Educational Ladder under Urban-Rural Divide: A Literature Review on the Correlation Between Compulsory Education Resource Disparities and Social Mobility in China

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Abstract. This paper conducts a literature review to explore the correlation between urban-rural compulsory education resource disparities and social mobility in China, focusing on three core dimensions: hardware facilities, teaching staff, and soft environments. Against rapid urbanization, rural students face marked disadvantages: urban schools have superior IT equipment and labs, while rural schools rely on outdated tools; qualified teachers concentrate in cities due to better salaries and training, leaving rural areas with underprepared educators; urban families also invest more in extracurricular support, widening the gap in holistic development. These disparities create systemic barriers to social mobility—rural students suffer "starting line inequality," lag in critical exams, and struggle with upward mobility, perpetuating intergenerational poverty. The study also identifies gaps: insufficient dynamic tracking of resource allocation and limited analysis of digital resource disparities. Future research should explore digital education's impact on mobility and evaluate policy effectiveness. Ultimately, narrowing the resource gap is key to educational equity and an open social mobility system, ensuring education acts as a mobility ladder rather than a barrier.

Keywords: Urban-Rural Gap, Compulsory Education, Resource Allocation, Social Mobility.

1. Introduction

Compulsory education stands as the "bedrock" of social equity, and the balance in its resource allocation directly shapes the openness of social mobility and the vitality of the social structure. In addition to being a fundamental necessity for protecting people' fundamental rights, achieving balanced resource allocation also serves as the rationale for effective mobility across socioeconomic classes. Students can only obtain relatively equitable beginning resources through compulsory education if external barriers such as family backgrounds and regional differences are removed. Only then will the social structure be able to maintain its innate dynamism and ability to self-renew in the face of change.

However, the imbalanced distribution of educational resources and the friction between urban-rural population movement have become increasingly noticeable as China's urbanization accelerates, putting social mobility avenues at risk. The impact of inadequate resources for rural compulsory education on social mobility has progressively drawn scholarly attention. As noted by Liu [1], "The most basic and fundamental task in the allocation of compulsory education resources is achievement of the balanced development of compulsory education. However, there still exist obvious gaps in the level of running schools and the quality of education among regions, between urban and rural areas, and among schools." Wood also emphasized [2], "Education, as a fundamental right, ought to be accessible to every individual. Governments, civil society organizations and communities should pull together to bridge the education gap between urban and rural areas."

Against this backdrop, this paper systematically reviews relevant research outcomes, with a core focus on the following questions: What differences exist in urban-rural compulsory education resources in terms of hardware, teaching staff, and soft environment? How do these differences affect the intergenerational mobility and urban-rural mobility of different social classes through the educational process?

2. Core Concepts

2.1. Compulsory Education Resources

Compulsory education resources refer to a collection of elements that ensure the effective operation of teaching activities in the compulsory education stage and safeguard the rights of students in different regions. It comprises three core components:

First, hardware resources—the material carriers for teaching activities, whose quantity and quality directly influence students' classroom experience. This category includes school buildings, teaching equipment (e.g., laboratory instruments), and information technology facilities (e.g., smart interactive whiteboards).

Second, teaching resources—centered on teachers' educational background, teaching experience, professional competence, and training opportunities. As the adage goes, "Education is a process where one tree sways another, and one cloud propels another." Teachers, as the leaders of classroom teaching, bear the responsibility of imparting knowledge, shaping values, and guiding growth. Those with rich experience tend to better adapt to students' diverse needs, implement individualized instruction, and enhance teaching quality.

Third, soft resources—intangible elements with profound impacts on education, including family educational investment (e.g., parental attention to learning, financial and time input, and the creation of a learning atmosphere), community cultural environment (e.g., the frequency of cultural activities and the positivity of the growth environment), and educational policies (e.g., resource allocation guidelines and teacher exchange programs).

2.2. Social Mobility

Social mobility refers to the movement of social members between different social strata, with intergenerational mobility as its core indicator. Educational mobility and occupational mobility are its primary manifestations. As Wen et al. pointed out [3], "The access gap between rural and urban students to higher education institutions, although still huge, has been considerably narrowed".

Rural children can break the intergenerational stratum constraints by receiving compulsory education and pursuing further studies, entering higher education stages to improve their social status. Similarly, manual workers can enhance their qualifications and skills through education, shifting to mental labor and achieving occupational mobility.

