



From Unequal Resources to Unequal Opportunities: The Transformation and Mechanisms of Urban–Rural Educational Inequality

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Abstract. In China, the disparity between urban and rural schools with respect to structures and simple amenities has been bridged over the recent years. Nevertheless, there are other inequalities that run deeper in areas like quality of pedagogy, the scope of the curriculum, and learning opportunities of the students. This paper explores the way urban/ rural educational inequalities have changed since the blatant inequality in the provision of material resources to more prudent and insidious hidden gaps. The following unseen gaps are the differences in teaching practices, the utilization of digital technology, the support of families, and the results of policy implementation. This paper will base its arguments on a review of recent works by arguing that these disparities are not based on the singular aspects but are a result of the relationship between the institutional structures, economic conditions, the cultural capital, and the execution of the policy. The impact of urban bias and unbalanced development of localities influence the expectations of families and the availability of resources that are further supported by the policies that cannot take into account local realities completely. According to the findings, to attain real educational equity, it is necessary to go beyond the resources availment to systemic reforms, such as capacity building, institutional optimization, and long-term support solutions specific to rural schools.

Keywords: The educational inequality between urban and rural areas, the hidden gaps, education policy, cultural capital, education government.

1 Introduction

As the goal of the policy of attaining balanced development of compulsory education in China proceeds, the differences in the conditions of the urban and rural schools in terms of school buildings, teaching equipment and basic educational provision have become narrower with time. The indications of educational inequality between urban and rural areas however do not show that education inequality has not led into extinction both in education practice and research. Rather, it has been emerging more covered and complicated concerning the quality of education, the learning process, and developmental possibilities. This fact has led to researchers to reexamine the analytic models that concentrate on the allocation of material resources, putting them in a new light as

educational processes, opportunity structures as well as their attendant institutional and social means of delivery.

It is against this background that the study of educational disparities in urban-rural areas has shifted to debates on unequal allocation of resources to formal beaches to systematic studies of hidden gaps, in the roles played by teaching practices, curriculum design, teacher professional capacity, family support, and implementation of policies in the formation of educational outcomes. However, the available literature tends to report on these factors in a divisive response, abiding with the paralleled explanations of the institutional, economic, cultural and policy aspects, and inadequately accounts the interactions and interactive processes of these factors.

Within the framework of the recent literature, the paper is focused on examining the change of urban-rural education inequality, its policy implications and socio-cultural backgrounds of this change. The study aims at elucidating the mechanisms through which urban and rural educational inequalities are perpetuated in the circumstances of structural inequality, and offering a theoretical perspective to the further optimization of educational governance and policy under structural inequalities, by establishing a mechanism-based analytical paradigm.

2 Recent Research on Urban–Rural Educational Inequality

2.1 Unequal Resources to the Hidden Gaps

Over the last few years, the study of urban-rural dreams in educational inequality has changed its focus from unequal distribution of the visible resources, including the facilities of schools, funds, and equipment, to systematic studies of differences in the quality of the educational process and chances of student development. Hidden gaps in this case mean the differences on a qualitative level that are not easily quantified using material measures, but have an enormous impact on the educational processes and the outcomes of education. These are the development of teaching philosophies and practices, the breadth and depth of curricula, the quality of teacher-student interactions, the scientific validity of assessment systems, school culture and the effectiveness of family-school collaboration.

This reconceptualisation signifies a more advanced research orientation that does not concern availability, but the execution and the creation of opportunities in education. According to the policy regime that advocates the creation of balanced compulsory education, numerous studies suggest that the gap in the hardware condition in urban and rural schools has been closing, whereas inequality in the quality of educational opportunities, learning processes, and future prospects has remained (or even increased) structurally diversified [1]. The city-country trends have been shifting to a blend of superficial circumstances and the major aspects of the education process, such as pedagogical approaches, curriculum frameworks, teacher professionalism, and the extent of using digital technologies. As Wood observes, despite the fact that the rural schools undergo massive increase in the level of infrastructure, the content of teaching and the teaching methods tend to remain deficient, which inhibits multidimensional growth in students [2].

