

Mitigating the rural-urban disparities in Chinese compulsory basic education

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Abstract

This review paper highlights the Chinese education context in rural areas and discusses some of the initiatives taken by the government in addressing the issue of disparity in accessing quality education. In particular, the review paper reflects the status of compulsory basic education in rural China from 1990s onwards, government support in rural schools and the initiatives to mitigate the rural-urban disparities. Few initiatives by the government to tackle rural-urban disparities include but not limited to government's commitment to the national policy of education, Free Normal Education Policy (FNE) of 2007, teacher mobility policy implemented from 2010 to 2020, compulsory school merger program in 2000, rural school mapping adjustment policy of 2001, abolishing Hukou system as well as compulsory basic education.

Keywords: Chinese education system; rural-urban disparities; compulsory basic education; quality of education

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1. Introduction

Education is the driving force to achieve economic development in any country. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for decades now, China has been struggling to mitigate the urban-rural disparities in the education system to help the population from rural areas which were lagging behind in education to acquire quality education as in urban areas (OECD, 2016). The observed disparities today emerged due to some of the social and economic policies introduced many years back, one of which include the Hukou policy which started in 1950s (Liu & Xing, 2016). Hukou system is a domicile registration system that accords rights and obligations to families based on their birth status; this restricts migrants from the rural areas from having equal education opportunities when they move to the urban or town areas (OECD, 2016; Chan, 2010; Montgomery, 2012; Donzuso, 2015). Hukou was the government policy which required people to be registered based on their areas hence limit them from accessing education opportunities beyond their areas (Liu & Xing, 2016). One of the repercussions on implementing this policy was widening the gap in accessing the education and its quality between the urban and rural areas. Migrants who moved to the cities and towns found it difficult to enroll their children to the public schools.

Since the availability of social services like education in rural areas declined as a result of economic disabilities of counties and rural authorities to provide them, many people migrated to the urban areas for job opportunities and better social services (Liu & Xing, 2016). The consequences of these migrations created a serious education disparity between rural and urban areas in China. Migrant children did not get the access to the public schools in the urban areas due to the limitation stipulated in the Hukou policy. Therefore, those children who remained in rural areas had poor attendance and performance in education (OECD, 2016; Montgomery, 2012). This situation created a notable gap between the urban and rural areas in the quality and access to education. Many schools in the rural areas had unequal distribution of resources thus, low quality education hence, leading to many families to migrate to the urban areas (Xu & Wu, 2015; Zhang, 2016). Therefore, this paper explains the disparity in the access to quality education and initiatives established and implemented by the government in mitigating the profound gap.

1.1 Chinese education context

China is the leading country in the world with a population of 1.4 billion people. In 2011, almost half of the population lived in urban areas while the other half was living in rural areas (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). In managing this large and diverse country, responsibilities have been distributed to provinces, towns and county authorities to manage the provision of education. A report by OECD (2016) shows that primary and secondary school affairs are under county management while higher education is under provincial management. The compulsory education introduced in 1985 comprises 6 years of primary education and 3 years of junior secondary education (Ngok, 2007; Rong & Shi, 2001). Given that, half of the population is living in the rural areas as stated earlier; there are many children i.e. about 38% in the age of attending compulsory basic education fails to complete the compulsory basic education of 9 years (Zhang, Li, & Xue, 2015). This trend has widened the disparity in the education between the rural and the urban, thus calling for the government to reduce this gap through various initiatives. According to OECD (2016), China has around 15 million teachers in 500,000 compulsory basic schools. Apart from good performance in Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, still there is a huge disparity in the education between the rural and the urban areas which needs further interventions to reduce the gap.

The historical background of Chinese education system may be considered as the source of the disparity which has now become one of the major concerns in sustainability of Chinese economic development, as Ngok

(2007) calls it “a perennial problem”. The first government school was established in 124 BC which was a special for the Royal Family members not to all people. This eliminated the others hence creating the educational gap within the same society. Moreover from the years 587 to 1905 there was a famous Imperial Civil Examination, where those who passed received a high social status compared to the others hence acting as a bridge in attaining the social status and recognition while there were no means of assisting those who failed; only the wealthy and royal families managed to hire good teachers to prepare them for the examinations; and having key schools for special groups (OECD, 2010). These practices also helped a lot to consolidate the emerging disparity in education opportunities by creating classes.

