

Research on the Influence Mechanism of Urban-Rural Education Disparity on the Social Mobility of Adolescents

-- A case study from the perspective of equity in nine-year compulsory education

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Abstract:

This study analyzes urban and rural adolescents in the nine-year compulsory education stage in China, and combines Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction with the framework of new institutional economics, Amartya Sen's theory of capacity deprivation, and China's special urban-rural dual structure to explore the multiple effects of urban-rural differences on the social mobility of adolescents.

Keywords: urban-rural disparity, educational equity, social mobility, nine-year compulsory education, implicit factors

1. Introduction

This article delves into the key issue of regional disparities in the distribution of educational resources resulting from the urban-rural dual structure. Using a combination of questionnaire surveys, literature reviews, and text analyses, and drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and the framework of new institutional economics, Amartya Sen's theory of capacity deprivation, and China's special urban-rural dual structure, This study examines how unequal access to educational resources, differences in participation in the educational process, and different educational outcomes jointly shape the trajectory of social mobility among adolescents, revealing the "explicit" and "implicit" dual deprivation effects of the allocation of educational resources between urban and rural

areas and their long-term impact on social mobility. An analysis was conducted at key life stages such as academic progress, employment opportunities, and income levels to gain a comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of educational disparities. The findings suggest that: (1) The urban-rural educational disparity weakens the social mobility of rural adolescents through the "structure-capital-mobility" three-stage path; (2) The household registration system and economic decentralization policy form a "double lock-in effect", exacerbating educational inequality; (3) The implicit factors (family cultural capital, feeling of school belonging) have a greater impact on rural students' willingness to pursue higher education than the explicit resource differences.

2. Research background and significance

In 2023, further efforts were made to improve the quality of compulsory education. The consolidation rate of nine-year compulsory education reached 95.7%[1] percent, and historic achievements were made in the popularization of basic education. However, the problem of uneven distribution of educational resources due to China's unique urban-rural dual structure remains prominent. The average educational expenditure for urban school students is 2.3 times[2] that of rural students, and the annual teacher turnover rate in rural areas is 8.2%. Urban areas have an advantage in terms of teaching staff and facilities, while rural areas face difficulties such as backward infrastructure and staff turnover. This disparity undermines educational equity and limits the social mobility of rural youth. Educational equity is closely related to social mobility. A study by the World Bank (2018) shows that uneven distribution of educational resources in developing countries leads to a 20%-30%[3] reduction in income for children from poor families as adults. In China, there is still much room for improvement in the proportion of rural students entering key universities. The disparity in education between urban and rural areas has become a key driver of social class solidification, while promoting educational equity can enhance social mobility and thereby weaken class solidification[4]. Therefore, exploring the mechanism by which the disparity in education between urban and rural areas affects social mobility is of great practical significance for improving education policies and promoting social equity.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do the differences in education between urban and rural areas affect adolescent social mobility through explicit and implicit pathways?
- (2) How does the urban-rural disparity in different regions affect the social mobility of adolescents?
- (3) What hidden urban-rural problems will further exacerbate educational inequality? (Family/School/Individual)
- (4) How to put forward targeted policy recommendations in light of China's urban-rural dual structure?

4. Literature review

Since the implementation of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986, the coverage rate of nine-year compulsory education in China has increased significantly, reaching 95.7%[5] percent in 2023, which means that China's efforts to promote educational equity since the reform and opening up have paid off well. Compulsory education has laid the foundation[6] for the accumulation of human resources in the country through the goal of all-round development in morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics and labor. But the problem of uneven distribution of educational resources due to the urban-rural dual structure remains prominent. The root cause of the urban-rural disparity can be traced back to the legacy of the household registration system. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the household registration system was gradually reformed. This reform endowed the household registration with more and more political, economic and social functions, making it have multiple functions such as population information management, regional factor flow control and social welfare coverage, thus forming the distinctive urban-rural dual household registration system[7]. Cities, relying on the economic agglomeration effect, have developed educational resource advantages[8], while small cities (rural areas) have lagged behind due to the traditional geographical social structure. This structural contradiction not only affects explicit educational indicators (enrollment rates), but also the implicit social mobility[9] of teenagers through differences in cultural capital accumulation. Existing studies have mostly analyzed the urban-rural disparity[10] from explicit dimensions such as the allocation of educational resources, teaching staff, and hardware facilities, but implicit factors such as family cultural capital, school social networks, and individual psychological states are often overlooked. The high mobility of teachers and the lack of vocational training in rural schools will further widen the gap in teaching quality. From the perspective of social mobility, the disparity in education between urban and rural areas affects the development of adolescents through pathways such as the differentiation of pathways for further education, unequal employment opportunities, and the intensification of inter-generational transmission. Rural students are more likely to choose vocational education or direct employment due to information asymmetry and insufficient policy inclination; Urban graduates get more high-paying jobs through alumni networks, while rural students tend to enter low-

skill industries; The educational disadvantage leads to the solidification of economic status in rural families, creating a “poverty trap” . [11]

