

A multidimensional analysis of the differences in urban and rural education in China

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Abstract. Educational equity is a crucial component of social fairness, and the urban-rural education disparity is a persistent socioeconomic issue that has garnered significant attention. This paper will conduct in-depth research and analysis from four aspects: the state, schools, communities, and families. It will explore the promoting role of national policies on educational achievements, analyze the role of teaching staff in students' development, and consider the influence of community environments and family atmospheres on students' growth based on existing literature and data. The research results show that the policy of allocating educational resources is biased towards urban areas, resulting in significant differences between urban and rural areas in terms of capital investment, teacher allocation standards, etc. Urban schools have abundant educational resources, can carry out diverse teaching activities, and provide multiple channels for continuing education. In contrast, rural schools are constrained by scarce resources, have a single curriculum, and find it difficult to promote quality education. At the same time, some rural families are limited by their economic conditions and educational concepts and provide relatively limited educational support for their children, further exacerbating the imbalance in urban and rural education development.

Keywords: educational equity, urban-rural education gap, teaching staff

1. Introduction

This study conducts a comprehensive investigation of the urban-rural education disparity within the context of educational equity. Educational equity is fundamental to social equity, aiming to guarantee that every kid has access to a high-quality education. In the pursuit of this ideal, the urban-rural education gap has become an obstacle that must be overcome. Currently, many scholars have analyzed and studied the urban-rural education gap. For example, Li Yanwen studied the overall situation of the urban-rural gap in compulsory education and the urban-rural gap situation in different regions [1]. Based on the perspective of educational equity, Chen Haixia analyzed the urban-rural education gap from two aspects: the degree of students' exposure to diverse education and the increasing number of left-behind children in rural areas [2]. Wang Xiangrui took the differences in after-school services in urban and rural education as the research topic and deeply explored and analyzed the causes of these differences from multiple aspects, including the influence of the urban-rural dual structure, and the differences in school management systems between urban and rural areas, etc. [3]. Tian Yurong from the Education Bureau of Liangzhou District, Wuwei City, Gansu Province, analyzed the differences in the scientific research capabilities of urban and rural teachers from the perspective of educational scientific research [4]. Based on the current research situation, the author further analyzes the urban-rural education gap in four influencing dimensions, namely the national level, the school level, and the community and family levels. A comprehensive analysis of these characteristics can precisely identify the core causes of the urban-rural education disparity and establish a basis for exploring strategies to attain educational justice. It also allows us to thoroughly comprehend the essential importance of educational justice in social development.

2. Overview of the urban-rural education gap

2.1. Definition of the urban-rural education gap

The urban-rural education gap denotes the disparities seen in all facets of education between urban and rural regions. This is primarily evident in the following dimensions [5]:

In terms of educational resources, it includes human resources, material resources, and financial resources [6].

In terms of educational concepts, it includes the family level, the school level, and the social level.

The urban-rural education gap is a comprehensive concept involving multiple links and levels of education. It is the result of the interaction of various factors and has a significant impact on the growth and development of urban and rural students.

2.2. Current situation of the urban-rural education gap

In terms of educational resources

The disparity in compulsory education resources between urban and rural regions in China is mostly evident in the teaching personnel, infrastructural conditions, and financial allocations, specifically concerning human, material, and fiscal resources. Urban schools have a larger student source scale, higher resource quality, and stronger teaching staff; rural schools have a smaller student source scale, lower resource quality, and weaker teaching staff [7].

In terms of educational equity

Li examined the educational experiences of the "post-80s" generation and discovered that despite numerous state initiatives aimed at enhancing educational equity, including the optimization of resource allocation and the advancement of educational reforms, the issue of unequal educational opportunities remains largely unmitigated. The urban-rural education gap has obviously widened, and it will exacerbate the phenomenon of unequal educational opportunities [8]. Sun Weihong proposed that higher education has the "Matthew effect." During the process of massification, due to the inequality of educational opportunities, it will hinder the upward mobility of social groups in a disadvantaged position. The students cultivated by families from the middle and lower social classes often have a bleak employment prospect after graduation, and in some cases, it may even lead to poverty due to education [8].

In terms of educational concepts

(1) At the school and social levels: Urban education pays more attention to quality-oriented education, emphasizing the all-round development and personality cultivation of students. Rural education may focus more on exam-oriented education, with relatively insufficient cultivation of students' practical and innovative abilities.

(2) At the family level: Urban parents generally attach greater importance to education and are willing to invest more time and money in their children's education. They focus on cultivating their children's interests and hobbies and comprehensive qualities. Rural parents' degree of attention to education and willingness to invest are relatively low, and their educational concepts are more traditional.