The tendency of the government policies to recognize ethnic minorities cemented the disparity as people from the rural had no opportunity to join urban schools where the quality of education was relatively higher (Zhang et al., 2015). Teachers hardly took teaching jobs in rural due to the poor economic situation and unattractive remuneration compared to the urban (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). Also leaving the management of teachers to local authorities extended the gap as counties with poor economic level had poor working condition for teachers, such as salaries, housing and resources (Tsang & Ding, 2005).

The rural-urban disparity is also contributed by migration of people to urban areas for economic reasons like looking for jobs for better life, the children from the rural have no opportunity to join schools in the urban hence receives informal kind of education (Zhang et al., 2015). Some scholars posit that the migration from rural to urban is partly contributed by closure of some rural schools (cf. Liu & Xing, 2016). This claim is challenged since the migration started even before when the government decided to close some schools. According to Cai, Chen and Zhu (2017), schools were merged and some were closed due to high rate of migration to the urban areas for better jobs hence left very few children to attend.

Also, there are some factors like demographic aspects, health issues, level of education of parents, parenting styles and how much is spent in education at family level which contribute much to widening the disparity between rural and urban (Zhang et al., 2015). Poor families failed to send their children to better schools because of high fees. This also made the government to abolish the school fees for compulsory basic education (Rao & Ye, 2016; Donzuso, 2015).

Addressing the rural-urban disparity in education opportunities is very important for China as one of the developing countries. Promoting quality education and mitigating the gap will develop more talents for innovation and creativity which is central in the economic development. Also there will be adequate skilled labor forces to provide technical and professional services and consultancies for economic growth.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The paper seeks to explain the origin of the urban-rural disparities in education and explains the government attempts to mitigate the disparities with the intention of improving the quality of education particularly in rural areas. A range of articles and policy documents were collected and reviewed. Specifically, the review aimed at exploring the urban-rural disparities in the Chinese education system and examining the efforts made in mitigating the disparities for better education system. To achieve these specific objectives, the following research questions guided this review.

- What are the urban-rural disparities in the Chinese education system?
- What initiatives have been put in place by the Chinese government in mitigating the urban-rural educational disparities?

2. Methodology

The study reviewed articles and policies explaining the education disparities and initiatives to mitigate the disparities between rural and urban areas in China. The reviewed articles are those published between the year

2006 and 2017 respectively. The literature reviewed were searched from BNU online library, reports from organizations like OECD and UNESCO which explain about the Chinese education system and the efforts to reduce the urban-rural gap in education accessibility. Different keywords were used to search for appropriate articles which best gave the information to answer the research questions concerning education disparities between rural and urban in China and initiatives introduced in addressing the problem. The searching words include; urban-rural disparities in China, Education equity in china, trends in the Chinese education, education policies in China, rural-urban inequality in China, rural education in China, urban education in China, access in the Chinese education and urban-rural education disparities in China. 15 articles that explain about policies and initiatives to address the rural-urban disparities in China were selected. Table 1 below is the summary of the reviewed articles showing the authors and titles of the articles and reports. The analysis was made and the key findings were presented in the sections based on the type of initiatives they explain.