At the practical level, the changes that occur can be viewed in various dimensions. As the system of fiscal transfers developed, as well as the informatization of the education system, vulnerabilities in school security, the delivery of equipment, and the absence of Internet have greatly decreased, and, according to some researchers, the issue of the inability to receive an education in rural schools has been minimized [2]. Nonetheless, the main focus of these improvements is on observable indicators, whereas the lack is in quality of resources, updated regularly, and long-term maintenance. As an illustration, in some rural schools they put in place multimedia equipment, but lack in technical support as well as maintenance services inhibit any real pedagogical usefulness. This implies that the issue of educational equity cannot be determined by the provision of resources alone, and it should also be determined by the usability, flexibility, and utility.

Inequality in the educational processes is even greater as compared to material conditions. Studies have continuously indicated a rural-favored school in the implementation of student-centered pedagogies, inquiry-based learning, and all-encompassing competency-building, teaching activities, in most instances, are characterized by exam based and lectures-driven learning practices [2]. Regarding digital integration, researchers underscore digital divide is not only the question of access, but also questions of use and pedagogical role [3, 4]. Digital technologies are often implemented in rural schools not to promote creativity and higher-order thinking but to convey the information and provide repetitive training, which leads to a kind of digitalization at a low level contributing to reinforcing the existing inequalities.

Such differences in the process level end up creating unequal educational outcomes in the end. The inequality between urban and rural areas is further enhanced by the differences in teacher stability and the way students develop. According to the case study by An, resource concentration and outmigration of students in urban regions form a circular process that benefits the urban schools at the disadvantage of rural schools in terms of qualified teacher retention [5]. Excessive turnover of teachers developing the disruption of the continuity of instruction and the school culture and unequal access to the educational information, school choice, and career planning inhibit the social mobility of the students living in the rural areas.

Despite the fact that the concept of the hidden gap perspective contributes to a better comprehension of the inequality in education, it also has some limitations. The excessive focus on underlying inequalities may hinder a clear understanding of the chronic material deficits in less developed areas and certain researches are not systematically explained as to how such inequalities are created. Moreover, the approach of the disparities beyond the surface also has a methodological problem. It is hard to perform large scale standardized measurement and comparison due to its qualitative nature and dependence on context, and this creates a setback in the formulation of universal and targeted intervention policies. Inequality in education between urban and rural regions must thus be seen as a simultaneous existence of both obvious and subtle inequalities that are regional and developmental at different periods. In general, the current literature points to the change of the resource-based inequality to the composite form with the focus on the quality of the processes and the opportunity structures.

2.2 Educational Policy: Differentiated Implementation, and Unplanned Consequences

One of the primary variables that still holds research on urban-rural educational inequality is educational policy. Through the introduction of significant reforms, including the Double Reduction policy, researchers have produced more and more work that analyzes differentiated impacts of policy within urban and rural settings and their undesired impacts. Liu and Ma discover that the policy has also been able to restrain the growth of the shadow education, but it has not necessarily decreased the existing inequality in accessing education in the regions and social classes [6].

The literature on rural settings also indicates that policy execution remains limited due to poor educative capability of the family, poor home-school partnership and backward educational ideology of the parents [7]. In cases where off campus tutoring is limited, urban families tend to take on the cost through either private tutoring, after-school programs that are both of high quality or even through social capital, whereas rural families do not have these kinds of resources, which may further widen the gap in extracurricular learning.

Critically speaking these outcomes are the results of inadequate attention to structural urban-rural divergences when a policy is designed and developed, rather than when a policy is planned to be implemented. Equal standards tend to ignore the differences in the support of a family, organization capacity in schools, and the resources in the community [1]. Douglass et al. also criticize the prevalence of top-down reform models, saying that the lack of engagement of the grassroots schools and communities undermines the consistency of the policy with the actual educational conditions [8]. However, varied results do not always mean a failure in policies but suggest that they should be implemented in a flexible mechanism and context-specific support.