Additionally, this paper incorporates the dimension of "urban-rural spatial mobility"—specifically, the process by which rural populations obtain urban residency qualifications and social identity through education. For instance, some migrant children receive education in cities, gradually gain a sense of identity in urban societies, and ultimately achieve both social and spatial mobility.

3. Multidimensional Manifestations of Urban-Rural Compulsory Education Resource Disparities

3.1. Structural Imbalance in Hardware Facilities

"A large number of institutional differences have resulted in an obvious gap between urban and rural areas in terms of school-running conditions of elementary education in China" [4]. During the compulsory education stage, urban schools significantly outperform rural counterparts in hardware configuration, including information technology equipment, sports facilities, and laboratories.

In terms of information technology, urban schools are generally equipped with high-definition projectors, AI-assisted teaching tools, and smart classroom systems—enabling precision teaching and boosting students' learning engagement. In contrast, many rural schools still rely on traditional blackboards; advanced teaching instruments are scarce, and library resources are inadequate, with slow updates. Unable to meet students' diverse needs, rural students often can only learn about experimental processes through teachers' demonstrations or textbook illustrations. This gap prevents

rural students from accessing cutting-edge educational technologies, leaving them at a persistent disadvantage in the timeliness of information acquisition and restricting the development of their practical abilities and knowledge horizons.

3.2. Uneven Distribution of Teaching Resources

3.2.1 Causes of Uneven Distribution

The mobility of teachers presents a one-way trend, with high-quality educators continuously concentrating in economically developed areas [5]. Urban teachers generally have higher educational attainment, and the proportion of senior-title teachers is significantly higher than in rural areas. Typically, teachers with advanced degrees and titles possess more solid professional knowledge and rich teaching experience, enabling them to provide targeted guidance to students and implement student-centered instruction.

In contrast, rural teachers often earn salaries barely sufficient for basic living expenses, with no sound performance-based incentive mechanisms. Opportunities for professional development—such as title evaluation and training programs—are also limited. These factors drive many outstanding rural teachers to transfer to urban schools. The frequent turnover of rural teaching staff disrupts teaching continuity, undermining instructional effectiveness and dampening students' learning motivation.

3.2.2 Training Opportunities

"Developed regions are generally at the forefront of educational reform, with more mature education systems compared to underdeveloped areas" [6]. Consequently, urban teachers receive more frequent and in-depth professional training. Urban schools regularly organize diverse training programs—including offline workshops, online courses, and inter-school exchanges—and invite experts and outstanding educators for lectures. Through these initiatives, urban teachers can promptly update their educational philosophies, master advanced teaching methods, and continuously enhance their professional competence.

Rural teachers, however, have limited access to training due to insufficient school funding and poor transportation. Over time, their professional development lags far behind that of urban peers. Gaps exist in their ability to innovate teaching methods and implement curriculum reforms, ultimately impairing the overall educational quality of rural schools.

3.3. Visible Gaps in Educational Quality

First, in terms of academic performance, rural students lag significantly behind urban counterparts at key transitional stages—including the transition from primary to junior high school, junior high to senior high school, and the college entrance examination. Due to this discrepancy, rural students are far less able to take advantage of possibilities for higher education.

Second, in terms of overall quality, urban schools make use of a wealth of instructional materials and hardware to provide a variety of specialized activities. In addition to organizing large social practice programs that lead students to visit businesses and communities to gain a better understanding of real-world operations and improve their practical literacy, many urban schools regularly conduct science and technology innovation challenges to encourage students' creative thinking.

In contrast, rural schools, constrained by resources, focus primarily on exam-oriented skill training. Lacking funds and facilities, they struggle to launch large-scale science and technology or social practice activities. This leads to a severe imbalance in the competency development of urban and rural students: urban students gain greater advantages in adapting to future social demands, while rural students' insufficient comprehensive literacy undermines their future career prospects.

4. Interactive Mechanism Between Resource Disparities and Social Mobility

4.1. Positive Constraints of Resource Disparities on Mobility Opportunities

4.1.1 Starting Point Solidification

The significant urban-rural resource gap has erected an insurmountable "educational starting line" divide. "Children in rural communities barely have equal educational access to resources compared with children who grow up in urban communities" [7]. In basic knowledge instruction, urban schools use advanced information technology to present abstract concepts in vivid, intuitive ways—facilitating students' understanding and retention.