Table 1*Summary of the reviewed articles*

No	Author	Title of the Article
1	Brock (2009)	Moving mountains stone by stone: Reforming rural education in China
2	Cai, Chen, & Zhu (2017)	Has the compulsory school merger program reduced the welfare of rural residents in China?
3	Fu, Yang, & Lin (2015)	Teacher education policy research in China: A decade review and reflection
4	Hong, Liu, Ma, & Luo (2015)	The way to early childhood education equity - policies to tackle the urban-rural
5	Li (2016)	Who decided college access in Chinese secondary education? Rural-urban inequality of basic education in contemporary China
6	Liu & Xing (2016)	Migrate for education: An unintended effect of school district combination in rural China
7	Luo & Mkandawire (2015)	Are fruits of free normal education policy real or mythical?: A critical appraisal of the free teacher education policy meant to promote rural education in China
8	Ngok (2007)	Chinese education policy in the context of decentralization and marketization: Evolution and implications
9	OECD (2010)	Shanghai and Hong Kong: Two distinct examples of education reform in China
10	OECD (2016)	Education in CHINA: A snapshot
11	Rao & Ye (2016)	From a virtuous cycle of rural-urban education to urban-oriented rural basic education in China: An explanation of the failure of China's rural school mapping adjustment policy
12	Zhang & Minxia (2006).	Universalizing nine-year compulsory education for poverty reduction in rural China
13	Xinzhi, Lu, & Chunyan (2014)	Evaluation on the efficiency of policy implementation for teacher mobility of disparities in China compulsory education between rural and urban areas in China
14	Zhang, Li, & Xue (2015)	Education inequality between rural and urban areas of the People's Republic of China, migrants' children education, and some Implications
15	Zhou & Cheung (2017).	Hukou system effects on migrant children's education in China: Learning from past disparities

3. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings obtained from reviewed articles to respond to the study questions. The key findings includes the status of education in rural areas in china since 1990, government support to rural schools, initiatives taken to mitigate the rural-urban disparities in education. Most of the initiatives are policies introduced to improve the environments for compulsory basic education in the whole country. The following are the explanation of these findings.

3.1 Education status in rural China since 1990's

China has been struggling to solve the issue of inequality of opportunities to access quality education. In 1997, there were around 140 million illiterate people and the majority was from the rural areas, while out of that number of illiterate people 70% were women (Ngok, 2007). This was a result of the massive migration of people from the rural to the urban areas from early 1990's which reached up to 100 million people migrating to the urban areas resulting to the decrease of the enrolment rate and number the of schools in the rural areas (Liu & Xing, 2016). As discussed earlier, these migrants were affected by the Hukou policy which denied the access of their children to better public schools for quality education. In addition, children who were left in the rural areas had poor attendance records and parental care which affected their schooling process (OECD, 2010, 2016).

China did and is still implementing some initiatives to improve education services in rural areas for the betterment of the societies and contributing to the economic development of the country. According to Luo and

Mkandawire (2015), in 2011 the Chinese rural population was 50% the same as in the urban areas. In contrast, the enrolment ratio was lower in rural schools compared to urban and city areas (Ngok, 2007). In 2010, about 100 million rural children were enrolled for compulsory basic education whereby 38% of them did not manage to complete the 9-years of compulsory education, while only 2% reached universities compared to 54% of the urban children (Zhang et al, 2015). The factors associated with the poor rate in transition to basic education include the perceptions regarding low benefits in education and also lack of parental care as most of the parents migrated to the cities for jobs.

The performances in rural areas also have been poor due to the lack of quality learning environment (Li, 2016). According to Zhang et al. (2015), the performance of students in rural schools is lower than that of the urban students and 61% of urban residents believe that students in urban schools have performed better than students from rural schools. One of the reasons is that, many graduate teachers are reluctant to work in rural areas because of the low remuneration compared to urban setting (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). Also unequal distributions of educational resources, materials and funding between rural and urban schools have contributed to the worsening condition of the quality education in rural areas (Hong, Liu, Ma, & Luo, 2016).

3.2 Government support for rural schools

The Chinese government increased its investment in rural schools to fasten the improvement of the quality of education (Zhang et al., 2015). The support included free primary education starting from 2001 to help parents who failed to enroll their children due to financial challenges (Rao & Ye, 2016). In order to ensure the availability of adequate and qualified teachers, the government introduced Free Normal Education (FNE) in 2007, which offered free university education to teachers who were willing to go and work in rural schools (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). This, however, failed to help in attaining the expected impact as still the enrolment in rural areas continued to decrease in kindergarten and primary education level. According to Hong et al (2015), enrolment in the rural areas decreased from 40% in 2010 to 28% in 2012 while in the urban it increased from 59% to 72% in the same years. This pushed the government to provide funds for free kindergarten education in 2012. In regard to this condition of disparity between rural and urban in accessing quality education, the government had to intervene and change the discriminative policies which did not consider the migrant children from rural areas in accessing education in urban area (Zhang et al., 2015). Some of the interventions introduced and implemented by the government are as explained in the following sections of this paper.

