A study of the relationships between inequality in urban and rural educational resources and social class solidification

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Abstract. The foundational role of education in propelling societal progress is twofold: it furnishes individuals with essential knowledge and competencies, while also significantly influencing social mobility patterns. Specifically, within the Chinese context, enduring differences between urban and rural areas have contributed to a segmented society, and uneven distribution of educational opportunities has further hindered the fluidity of upward social movement. This study investigates the influence of disparities in educational resources between urban and rural areas on social mobility within China. It analyses the excessive urban-rural resource gap and opportunity gap leading to the solidification of social classes. The study highlights how inequalities in education funding, teacher quality, and infrastructure impede rural students' development opportunities and lead to deep-rooted social stratification. Despite the Government's efforts to address the disparities, challenges remain, and further reforms are needed to ensure equitable quality education and promote upward mobility of the rural population. They are further optimizing the distribution of educational resources, ensuring that rural areas enjoy the same educational opportunities as urban areas, and improving the remuneration of teachers, to attract more high-quality personnel to rural education. It is only through sustained efforts that the imbalance between urban and rural educational resources can be fundamentally alleviated, the solidification of social classes broken down, and the upward mobility of the rural population promoted, thus laying the foundation for the long-term development of society.

Keywords: Education; urban-rural; inequality; class.

1. Introduction

In the past four decades, China, as the largest developing nation globally, has witnessed unprecedented economic expansion. However, this progress has been accompanied by a persistent widening of the disparity between urban and rural areas. Following the initiation of economic reforms and openness in the late 1970s, China's economic trajectory has remained consistently upward, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). By 2017, the output value of industrial enterprises escalated to 112 trillion yuan, marking a staggering 247 times increase compared to the level in 1978. Similarly, total profits surged to 7.5 trillion yuan, representing a 125-fold rise since 1978, indicative of a substantial elevation in the living standards across the country. Since the convening of the 18th National Congress of the CPC, China's educational landscape has witnessed unprecedented advancements, propelling its developmental standards onto the global stage and significantly bolstering both economic growth and societal advancement. Significant strides have been made in consolidating the accomplishment of universal nine-year compulsory education coverage. Statistics provided by the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that the recent net enrollment ratio in primary education stands at an impressive 99.99%. Additionally, the enrolment rate in lower secondary schools has reached 104%, which exceeds the national average. Additionally, the enrollment retention rate for the nine-year compulsory education system has advanced to 93.4%, marking a 1.6% rise from the figure recorded in 2012.

Variations in educational experiences among distinct demographic segments persist, with the quest for equitable education gaining notable prominence in recent times. As highlighted by the 'China Youth Daily,' discrepancies in teacher qualifications, instructional expertise, and age profiles, as well as disparities in teaching resources and educational infrastructure, continue to distinguish urban from rural educational landscapes. Moreover, the challenge of an aging teaching force predominantly affecting rural zones remains a pressing concern. In 2020, a national survey revealed that rural areas

had a notably higher percentage of young educators aged below 29, standing at 6.1% more than their urban counterparts, indicating a tendency towards a younger teaching demographic. Nonetheless, the issue of an aging teaching workforce in rural regions persists as a significant concern. Evidence reveals that the rural areas have a 5.5 percentage point greater share of educators aged 55 and above compared to urban locales, thereby emphasizing that bridging the urban-rural divide remains a paramount objective, and enhancing the educational standards in these rural settings continues to pose a substantial challenge.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Inequality in Educational Resources Across Urban and Rural China: Analysis and Solutions

The fundamental issue behind China's inequality lies in its bifurcated societal framework that separates urban and rural zones, resulting in a substantial disparity in access to social benefits and public amenities between these two realms. China exhibits a pronounced disparity in education expenditure between its urban and rural sectors, wherein urban educational institutions allocate notably higher funds compared to their rural counterparts. This discrepancy has led to inferior infrastructure, less abundant teaching resources, and an overall lower standard of education in the countryside relative to cities. The hukou system plays an important segmenting role in Chinese society, with urban residents with hukou registration enjoying access to higher-quality public services and rural residents with limited access to resources, further exacerbating urban-rural inequalities in education.

As urban teachers enjoy more social benefits and career development opportunities, many experienced rural teachers choose to enter urban schools, leading to a serious aging of rural teachers. Trainee teachers from educators' institutes show a stronger preference for urban employment over rural postings, particularly shying away from economically disadvantaged regions. Moreover, rural educators lack equitable access to healthcare and pension benefits enjoyed by their urban counterparts, resulting in a diminished quality and an aging workforce among rural teachers. Consequently, the overall teaching proficiency and standards in rural schools often fall short of those in urban settings, posing challenges for students in accessing high-quality education. This disparity, in turn, exacerbates the educational inequality between urban and rural areas, further widening the gap between them.