Rural schools, however, lack such facilities. Teachers can only rely on blackboard writing and verbal explanations, forcing students to rely heavily on imagination to grasp knowledge—reducing the efficiency of knowledge absorption. Furthermore, urban teachers tend to emphasize guiding students toward autonomous learning, cultivating their ability to develop study plans and solve problems independently. In contrast, rural teachers invest less effort in fostering independent learning, focusing mainly on theoretical knowledge transmission. As a result, rural students fall behind from the very start in developing learning habits, severely weakening their competitiveness in critical examinations (e.g., the senior high school entrance exam and college entrance exam) and narrowing their channels for upward social mobility through education.

4.1.2 Process Interruption

The gap in educational starting lines isn't the end of the story—urban-rural resource disparities keep squeezing social mobility opportunities as the education process unfolds. Take urban schools first: their rich soft resources mean students get way more hands-on chances, like visiting local tech firms for internships or joining school-led science projects. Career guidance there is also more targeted; teachers might even connect students with industry professionals to talk about future paths. Urban families, especially those in well-off areas, pile more into their kids' education too—signing them up for after-school math or English classes, or taking them on study trips to museums in big cities, all to stretch their knowledge and build real skills.

Contrast that with rural areas, especially less developed ones. Rural families are stuck between tight wallets and old-fashioned ideas about education—some still think "studying is useless if you can't get into college right away", so they don't put much into their kids' learning. Most can't even afford basic after-school tutoring, let alone fancy study tours; a village school might struggle to organize a single trip to the county museum all year. Rural teachers aren't to blame either—they often haven't had proper training in career counseling, and with big class sizes, they can barely keep up with grading, let alone sit down with students to talk about college majors or jobs.

This kind of resource gap doesn't just stay static, it grows as kids move through school. By the time they're in high school, urban students have already built up advantages in practical skills and career awareness, while rural kids are still playing catch up. In the end, this shapes where they end up in the social ladder later—rural students often start behind, and the process gap makes it even harder to climb up, which in turn narrows their chances of social mobility.

4.2. Reverse Reinforcement of Mobility Opportunities on Resource Disparities

4.2.1 Advantage Aggregation Effect

In addition to employing financial means, such as buying school district residences and paying for pricey tutoring, to monopolize high-quality educational resources, wealthy urban families also utilize social capital to concentrate top-tier instructors and cutting-edge technology in the schools where their kids attend. The "Matthew effect"—the rich become richer, the poor get poorer—in education is perpetuated by this dual investment, which makes it even more difficult for rural schools to obtain high-quality resources.

4.2.2 Limited Feedback from Mobile Groups

Higher access thresholds in cities may influence the occupational preferences of the floating population, thereby affecting their migration decisions and willingness for urban citizenship [8]. Guiding the orderly flow of rural populations to cities is crucial, but the high cost of urban living and disparities in hukou (household registration)-tied welfare force rural individuals who have achieved mobility through education to prioritize high-paying but high-intensity industries (e.g., internet and finance) to cope with urban pressures.

As a result, they lack the time and resources to contribute to rural education. Even those with the willingness to give back can only make limited impacts—such as funding individual students or donating small amounts of materials—failing to fundamentally address the overall resource shortage in rural areas and having minimal effect on narrowing the urban-rural resource gap.

4.3. Relevant Factors

4.3.1 Individual Agency

Some rural students overcome resource constraints through intensive studying, which requires strong self-management skills, academic talent and basic family support like a quiet study space and essential books. However, when the resource gap exceeds a "critical threshold"—such as rural schools lacking basic textbooks or sufficient teachers to maintain normal teaching—even the strongest individual agency becomes ineffective, like "a clever cook cannot make a meal without rice," severely limiting learning outcomes.

4.3.2 Policy Intervention

To a certain extent, governments encourage or mandate short-term or long-term teacher transfers between schools to achieve balanced allocation of teaching resources across institutions; this constitutes policy-driven mobility [9]. National initiatives like teacher exchange programs can promote resource balance and mitigate the constraint of resource disparities on mobility, but they face practical challenges: exchanged teachers are often young novices rather than senior educators; short exchange periods fail to generate long-term impacts; and poor facilities in rural schools reduce teachers' willingness to participate—undermining policy effectiveness.

5. Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

5.1. Research Gaps

Existing studies have three key limitations:

First, there is a lack of dynamic tracking of resource acquisition processes. Most research focuses on cross-sectional comparisons of resource stocks at specific time points, failing to explore the dynamic game between urban-rural schools, families, and other stakeholders in resource competition, allocation, and utilization. This makes it difficult to reveal the evolutionary logic of resource disparities over time.

Second, insufficient attention is paid to "digital resources." High-quality digital learning materials are becoming essential components of educational progress in the information era. Few studies, however, examine the growing "digital literacy gap" or the differences in access to and use of digital resources between urban and rural areas, which leaves out important aspects of the new types of educational inequality.

Third, there is a lack of cohesive research on the migration patterns of disadvantaged groups. Instead of placing the educational struggles of certain groups into the larger framework of social mobility and the interaction of educational resources between urban and rural areas, the majority of studies isolate these issues. This makes it more difficult to fully comprehend the similarities and differences in the movement patterns of different groups.

5.2. Future Research Directions

Future studies can expand in three areas:

Examine first how the urban-rural resource gap is affected by digital schooling. This entails examining inequalities in the distribution of digital resources and the digital literacy of urban and rural students, as well as considering how these elements work together to influence social mobility.

Second, monitor how immigrant children adjust to "urban-rural educational transitions" and how this affects intergenerational mobility over time.

After moving from rural to urban schools, longitudinal surveys can document the dynamic shifts in migrant children's academic adjustment, social integration, and psychological health and investigate the ways in which these shifts impact their future educational decisions, professional growth, and the generational transfer of family social status.

Third, evaluate the actual effect of educational policies on resource balance and social mobility. Beyond analyzing policy formulation and implementation, empirical research should assess the effectiveness of initiatives like teacher rotation and education funding tilt in narrowing the urban-rural resource gap and promoting social mobility. This includes summarizing lessons from policy implementation to inform ptimization. As Davies et al. suggested [10], "As a result, an over-arching system could be developed aimed at providing national coverage of widening participation activity, allocating each elite university additional under-represented areas and offering universities financial incentives to target priority areas".

6. Conclusion

Urban-rural differences in compulsory education resources have a significant, palpable impact on China's educational system and social structure, influencing both the trajectory of social mobility and the likelihood that individuals will attain it. On the one hand, this disparity could become more than simply a "gap" if it continues to widen; it could become a "invisible barrier" that strengthens social rigidity and makes it more difficult for rural families to rise above their current social stratum. Due to a lack of resources, rural students already lag behind in academic competition and holistic literacy, making it difficult for them to use education as a means of social advancement. In addition to limiting their personal prospects, this keeps entire families stuck in a generational cycle of poverty.

However, with certain governmental changes and genuine human effort, this disparity can be transformed into a "ladder for social mobility." Rural students can start on an even playing field if policies are not just carefully crafted but also genuinely adapted to local requirements. What about the pupils themselves? Even if they lack all the resources they require, their genuine desire to learn and readiness to work hard can somewhat compensate for the absence of educational support. They can escape the limitations of the social class they were born into in this way.

Achieving educational equity and creating a foundation for open social mobility both depend on closing this urban-rural disparity in mandatory education resources. The foundation of more general social justice is educational equity, which is more than simply a catchphrase. After all, no one can truly have a fair chance at realizing their potential unless both urban and rural children have equitable access to high-quality education. The smoothness of a social mobility system's educational channels determines how open it is; when resources are distributed evenly between urban and rural schools, people from all walks of life can use education to change their course in life, which in turn makes society more stable and lively.

The public school system need a complete reform, not simply minor adjustments. Going forward, improving the accuracy of resource-balancing policies is not merely an objective; it entails creating strategies for resource allocation that are especially suited to the needs of various urban and rural regions. No more strict "one-size-fits-all" policies, which only serve to waste resources that could be used more effectively. However, the digital age also presents a new set of issues, such as the need to close the digital literacy gap among students and promote the equitable development of digital

educational resources in both urban and rural areas. These actions will not only establish fairness but also cultivate a genuinely equitable atmosphere where all individuals have the opportunity to develop.

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