2.3 Factor Socio-Cultural and Governance: Family Capital and Collaborative Capacity

In addition to the policy and resources, the socio-cultural and governance issues significantly contribute to perpetuating the inequality in education between urban and rural areas. Most studies rely on the theory of cultural capital developed by Bourdieu and highlight how family background has a role in determining the educational opportunities of a person [9]. Wood illustrates that there is a notable disparity between urban and rural families regarding educational expectations and participation patterns, mobilizable resources, and such disparities are intergenerational [2].

Similar studies on a domestic level also reveal that rural households tend to experience lower parental education, less and less access to educational information, and less strong ties to schools [7]. The intergenerational caregiving has also reduced the effective academic support in a place where the percentage of left-behind children is high. Although schools may offer additional services, the results are meager in case of the absence of collaboration of the family and communities.

Regarding governance, an integrated urban-rural schooling must not pursue an institutional homogeneity, but through the building of collaborative structures between

schools, families, and communities [1]. Sometimes, however, rural schools have no organizational strength and social support systems to do the job of governance. Notably, the tendency to blame families only puts the idea of the privatization of structural inequality at risk. The differences in cultural capital are not made but are a result of structural effects over a long period of time. Based on the social capital theory, educational results can also be influenced by the quality of social networks between families, schools and communities which are weaker in rural environments [10]. As a result, the policies of governance are to be aimed at increasing the level of public support and institutional insurance instead of individual compensation of the families.

3 Urban-Rural Educational Inequality to Structures

The current literature offers urban-rural educational disparity in terms of institutional, economic, cultural, and policy factors but the isolation of individual factors to explain the interaction between them, misunderstands their logic. Urban-rural inequality can be thought of as a structure-driven phenomenon that gets reproduced by way of interacting processes.

Urban-biased development and household registration system at the institutional level influence resource distribution and population migration. An shows how original differences cause student migration to urban centers, which compounds teachers and finances and establishes a vicious cycle that limits education in rural households [5].

These institutional restraints are economically based. Economic inequalities within a region result in restriction on investment in education and family spending on education. Economically disadvantaged areas have problems with maintaining funding and raising the salaries of teachers, as well as modernizing the conditions of teaching, and rural families do not have the funds to pay on their own, as it is stated by Wood [2].

Economic disparity also entrenches the differences in cultural capitals. Restricted access to educational materials and learning support restricts the ability of rural families to influence aspirations and educational habits, which results in a situation of uniform intergenerational distances [2].

These policy-making processes, cultural and economic inequalities meet in policy expression. The article by Zhang demonstrates that rural areas usually feature limited administrative capacity and professional support which leads to formalistic application of standardized policies, where more-resource endowed urban schools and families may benefit in reform [7]. In this way, there is an incessant reenactment of urban educational inequality vs. rural via structural, economic, cultural, policy processes.

4 Discussion: Integrated Policy Response to Load shedding

According to the analysis, the cause of the inequality in education in cities-rural settings is not the discrete lack of resources but rather structural inequality supported in a number of ways. To respond to this quandary, one will have to go beyond resource compensation and focus on institutional change based on capacity building and optimization. The idea of differentiated collaborative development developed by Tan and

Ouyang provides useful recommendations since it suggests the coordination towards differences in contexts [1].

The policies at the institutional level should enhance long term insurance covering rural education under varied fiscal allocation, teacher distribution and evaluation systems. Investment decisions ought to focus on the sustainability and the capacity of the process instead of focusing solely on the scale. The governance structures should involve communities and families based on the support of the populace instead of the individualization of responsibility. Lastly, to make sure that reforms are helpful to disadvantaged contexts, it is worth policy implementation that should first be flexible, professionally supportive and conduct process evaluation.

5 Conclusion

This work illustrates that the changes in the educational inequality between cities and rural communities have moved beyond the apparent disparities in resources to the composite inequalities in educational procedures and chance systems. These inequalities are reproduction by way of an interplay of institutional structures, economic restraints, cultural capital differences and policy enforcement processes. To respond to them, substantial, structural reforms of the structures, instead of technical tweaking, are necessary, which in turn offers a theoretical basis of promotion of substantive educational equity.

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