Measures at the policy level must be implemented to tackle the uneven distribution of educational resources between cities and countryside. In 2006, an education guarantee mechanism led by the central government was established to guarantee compulsory education in rural areas, compulsory education was included in the scope of the public finance guarantee, and the central and provincial governments increased their financial inputs to primary and secondary schools in rural areas, and the funding and management standards of urban and rural schools were harmonized, meaning that rural student base and management coverage is closer to the urbanized level [2]. Furthermore, the Chinese Government has implemented various measures to enhance the teaching quality in rural education institutions. One such initiative is the "Teacher Special Assignment" program, designed to incentivize top-tier university graduates to take up teaching positions in rural locales [5]. Complementing this, the "National Training Programme" is in place to bolster the capabilities of educators already serving in these areas. The "Special Post Teachers" initiative represents a tailored strategy by the Central Government aimed at bolstering rural education in China's central and western regions. This program, specifically designed for rural educators, plays a pivotal role in incentivizing university graduates to embark on careers in rural schooling. Its dual objectives are to progressively tackle the dual challenges of teacher shortages and imbalanced workforce distribution in these areas, thereby bolstering the rural teaching force. This strategic move signifies a substantial leap forward in enhancing educational equity, as highlighted by Jian in 2020.As per statistics released by the Ministry of Education in China, there are a total of 367,000 educators serving in primary and secondary schools across Yunnan province, among which, 273,000 are based in rural areas. Yunnan region high mountain valley deep ,

the masses live scattered , most areas of transport , communication and other infrastructure is seriously backward , in the existing rural teaching team , the proportion of qualified education is obviously decrease than in the city , the teachers of modern teaching theory is relatively weak foundation . Yunnan Province implemented a special post programme in 2006, in which 4,196 teachers were posted to teach, and 4,284 in 2007, for a total of 8,480 special post teachers in the two years. The influx of recent university graduates has infused rural schools with fresh vitality and innovative thinking, alleviating the teacher shortage in these areas. Consequently, rural students are benefiting from enhanced educational resources, which is helping to bridge the gap in educational opportunities between urban and rural communities. The National Training Initiative endeavors to invigorate talent cultivation methods, with a keen focus on underprivileged and rural zones. It aims to extend top-notch training prospects to educators, thereby lessening the disparity in education standards between urban and rural communities and different regions, fostering an environment of equitable educational progress. Fostering a collaborative growth environment between these two realms, while harnessing their unique strengths, aims to equip rural regions with enhanced teaching talent, thereby elevating the overall competence of rural educators and catalyzing progress in countryside education. Although the Administration has implemented policies and allocated funds to diminish the disparity between urban and rural educational landscapes, disparities persist concerning teacher competence and the genuine parity of educational experiences.

2.2. Impact of Educational Inequality on Social Mobility and Neighborhood Effects

2.2.1 Impact of urban-rural educational inequality on society mobility

Education as an important channel of social mobility, plays a crucial role in the economic status of individuals. Studies have highlighted that a parent's level of education significantly influences their offspring's educational attainment and future economic prospects. In the specific socioeconomic landscape of China, where the disposable income per urban resident has witnessed a notable rise from 0.22 in 1988 to 0.31 in 1999, the roles of economic expansion and escalating household incomes are of paramount importance. In the context of China's swiftly evolving job market, modifications to the delivery of educational services, moves towards decentralization, and adjustments in fiscal measures have heightened the significance of parental education as a determinant in shaping children's educational outcomes. Meng and Gregory's (2002) research reveals that households where parents have attained lower education levels experience more adverse impacts amidst societal shifts, which, in turn, hinder children's access to education and curtail their economic prospects in the long term. Emran and Sun's (2011) findings illustrate a heightened effect of educational inheritance within rural Chinese communities. They further emphasize that in an environment characterized by limited social mobility, an individual's family background exerts a deeper influence on their prospects. Furthermore, Golley and Kong's (2013) investigation, which drew upon data pertaining to both urban and rural migrants, revealed substantial discrepancies in the way education is passed down from one generation to the next between urban and rural contexts [3].

Education is seen as an important tool for breaking down class stratification. Nonetheless, parental education levels impact children's academic achievements through various pathways. When parents are more educated, they tend to have greater income, which in turn facilitates access to superior educational prospects and resources for their offspring, including top-quality schools, additional private tuition, and a wealth of learning materials that nurture children's enthusiasm for learning. Moreover, these parents typically boast broader social connections, enabling them to pave the way for a multitude of opportunities beneficial to their children's development. Rural regions' scarcity of educational materials poses challenges for parents aiming to offer their offspring equivalent prospects as those in cities, irrespective of their superior education level, thereby exacerbating societal hierarchies.