3.3 Initiatives to mitigate the rural-urban disparities

The education disparities were partly caused by the policies like Hukou which restricted opportunities to access education for some children who migrated to other places (Montgomery, 2012). To address and remove the gaps of accessing the quality education between rural and urban, in different times the government has been implementing some initiatives to mitigate the gap. Some of the initiatives are explained here below with challenges they face in trying to improve the quality of rural education which has been very low for many years. In this regard, few policies which have considerable contribution in mitigating the disparities were reviewed.

National policy of education - In 1982 the national education policy decided to abolish school labelling that created classes between the rich and poor families as well as the rural and urban schools (OECD, 2010). Also, there were several initiatives taken like improving the working environments, renovation of schools and offering training programs for rural teachers to improve their teaching skills, as well as promoting standards as a motivation (OECD, 2016). Again the government called for local governments and schools to improve the working environments including houses to attract and retain qualified teachers and improve the general conditions for achieving compulsory basic education (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). The only way to improve the rural school working environment is to make them attractive with high quality resources for teachers. This would motivate them to work to their best in creative and innovative ways to help students acquire quality education.

Free normal education policy – The Free Normal Education (FNE) was introduced in 2007 to provide free teacher education programs for students who would go to work in rural areas and improve the quality of education there (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). There was little investment in rural education like poor infrastructures, low teacher pay and arrears leading to high rate of student dropout (Ngok, 2007). This was the factor for low enrolment and attendance rate in rural areas hence prompted the introduction of the FNE policy in order to have more teachers in rural schools so as to revive the quality of education.

The policy required them to go and work in the rural schools for at least two years before they are offered a teaching job in cities. However, the approach was not successful as number of graduates did not go to work in the rural areas as expected due to poor working conditions (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). One of the success of the policy in its early years of implementation includes changing of years of schooling in the urban from 7 to 12 and in the rural from 4 to 8 years in 2010 respectively (Zhang et al., 2015). The policy was somewhat able to improve the situation in both rural and urban areas. Also the number of students enrolled for compulsory basic education increased with a large number of new students registered (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). However, the changes and improvements in the rural areas were still marginal thus required mire initiatives to pull the quality to match that of the public schools in the urban areas.

The policy lacked the key target in motivating individual teachers to go and work in rural areas. Providing free teacher education gave parents a relief since it is their responsibility to assist their children through paying school fees. The government could have opted to use the money to improve the working environment in rural so as to attract young graduates. The policy through agreement between government and students, required students to go to work in rural schools on a specified period of time if they want to take urban teaching jobs while receiving the same salary as urban teachers (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). The policy failed to internalize the urge for graduates to feel that they are obliged to repay the favour by working in the rural areas to support the provision of quality education (Li, 2016). The government should make a thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the policy and then change the approach to make rural working environment and conditions more attractive.

Likewise, the government should introduce a reliable mechanism of ensuring sustainable funding to the education system in both rural and urban (Li, 2016). This may involve centralizing the teachers' salaries in order to make them equal in both, rural and urban areas so as to remove the disparity in the two different places (Rong & Shi, 2001). Regardless of the FNE policy which intended to prepare many teachers who would go to work in rural areas, still most of them were not willing to work in such areas (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). Eight years after the introduction and the implementation of FNE which had little emphasis on kindergarten education, teachers for kindergarten schools are still few. The teacher student ratio in rural areas is 1:48 compared to 1:21 in the urban areas (Hong et al., 2015). The situation requires also intervention since they are preparing children for basic education. If kindergarten schools are neglected, it will be hard to achieve the compulsory basic education. Kindergarten prepares children to join primary education, if they are weak then there will be very small number of students in primary schools and fewer in secondary schools. At the end the gap will continue to exist in spite of all the efforts and investment injected in improving the balanced education system.