3. Analysis at the national level

3.1. Analysis of policies and strategies

From the early days of the People's Republic of China, when efforts were made to popularize the right to education, to the period of reform and opening up when efforts were made to improve educational efficiency, and then to the beginning of the 21st century when educational equity was taken as a basic national education policy, the national educational equity system has been continuously upgraded and deepened. This is the key to creating a historical miracle of leapfrog development in national educational equity. For example, in 2010, the National Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) clearly stated that "promoting educational equity should be regarded as the basic national education policy" [9].

3.2. The role in educational achievements

The promulgation and implementation of national education policies and strategies will guide the development direction of the people's education cause and promote educational and teaching reforms, having a crucial impact on educational achievements. It is specifically reflected in the following aspects:

Direction Guidance and Standard Setting: The state, by establishing educational rules and laws, delineates the overarching objectives and developmental trajectories of education to guarantee that it fosters abilities aligned with national and societal advancement. The state establishes curriculum standards and teaching syllabi to standardize educational content and requirements, maintaining uniformity in the fundamental quality of education nationwide and offering a cohesive reference for educational instruction across various regions and institutions.

Resource Guarantee and Condition Improvement: The state continuously increases educational expenditure, providing financial support for school construction, equipment procurement, teachers' salaries, etc., to improve educational and teaching conditions. Information technology is used to build educational resource sharing platforms, such as the National Educational Resource Public Service Platform, so that high-quality educational resources can radiate to more regions and narrow the urban-rural and regional educational gaps. At the World Education Conference in 2024, Minister Huai Jinpeng pointed out that

"Digital education is enabling more high-quality resources to break through time and space limitations, connect urban and rural areas, and cross mountains and seas, promoting social justice through educational equity" [10].

Construction and Support of the Teaching Staff: The state, via the conventional education system, develops a substantial cadre of high-caliber and professional educators, so furnishing a talent reservoir for the educational endeavor. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the importance of teachers' in-service training and ongoing education to enhance their professional competencies. The Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to "refine the mechanism for moral cultivation and education" and "augment teachers' capacity to disseminate knowledge and educate individuals" [11]. At the same time, policies are introduced to improve teachers' social status and treatment levels to attract and retain excellent talents in teaching. For example, the policy of providing living allowances for rural teachers is implemented to stimulate teachers' work enthusiasm and creativity. We should care about and pay attention to grassroots teachers, especially rural teachers, ensure and improve their working and living conditions, implement various policies such as salaries, social insurance, and living allowances, and give appropriate preferential treatment in terms of staffing, professional title evaluation, and selection of advanced individuals so that they can "go down, stay, and teach well" [11].

4. Analysis of the urban-rural differences at the school level

4.1. Analysis of the current situation at the school level

The research on the manifestations of urban-rural differences with schools as the research subject is mainly carried out from the perspectives of the teaching staff, management, and concepts. Chen Min and Ye Peng discovered a significant disparity in the teaching workforce between urban and rural schools, primarily seen in the variations in teachers' educational levels and the availability of replacement teachers. The educational qualifications of teachers in urban schools are higher than those in rural schools; in terms of the number of substitute teachers, the proportion of substitute teachers in rural areas, especially in poor rural areas, is higher than that in urban areas. It also shows characteristics such as low educational levels, unstable teams, and serious loss of excellent teachers [12]. The quantity of urban teachers rose from 2.075 million in 2004 to 4.758 million in 2020, representing an increase of 2.683 million and a growth rate of 129.3%. The quantity of rural teachers has consistently declined, from 5.407 million in 2004 to 2.413 million in 2020, representing a reduction of 2.994 million, equating to a fall rate of 59.2% [13].

Lu Xiaoyao's analysis of school management concepts and management found that in recent years, with the increase in national investment in rural education resources, due to the deficiencies in teaching concepts, teaching management, and teaching technology levels in rural schools, many educational resources cannot be fully and reasonably utilized [14].

4.2. Analysis of the influence of the teaching staff on students' development

The teaching staff is a key factor affecting students' development. Dimensions such as teaching ability, professional ethics, and teacher-student interaction can all have a profound impact on students. The following is a specific analysis:

Teaching Ability: Teachers with strong teaching abilities can explain complex knowledge in a simple and profound way, helping students better understand and absorb it. For example, in mathematics teaching, excellent teachers can guide students to quickly master the solutions to difficult problems through ingenious problem-solving ideas, improving learning efficiency. High school English teachers attach great importance to the important role of teacher questioning in cultivating students' critical reading ability in English reading classes [15]. At the same time, teachers can also teach students in accordance with their aptitudes according to the different learning progress and abilities of students, providing additional tutoring for students with learning difficulties and expanding knowledge for students with spare capacity, meeting the development needs of students at different levels.