2.2.2 Neighbourhood effects theory

Neighborhood effects theory suggests that the values, attitudes, and behavior of a community affect the educational outcomes of the individuals who live there, particularly adolescents, similar to a "contagion effect", as prevailing values and behavior patterns in the neighborhood influence community members through the transmission of community norms, moving adolescents from unfavorable neighborhood to better ones. Moving adolescents from unfavorable neighborhoods to better neighborhoods significantly improves academic performances, and good influence adolescent development, with positive neighborhood effects becoming stronger and educational outcomes more pronounced the longer the neighborhood is in place , neighborhood with strong collective efficacy is effective in controlling adolescent's behavior and avoiding truancy and delinquency, which improves adolescent's academic success, and neighborhood also protects children from violence, which can hurt children [4] . In contrast, in poorer areas, institutional resources are scarce and the quality of services is low, as middle-class families move from the central city to the suburbs, poorer inner-city neighborhoods further deteriorate the educational environment for adolescents as a result of the exodus of the population leading to a reduction in resources and a decline in the quality of public services. Enhancing the educational milieu necessitates a dual focus: not just on schools' roles but also on elevating community surroundings. This aims to foster a more conducive atmosphere for youth development by enhancing neighborhood standards and alleviating both poverty and uneven distribution of resources.

3. Literature References

In the early stages of economic reforms and opening up, as China shifted gears from a planned to a market economy, there was a strategic decentralization of the hitherto highly centralized education governance to provincial authorities. This move, while aimed at enhancing local responsiveness, inadvertently exposed disparities in regional resource allocation capabilities, consequently giving rise to uneven educational development across the nation [1]. The disparity in educational resource allocation between urban and rural areas has a dual impact on restricting educational prospects and resource accessibility, as well as hindering upward social movement. This uneven distribution is conspicuous in the unequal provision of educational opportunities, notably evident in discrepancies in financial support for education, teacher competence, and infrastructure enhancement between urban and rural areas. Schools located in urban areas typically benefit from greater financial resources, enabling them to offer superior educational facilities and a wider range of extracurricular programs. Conversely, rural schools struggle with inadequate funding and face challenges in attracting and retaining skilled educators, leading to a disparity in resource allocation that negatively impacts the educational competitiveness of rural students. This, in turn, hinders their ability to achieve social mobility through education.

Ensures the entitlement of school-aged children to obtain mandatory education. Nonetheless, fueled by the market mechanism's primacy, the progression of socioeconomic development has led to a transformation in educational disparities. Initially characterized by a coastal-inland divide, it has evolved into a more pronounced urban-rural gap in accessing premium educational resources, thereby emerging as the predominant chasm in the educational landscape. Rural-urban educational inequality is not only an educational problem, but also a manifestation of economic problems. In countryside settings, where resources are limited, equal opportunities as those enjoyed by city pupils are hard to come by, and the barriers imposed by family background are more pronounced. This poses a challenge for children from financially disadvantaged and rural households to ascend socially through learning, leading to an intensified divide among social strata.

The origins of disparities in education between urban and rural areas stem from socio-economic aspects, primarily the gap between cities and villages and societal hierarchies. A pivotal institutional barrier contributing to this educational inequality is the household registration system, which segregates along urban-rural lines. Children enrolled under rural household status attend schools in

rural locales, whereas those with urban household registrations are educated in town settings, leading to a residency system that limits rural inhabitants' opportunities for accessing high-quality urban education. The divide between urban and rural areas, characterized by a dual social structure, contributes to the entrenchment of social stratification. This, in turn, amplifies disparities in education development between cities and villages, mediated by factors such as social capital, family background, and network connections.

4. Conclusion

Despite China's remarkable economic expansion and advancements in education, inequalities in the allocation of educational resources persistently hinder the path towards social fairness in contemporary society. These disparities, fueled by factors like the hukou system and varying economic conditions, impose significant barriers to the upward mobility of rural students, entrenching a cycle of poverty that complicates advancement for those from less privileged origins. The lack of quality educational and financial resources, good teachers, and infrastructure development in rural schools puts rural students at a distinct disadvantage, and the inequality gap is further exacerbated by an aging rural teacher population, restrictions on educators' career development, and the migration of skilled teacher to urban areas.

Closing the disparity between urban and rural regions can be achieved through enhancing rural education investments, upgrading the caliber of teaching staff and neighborhood conditions, while bolstering the implementation of policies such as "Specialized Teachers for Rural Areas" to incentivize qualified educators to teach in these locales, thereby elevating educational benchmarks. Tackling the fundamental issues behind the disparity in education between rural and urban areas necessitates enhancements in the rural educational standards, fostering equal prospects for all learners, mitigating societal divisions, and cultivating a society that is more integrated and upwardly mobile.

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