Combining Bourdieu’ s theory of social stratification with the theory of educational equity, this study presents a three-dimensional analytical framework of “structure-capital-mobility” . In the structural dimension, the urban-rural dual system and the household registration system restrict the flow of resources; In the capital dimension, differences in family cultural capital between urban and rural areas affect academic achievement; In terms of mobility, unequal educational opportunities reduce the possibility of rural teenagers moving upward. The innovation of this study lies in incorporating hidden factors such as psychological resilience and social support networks into the analysis to reveal the differentiated coping strategies of urban and rural teenagers in the face of educational inequality. The study shows that the proportion of normal psychological stress among urban students is higher than that among rural students, while the proportion of mild and severe psychological stress among urban students [12] is lower than that among rural students, possibly through ways such as attending interest classes, having favorite toys, and seeking psychological counseling. In addition, from different cases in the eastern, central and western regions of China, regional differences also affect the equalization of educational opportunities. The economic and educational gaps between the east and the west, and between urban and rural areas are widening further [13] . Cities in the east are more likely to achieve educational balance due to economic advantages, while rural areas in the west are constrained by financial input, and the gap continues to widen. Although studies have focused on the surface of the disparity in education between urban and rural areas, problems such as policy implementation bias, the potential for technology empowerment, and the lack of long-term tracking data remain. The implementation of central policies at the local level is constrained by fiscal capacity and administrative efficiency, leading to problems in the “last mile” of resource allocation [14] ; It remains to be seen whether digital education can bridge the gap in teaching quality between urban and rural areas. Most of the existing data are based on cross-sectional studies, making it difficult to reveal the cumulative effect of educational differences on social mobility.

The disparity in education between urban and rural areas is not only a matter of resource allocation, but also a

manifestation of social structural contradictions. Future policies need to shift from “precise intervention” to “systematic reconstruction” . To achieve a positive interaction between educational equity and social mobility, we need to optimize the fiscal transfer payment mechanism, enhance support for the career development of rural teachers, use technology to narrow the information gap, and carry out multi-dimensional reforms.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 The core interpretation of Bourdieu’ s theory of cultural capital

Bourdieu believes that the education system achieves the reproduction of social classes through the accumulation and transformation of cultural capital. Cultural capital includes embodied capital, objectified capital and institutionalized capital [15]. In the context of the educational disparity between urban and rural areas in China, the difference in embodied capital is reflected in the fact that urban families shape their children’ s cognitive abilities and non-cognitive skills through early education investments, such as English enlightenment and art training, while rural families, constrained by economic conditions, rely more on school education to develop [16] basic abilities. Objective capital is reflected in an individual’ s economic ability and material foundation. Urban families tend to be able to provide good learning conditions for their children, while rural families may not be able to support their children to receive a better education due to their poor economic foundation. According to CFPS (2020) data, the proportion of children from urban families participating in after-school tutoring is 72%, compared with only 28% in rural areas. This disparity directly leads to a gap in academic performance between urban and rural students - the average math score of urban junior high school students is 15.3 points higher than that of rural students. In terms of institutionalized capital, urban students are more likely to be admitted to key schools thanks to quality educational resources, while rural students, with limited opportunities for further education, tend to go to vocational schools or enter the workforce directly [17] .

5.2 The application of Amatia Sen’ s Theory of deprivation of ability

In Amatia Sen’ s theory of deprivation of ability, an individual’ s development depends on their opportunity to

convert resources into actual “abilities” . In the field of education, the disparity between urban and rural areas is not only reflected in the gap in resource input, but also in the inability of rural teenagers to expand their abilities due to institutional barriers. Due to the shortage of teachers in rural schools, it is difficult to carry out quality education programs such as laboratory classes and club activities, resulting in lagging development of students’ innovation ability and social skills. The long-term scarcity of resources and the pressure of college entrance have caused “academic anxiety” in 68% of students in rural schools, compared with 42%[18] in urban schools. This mental exhaustion limits the development of students’ abilities in all aspects. Amatia Sen’s theory suggests that educational equity policies need to shift from “equalization of resources” to “empowerment of capabilities” , such as enhancing the resilience of rural students through mental health support systems.

5.3 The special urban-rural dual structure in China

China’s household registration system further reinforces the traditional urban-rural dual social structure, while China’s urban-rural dual structure has significant institutional obstacles in the field of education. In 2015, children of the migrant population in Chongqing were not allowed to take the joint entrance examination for key high schools. Students with non-local household registration in Chengdu could take the high school entrance examination in Chengdu, but they could only apply for the transfer enrollment, not the regular[19] enrollment. This binding of household registration to educational rights makes it difficult for rural students to access quality educational resources across regions. Although the household registration system has changed since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, local government investment in education has always been constrained by fiscal revenue, and the per-student funding for rural schools in economically backward areas is only one-third[20] of that in urban areas. The household registration system and the policy of economic decentralization jointly form a “institution-economy” double lock, restricting the social mobility paths of rural youth.