Teacher mobility policy - The policy was planned to be implemented from 2010 to 2020 intending to improve the quality of education in the countryside of China (rural areas) having challenges of quality and adequate teaching resources and few qualified teachers to support the compulsory basic education (Xinzhi, Lu, & Chunyan, 2014). The mobility of teachers is supported by proper coordination of adequate resources to help teachers utilize their full capabilities in creativity and innovativeness to improve the learning environment in rural areas (Fu, Yang, & Lin, 2015). The target goal of implementing this policy was to improve the quality of education through motivating teachers by giving them incentives and supplying adequate resources so as to facilitate teaching.

Adequately, Xinzhi et al. (2014) assert that despite the number of challenges like limited support from the responsible authorities, the policy was expected to improve the quality of education in rural and countryside in

the country. The efforts sought to address quality education including improving the working environments, renovation of schools and offering training programmes for rural teachers so as to improve their teaching skills, as well as promoting the standards as a motivational factor (OECD, 2016). The limitations in the policy implementation included the substitute policies in the process, incomplete implementation of the mobility policy and inappropriate supervision in the implementation process (Fu et al, 2015). Thus, it is imperative for the policy goals to be worked upon so as to achieve them. However, this requires a modified mechanism which may match with the current situation in rural areas.

Compulsory school merger program – This program started in 2000 with the main emphasis on compulsory basic education of 9 years of which by then it was 6 years for primary education and 3 years for junior secondary education which started before the compulsory school merger program (Nanzhao et al., 2007). Its implementation was in two phases, 1995 to 2000 and from 2001 to 2005 which in total helped around 250 million children to access education (Zhang & Minxia, 2006).

Compulsory school merger program aimed at abolishing some of basic schools so that only few which are controllable can remain and be improved with adequate resources, facilities and renovation (Zhang & Minxia, 2006). The government expectation was to ensure adequate support in terms of resources, facilities and staff aiming to improve the quality of education (Cai et al., 2017). In this regard, the World Bank in collaboration with Chinese government spent a large amount of money in renovating the dilapidated school buildings, restoring quality facilities and placing improved resources for quality education (Zhang & Minxia, 2006).

The tangible impact of the policy implementation includes increased enrolment, large number of children meeting the set standards of competencies, and teachers were competently trained to assist children in the learning process (Zhang & Minxia, 2006). This led to the increase of financial burden to the poor families in rural areas for costs to cover the distance from home to those centralized schools. Another impact relates to the diminishing support from counties and provincial authorities (Cai et al., 2017). Therefore the success of this policy in mitigating the rural-urban disparity requires more collaboration among the stakeholders.

Abolishing Hukou system - Although the Hukou system still exists in other aspects of the social and economic development, in education sector Hukou is being gradually phased out allowing migrant children to access education opportunities in urban areas (Zhou & Cheung, 2017). Due to the life situations in rural areas and low capacity of local governments to finance the education system, the quality of education in rural areas was poor forcing parents and children to migrate to the urban areas for better education opportunities (Xu & Wu, 2015). Children from rural areas had limited opportunity to access the high quality public schools in urban areas because the Hukou system restricted them from being enrolled (Hong et al., 2015; Li, 2016). They were allowed to join private schools which were poorly managed and had low quality as compared with the public schools (Liu & Xing, 2016). In this situation, many children from rural areas failed to achieve the compulsory basic education (Li, 2016).

In many parts of China, recently, the authorities have allowed migrant children to be enrolled in the public schools in cities or towns where they migrated to (Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Zhou & Cheung, 2017). Since 2002, in Shanghai, the policy has been emphasizing that education for migrant children should be a responsibility of the recipient city and they should attend the public schools (OECD, 2010). Also in 2010, the Hangzhou government in Zhejiang province introduced a new policy requiring children to be treated equally regardless of their place of origin (Donzuso, 2015). This has been regarded as a notable step towards mitigating the rural-urban education disparities and helps to achieve compulsory basic education in the country. This results in the increment of students' enrolment in both rural and urban areas. According to Luo and Mkandawire (2015), in 2010 the number of high school students in urban were 8.5 million with 2.9 million being new students while in rural areas there were 1.6 million students with 567,141 new students.

