural education funding and system has mostly closed due to the above-mentioned efforts.

Nevertheless, the situation is more complex. China's registered residence influences the distribution of educational resources and students' identities. Thus, even though the entrance threshold for rural students to enroll in compulsory education in cities has been lowered, the educational resources and utilization efficiency available to migrant children of migrant workers in cities are still not entirely equal to those of urban students with registered residence, and the distribution of urban and rural educational resources is still unequal [14].

Due to the above reasons, most students with rural household registration do not receive the same good education as their urban peers. To make matters worse, due to the restrictions of the registered residence system, it is difficult for them to move to areas or cities with higher education levels to study. This also exacerbates the education level in rural areas, as students' academic level also affects the attractiveness of schools to teachers. If a school's overall academic level is high, it is more likely to attract good teachers. On the contrary, rural education has been dragged into a vicious cycle due to the insufficient level of students in rural schools and the inability of students to break through the restrictions of the registered residence system to find better education.

2.2.3 Disparities of Openness and Inclusiveness

English proficiency has emerged as a prerequisite for success in the labor market and international communication due to the nation's rapid development and growing globalization. However, China's urban-rural education gap has remained a persistent issue concerning English instruction. This essay will examine how regional openness affects the disparity between urban and rural English education in China.

The level of a region's openness to international trade, investment, and other types of interchange is referred to as regional openness. Regional openness has been widely acknowledged to majorly affect economic development and progress [15]. However, its educational implications, particularly on urban and rural education disparity, have not been thoroughly investigated.

The growing disparity between urban and rural areas regarding access to high-quality English education is one of the effects of regional openness on urban-rural English education inequality. Urban locations often have greater access to resources for high-quality English education, including native English speakers as teachers, cutting-edge textbooks, and multimedia learning tools. Rural communities, which are frequently less open, do not have access to these resources, which lowers the quality of English instruction there [16]. Since they have more chances for further education and jobs, urban students have a distinct advantage over their rural counterparts regarding English competence.

The brain drain from rural to urban areas is another way that regional openness affects the disparity in English schooling between urban and rural areas. Urban regions that are more open draw more foreign investment and open up more job opportunities, especially in fields like international trade and finance that demand English ability. As a result, talented people from rural areas may be drawn there for better educational opportunities and job prospects. Because of this, rural areas may see a brain drain, which could result in a lack of competent workers and a stagnation of English education [17].

3. Suggestions and Relevant Countermeasures

3.1. Optimize the Allocation of Teachers and Resources

Combining financial and non-financial incentives is one way to address the problem of attracting and retaining qualified teachers in rural areas. Rural teaching positions may be more appealing with

financial perks, including competitive wages, accommodation, and hardship allowances [18]. Due to the low fiscal income of the local governments of rural areas in China, this monetary help can be stressful and even unaffordable. Thus, the central government should be responsible for distributing financial help to teachers willing to work in Poverty-stricken areas. Moreover, the education department needs to coordinate the publishers and sellers of English teaching resources, provide free or low-cost English textbooks for English teachers and students in impoverished areas, and actively provide multimedia resources to make up for the shortage of English learning resources for English teachers and students.

Incentives that are not monetary, such as chances for professional growth, recognition, and career advancement, can be quite effective at luring and keeping good instructors [19]. The promotion space for rural English teachers is a noteworthy issue. Provincial and municipal education departments should pay more attention to the career issues of rural English teachers. In each round of teacher title selection, a fixed proportion of quotas should be allocated to rural teachers to reduce the urban-rural gap in teacher career advancement.

Consider the “Teach for China” effort, akin to “Teach for America,” where top university graduates are rewarded for two years of teaching in rural, low-income schools. This methodology has effectively tackled teacher shortages and quality issues in underprivileged areas of America, and it might be modified to work in China [20]. Nevertheless, this approach must be combined with rural English teachers’ salaries and career support. Otherwise, such programs will not be attractive to college graduates.

Education policies should ensure an equitable distribution of resources to close the resource gap between urban and rural schools. This can be accomplished by implementing a needs-based funding model in which schools with higher needs (typically in remote or disadvantaged locations) receive additional funding. This technique has effectively reduced educational disparities in nations like Australia and Canada [21]. There are often only one or two middle schools in China’s rural areas, especially those in economically underdeveloped counties. Nevertheless, these schools must complete the county’s secondary education. This means that one of their schools must admit hundreds of students yearly. This has caused considerable pressure on the quality of teaching in these schools. Therefore, giving additional subsidies to schools with similar needs is urgent and necessary.

3.2. Improving Education Policies and the Household Registration System

The ability to narrow the educational gap between urban and rural areas exists with technology in education. Even if they do not have access to highly competent teachers in their location, online education platforms can give rural students access to high-quality English education resources and instruction. The help of the Internet to English acquisition is greater than that of other subjects because learning foreign languages requires the cultivation of the environment most. However, rural communities must have access to dependable and fast internet connections for this to be successful. The government may collaborate with private businesses to enhance internet infrastructure in rural areas. However, in this process, the government should strengthen supervision and avoid corruption because corruption will add more economic pressure on students’ families in underdeveloped areas.