5.4 “Structure-capital-mobility” three-dimensional analytical framework

The “policy barriers” formed by the urban-rural dual system and institutional obstacles (household registration,

finance) restricting the flow of resources affect educational equity in the structural dimension. Explicit capital (educational funds, hardware facilities) and implicit capital (cultural capital, psychological resilience) jointly determine the development of individual capabilities. Uneven educational opportunities affect intergenerational mobility through the paths of further education, employment and income. Ultimately, it leads to the solidification of social classes. Many existing studies have examined the impact of overt factors on social mobility, but this study has incorporated more of the implicit factors into its research scope.

The hidden factors are first reflected in the intergenerational transmission of family cultural capital. Urban families accumulate extracurricular knowledge through “shadow education” , while rural families pay more attention to test-taking skills[21] due to economic pressure. This disparity leads to a divergence in adaptability between urban and rural students at the higher education stage. Secondly, urban schools build social support networks through alumni associations and school-enterprise cooperation, while rural students rely more on blood ties and have limited accumulation of social capital. The social network effect resulting from school belonging also gradually intensifies class solidification.

6. Case studies (Gradient representation of urban-rural differences in eastern, central and western China)

This study selects three provinces in the east (Jiangsu province), the central (Hubei province), and the west (Sichuan province) for case analysis to reveal the regional heterogeneity of urban-rural educational differences.

In eastern China, Jiangsu Province implements “group-based education” , and through the “education grouping” model, it bundles high-quality urban schools with weak rural schools for development. Take Nanjing as an example. The Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education (2023) has guided Gulou District to form 12 education groups covering 80% of rural schools. The “education grouping” model has achieved remarkable results in recent years. The per-student funding gap between urban and rural areas has dropped from 1.8 times in 2015 to 1.2 times in 2023. The proportion of urban teachers rotating to rural schools each year has reached 15%, and the proportion of rural teachers with undergraduate degrees has increased to 65%. But the group-based education model

relies on financial input and is difficult to replicate in economically underdeveloped areas. For example, rural schools in Yancheng still face the problem of outdated laboratory equipment due to insufficient funds.

Nanyang City in Henan Province, a major agricultural city in central China, has a typical problem with the allocation of rural educational resources. According to the Henan Province Education Statistical Yearbook (2022), in 2021, 24% of rural junior high school students in Zhoukou City were admitted to key high schools, compared with 63% in urban areas. In terms of hardware facilities, the coverage rate of multimedia classrooms in rural schools is only 45%, far lower than 92% in urban areas; In terms of teacher training, only 38% of rural teachers have received systematic information training. The disparity in family cultural capital is even more pronounced: urban families spend an average of 12,000 yuan per year on after-school education, while rural families spend only 3,500 yuan [22]. In addition, 72% of rural parents focus too much on the goal of education and neglect the development [23] of overall qualities.

In western China, Liangshan Prefecture in Sichuan Province has fallen into the predicament of being a “resource depression”. According to a 2023 survey by the education department of Sichuan Province, the per-student funding for rural schools in Liangshan Prefecture is only a quarter of that in Chengdu, and the average annual teacher turnover rate is as high as 15%. Rural schools have poor hardware facilities. Thirty percent of the schools have no standardized laboratories and computer classes rely on volunteers for temporary teaching. There are many minority students in Liangshan Prefecture. Due to the differences in language and culture, only 35% of students of the Yi nationality can fully adapt to Chinese language teaching, and they are subject to implicit discrimination from their peers in both study and life. The long-term shortage of resources has led to “learned helplessness” among rural students, with 40% choosing to work after graduating from junior high school.

7. Policy recommendations and Summaries

7.1 .Policy recommendations

Based on research findings, the following systematic reform paths are proposed:

It is possible to optimize the resource allocation mechanism, establish an “urban-rural education balance index”, dynamically adjust fiscal transfer payments, and give priority to rural areas in the central and western regions. To break down institutional barriers, the government should promote the pooling of provincial education funds and reduce the constraints of regional fiscal capacity differences on rural education. At the same time, rural areas need to strengthen the implicit capital support system, set up rural community education centers, and provide free after-school tutoring, mental health counseling and career planning services. With the development of information technology, technology empowerment and precise intervention are particularly important. By building a big data monitoring platform for education, regions can track the implementation of policies in real time and avoid misappropriation of resources and “last mile” deviations.

7.2 Research summary

The essence of the educational disparity between urban and rural areas is a microcosm of the structural contradictions in society. To solve this problem, we need to go beyond the single-resource input mindset and turn to a systematic reconstruction of coordinated reforms in institutions, technologies and cultures. Only by optimizing resource allocation, breaking down institutional barriers and empowering hidden capital can we truly unblock social mobility channels and provide rural youth with a fair starting point for development. This is not only about educational equity, but also the core support for achieving rural revitalization and common prosperity. Only by building consensus through multi-dimensional reforms can the promise of “education changes destiny” be translated into the real life picture of every rural child.

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