Project aimed to support compulsory basic education - The compulsory basic education in China started in 1986 and the focus was to improve education in rural and poverty stricken areas (Nanzhao et al., 2007). Zhang

and Minxia (2006) argue that although some initiatives to ensure the accessibility of the basic education have been proposed since 1949, the government has placed more emphasis on the issue after experiencing a noticeable widening gap between the rural and urban in terms of achieving basic education. The move further got support after the Jomtien conference of 1990 on Education For All (EFA) which emphasized universalization of the basic education (UNESCO, 1994). Thereafter, a number of initiatives were made to ensure the provision and accessibility of the compulsory basic education to all people in rural and urban areas.

The World Bank basic education project of 1992-2002 in poor areas was another initiative to improve the compulsory basic education in poor areas in China (Zhang & Minxia, 2006). The project supported the improvement of education environment including resources and facilities to help in increasing the enrolment and attendance of children. In the same period there was a Sino-UNICEF Project which worked to promote primary education in poor counties (Zhang & Minxia, 2006). All these efforts had one goal in common i.e. improving compulsory basic education and make all children achieve the 9-years of schooling. In some areas it was not successful due to urbanization where many rural dwellers moved to urban areas (Rao & Ye, 2016). This required a very flexible and dynamic approach to help the implementation of the compulsory basic education in such context where there was a high movement of people from rural to urban.

The GANSU basic education project from 1999 to 2006 also aimed at improving the quality of education in rural and poor areas to mitigate inequality in accessing education opportunities (Brock, 2009). The project contributed to the increase of enrolment by 12% in five years whereby student drop out was also reduced and about 7000 teachers were trained. However, its sustainability was dependent on funds from Department for International Development (DFID) from United Kingdom. This means after the expiration of the project nothing was put in place to support its continuity. Furthermore, there were no desirable teachers' motivation strategies to retain the trained teachers under the project (Li, 2016).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The education disparities in China between rural and urban have elements of self-perpetuating process whereby the more interventions are implemented to address it the higher new avenues of maintaining the gap emerge. Some scholars call this a perennial problem, meaning that it is a long lasting problem regardless of the efforts made to address it (Ngok, 2007). This calls for the government to invest more on improving the rural working condition and environment. Personal gains are central in attracting teachers to work in difficult conditions, hence focusing on that could have rendered more positive impact to the improvement of quality of rural education.

Graduates who are required to spend one year in rural schools as novice teachers who still need mentorship to grow will not be helpful in rural areas as far as quality education is concern. There should be adequate teachers with mixed experience so as to help in learning from each other not only novice teachers.

It is recommended that, coordination of the initiatives must have a multiplier impact in all rural areas. Currently many initiatives are implemented in piecemeal; there should be adequate time for implementing and assessing the impact of the initiative. Introducing local policies or initiatives to large extent interferes with other policies hence hinders the targeted goals.

The urban-rural disparity in Chinese education system is a problem rooting from historical and political circumstances. China has the highest population than any country; hence ensuring access to quality education in rural and urban area is still one of the challenging issues. There is high rate of migration of people from rural to urban searching for better jobs and better life. The movement of people makes it difficult to offer quality education. That is why there was a school merger program which abolished some schools in order to have few but good schools in rural areas because people migrate and very few children are left to attend in those schools.

Government also needs to have a program that will cut across all provinces in order to have equal

management of education. This should involve centralization of teachers' remuneration like salaries and allowances. Housing and learning resources should be under local authorities' responsibilities. These approaches will help nationalization of initiatives to improve rural education setting towards achieving the compulsory basic education. These will ensure a reduced if not totally mitigated gap between advantaged urban and disadvantaged rural in terms of having access to quality education.

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