Professional Ethics: Good professional ethics are the spiritual lighthouse for students' growth. Teachers' dedicated attitude will make students feel the sense of responsibility for work, inspiring them to go all out in their studies. Some studies have shown that excellent professional ethics are conducive to cultivating students' learning attitudes and interests. Teachers with excellent professional ethics have more attractive classroom lectures, which can better stimulate students' learning potential and promote the formation of students' autonomous learning ability [16].

Teacher-Student Interaction: Positive teacher-student interaction can create a lively classroom atmosphere and stimulate students' learning interest and participation enthusiasm. When the teacher-student relationship is good, students will have a deeper emotional connection with the school. Students will not only perform actively and positively in school life but also often be inspired in their future social work [16]. This emotional connection can also enhance students' sense of belonging to the school and learning, making them more willing to invest in learning and promoting the all-round development of students.

5. Analysis of communities and families

5.1. Analysis of urban-rural community differences

Cities are rich in cultural resources, such as museums, science and technology museums, art galleries, libraries, etc., providing students with a broad space for extracurricular learning. The learning atmosphere within the community is strong, and various learning and communication activities are frequent. At the same time, there are many educational and training institutions in urban communities, which can meet the learning needs of different students and further expand their knowledge horizons and skills. In rural areas, cultural resources are scarce, lacking the above-mentioned cultural venues, and students' extracurricular learning channels are limited. There is a lack of a good learning atmosphere, and most students mainly complete their school homework in their spare time, lacking opportunities for extracurricular expansion learning.

5.2. Analysis of urban-rural family differences

The community plays a crucial role in delivering family education guidance services. Surveys indicate that family education advice services in metropolitan regions are more detailed and thorough, with varied implementation methods. In rural areas, limited by economic conditions, the family education guidance services have achieved little effect [17].

The differences in urban and rural family education can be refined into several typical levels: the family education of left-behind children in rural areas, the family education of rural families accompanying their children to study in cities, the family education of ordinary urban families, and the family education of high-quality urban families [18]. Urban parents attach great importance to their children's education and focus on the cultivation of comprehensive qualities. They not only pay attention to academic performance but also actively support their children in participating in various interest classes and tutoring classes, such as art, sports, science, etc., hoping that their children can develop in an all-round way and be well-prepared for future diversified career paths. They are prepared to commit substantial time and financial resources in their children's education, frequently engaging in parent training and parent-child events offered by schools, while also remaining attentive to updates in educational concepts and methodologies. Although many rural families have bought houses or rented houses in the city, and their children can study in urban schools during the compulsory education stage, the backward family education concepts still make the gap in urban and rural family education very obvious. The family education of left-behind children in rural areas is evidently inferior to that of urban family education in both material and spiritual dimensions [18].

Although some rural parents attach importance to education, restricted by economic conditions and traditional concepts, they care more about whether their children can leave rural areas through education and change the family's economic situation, and they invest relatively less in cultivating their children's interests. In addition, some parents are busy with farming or working outside, so most rural parents lack supervision of their children's studies, and the communication between home and school is not close enough, resulting in a lag in their understanding of new educational trends and concepts.

5.3. The role of communities and families in students' development

Communities and families have a significant impact on students' expansion of horizons and cultural edification, provision of practical and social experiences, shaping of social interactions and interpersonal relationships, career cognition and planning, laying the foundation for personality and emotions, cultivation of learning habits and interests, facilitation of the formation of values and moral concepts, and improvement of physical fitness. As the social environment in which children and adolescents live, communities, with factors such as their public facilities, cultural atmosphere, and community activities, also have a positive impact on the physical health of children and adolescents [19]. As the first environment for children and adolescents to grow up in, families, with factors such as their lifestyle, eating habits, and family education, have a direct impact on the physical health of children and adolescents [19].

6. Conclusion

The educational disparities between urban and rural regions manifest at various levels, including national, school, community, and familial levels. Enhancing this condition is crucial for advancing educational equity and fostering societal growth. At the national level, this is manifested in policy guidance and standard establishment, resource allocation and enhancement of conditions, as well as the development and support of the teaching workforce. Variations in the teaching staff among schools contribute to urban-rural disparities, as proficient educators are capable of nurturing a greater number of high-caliber students. Additionally, the influence of communities and families is significant and should not be overlooked. They play an important role in creating a good educational atmosphere, providing educational resource support, carrying out career planning training, promoting the physical and mental development of children, and forming good values. This study still has some limitations. It mainly uses the literature review method, quotes data for comparative analysis, and studies several major aspects. In future research, methods such as field investigations or questionnaires will be used to obtain more accurate and comprehensive information.

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