Reforming the legal and educational systems and ensuring their rigorous implementation is useful in addressing these inequities. The Teachers Law might be amended to incorporate elements that specifically benefit rural teachers, such as competitive pay, chances for professional growth, and better working circumstances. It is the basis for guaranteeing the basic rights of rural teachers to restrict the local government and education department from distributing rural teachers’ subsidies in a timely and legal manner by law. Many advanced economies have experience in perfecting relevant laws. Countries like South Korea, where the “Rural Education Support Act” was passed to enhance the circumstances for rural educators, have taken a similar strategy [22].

Another area that needs improvement is the household registration system. Rural students are at a disadvantage due to the current system, which connects education to the location of household registration. Education might be separated from the site where households are listed as a household,

allowing students to enroll in classes depending on their actual domicile rather than their registered residence. As a result, both native-born urban children and migrant children in cities would have equal access to high-quality education. This approach has been successful in nations like Brazil, where laws have been established to guarantee that all kids have equal access to education, regardless of where they live [23].

The use of technology in education, along with improved education policies and legal frameworks, household registration system reform, and other measures, can offer a comprehensive strategy for reducing the English educational disparity between urban and rural China. However, it is crucial to understand that this problem will call for consistent work and investment over time.

3.3. Enhance Regional Inclusiveness

3.3.1 Promote Student's Exposure to English Language Environment

The learning of English should not be limited to the classroom. While classroom instruction is crucial, students must also have access to chances to practice their English outside the classroom to become proficient speakers. It is crucial to give pupils alternatives because access to English language resources can be constrained in rural areas.

Community activities are one means of promoting English language learning outside of the classroom. These courses may include conversation circles, immersion programs, and clubs where students can practice their English with native speakers or other English language learners. Some rural areas lack native English speakers or English-speaking English teachers. Schools in these areas can organize activities within the school, such as applying an all-English teaching model. In classes where only English is used for teaching, teachers can appropriately reduce the difficulty of the course itself to offset the difficulties brought by pure English teaching to students. Such initiatives can expose kids in rural areas to the language, which can aid in developing their skills.

Online resources can be used to encourage English language learning outside of the classroom in addition to community programs. Teachers can suggest that students use mobile apps or computers to read English works or memorize words on time. This method not only allows students to be more exposed to the English environment but also facilitates teachers to more accurately grasp students' learning progress. For instance, online language learning tools like Duolingo can enhance classroom instruction. Students in remote places can use these platforms' interactive, self-paced language learning courses because they are accessible from any place with an internet connection.

3.3.2 Build a Culture of Inclusiveness

In order to close the English education gap between urban and rural communities, it is essential to promote an inclusive culture. Schools and society should make students aware of the cultural diversity in their world and strive to become a student with an international perspective, not just limited to their county or state. Promoting respect and awareness of many cultures and origins is what inclusiveness entails. Rural kids might not be exposed to different cultures as much as their urban counterparts, making learning English harder.

There are several strategies to encourage inclusion. For instance, schools can set up exchange programs encouraging interaction and mutual learning between kids from urban and rural locations. Schools in the urban areas of big cities often have the opportunity to study abroad in places with cultural heritage at home or even abroad. Suppose schools in rural areas do not have the corresponding economic strength. In that case, they can also exchange and study in big cities in the province, which can compensate for the disadvantages caused by the backward internationalization of rural areas to students in English learning. These initiatives can support creating a more inclusive learning environment and assist in removing cultural barriers.

It is critical to foster inclusiveness in the classroom and participate in cultural exchange activities. Regardless of a student's background, teachers may create a courteous and inviting environment in the classroom. To achieve this, open communication should be encouraged, students should be encouraged to share their experiences, and any instances of bias or discrimination should be addressed.

Teachers have no less influence on the moral character of students than parents. When English teachers guide students to learn, they should pay attention to reducing students' subjective evaluation and the cultivation of students' English expression ability. In addition, students should also be encouraged to express their ideas in English rather than repeating what is written in the textbook. In this way, a relaxed, less stressful, and inclusive classroom will be established, and students will be more receptive to English-medium information.

4. Conclusion

This article is drafted to analyze how economic, systems, and regional inclusiveness affect rural-urban inequality of English education in China. In conclusion, a number of variables, such as an imbalance in economic and social development, flaws in the policies and procedures, and differences in openness and inclusiveness, contribute to the English proficiency gap between urban and rural China. The standard of English education in urban and rural locations is significantly influenced by the quality of teacher resources, educational infrastructure, and instructional strategies. Additionally, the disparity in English schooling between urban and rural areas is exacerbated by the absence of pertinent laws and regulations, restrictions on household registration, and the brain drain from rural to urban areas. The author also offers feasible suggestions. Online learning platforms, needs-based funding methods, and financial and non-financial incentives for teachers are some solutions to the issue of finding and keeping skilled teachers in rural areas. The situation for rural pupils can be improved with changes to the legal, educational, and household registration systems. Closing the English education gap can also be achieved through fostering inclusiveness through neighborhood events, cultivating an inclusive culture, and creating a courteous and welcoming learning environment. To have an impact and guarantee that all children, regardless of physical location, have access to high-quality English education, these tactics must be applied repeatedly throughout time.

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