

Analysis of the Impact of the "Rural Teacher Support Program" Policy on Educational Equity in China

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Abstract: In China, educational equity is a significant public concern. To address the urban-rural educational gap, the government launched the "Rural Teacher Support Programme." This paper analyzes the policy's impact on educational equity, detailing its background, objectives, and implementation measures. It assesses the programme's effectiveness in enhancing rural education quality, narrowing the educational divide, and boosting rural students' learning engagement. The research also identifies challenges in implementation, including teacher training, career development, cultural differences, and teacher composition disparities. Recommendations include promoting digitalization, increasing joint funding, and optimizing teacher incentives. Findings reveal notable improvements in the rural teaching workforce, including increased teacher numbers, quality, and living conditions, alongside enhanced stability and professional development opportunities. However, disparities in policy effectiveness persist across provinces, with local governments showing bias in policy tool application, particularly in recruiting and training arts educators. Overall, the programme has successfully diversified policy tools to improve rural teacher retention.

Keywords: Educational equity, Rural teacher support programs, Urban-rural education gap, Incentive mechanisms for rural teachers, Revitalization of rural education.

1. Introduction

Educational equity has increasingly emerged as a critical concern for both the public and governmental bodies in China. Despite the country's rapid economic advancement, notable inequalities in educational resources and opportunities between urban and rural areas continue to exist, presenting a significant obstacle to the realization of educational equity. To address the urban-rural educational divide and foster the revitalization of rural education, the Chinese government initiated the Rural Teacher Support Programme (RTSP) in 2015. This comprehensive initiative is designed to enhance the recruitment, retention, and professional development of rural educators, thereby elevating the quality of education in rural locales [1]. The fundamental components of the policy encompass enhancing educator compensation, streamlining teacher allocation, and instituting incentive structures for rural educators to mitigate elevated attrition rates and the diminished attractiveness of the profession [2]. The implementation of policy instruments differs among various regions, with the adoption of incentive-based strategies being notably restricted in certain provinces, consequently impacting the efficacy of teacher retention efforts [3]. Over the last ten years, the execution of these policies has considerably reduced the educational gap between urban and rural

regions. Nevertheless, rural education continues to encounter obstacles, including inconsistent teacher quality, a shortage of younger educators, and low retention rates, which impede further advancements toward educational equity. Consequently, this paper will utilize literature review and policy analysis methodologies to evaluate the efficacy of the RTSP and suggest possible enhancements.

2. A Brief Overview of China's "Rural Teacher Support Programme" Policy

2.1. Background

The disparity in the distribution of educational resources between urban and rural regions, coupled with a deficit of teaching personnel, has been a persistent challenge in China, which has become increasingly evident over time. Influenced by China's distinctive dual economic framework and the ongoing urbanization process, along with the exodus of rural elites, the appeal of the rural teaching profession remains minimal. This situation complicates the recruitment and retention of educators, resulting in an uneven and inadequate development of the rural teaching workforce[4]. Numerous rural educational institutions encounter a significant deficit of educators, especially in isolated and economically disadvantaged regions. The substandard living and working conditions deter highly qualified professionals from accepting positions in these areas, leading to a scarcity of educational resources. Research indicates that 74.22% of rural educators prioritize salary concerns, and these teachers typically engage in an average of 12 hours of work per day, with 32% required to instruct in 3-4 different subjects. Such demanding workloads have exacerbated both physical and psychological stress among educators, thereby compromising career sustainability and the overall quality of instruction[5]. The educational resources and infrastructure in rural schools remain significantly underdeveloped, and there is a pressing need to enhance the professional competencies and pedagogical skills of educators. This situation results in a quality of education for rural students that is markedly inferior to that of their urban peers. Consequently, since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, there has been a concerted focus on policies aimed at revitalizing rural education. In 2015, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with various departments, issued a directive regarding the "Implementation of the Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015-2020)," which formally initiated the Rural Teacher Support Programme (RTSP) [4]. The core objective of the RTSP is to enhance the government's involvement in developing the rural teaching workforce as a facet of public policy, and assessing its efficacy is categorized within the realm of public policy evaluation [1]. The primary emphasis is on enhancing educator compensation and offering fundamental financial incentives to tackle the teacher shortage and elevated attrition rates. Through programs like the Special Post Teacher Programme, the government seeks to draw a significant number of university graduates to serve in rural regions.

In response to the previously mentioned challenges, the Chinese government has implemented the "Rural Teacher Support Programme" (RTSP). This pivotal policy seeks to rectify the imbalanced allocation of educational resources between urban and rural regions, address the teacher shortage, and mitigate disparities in educational quality. The primary goals of the RTSP encompass enhancing the living conditions of rural educators by offering housing subsidies, medical insurance, and additional allowances, thereby attracting and retaining a greater number of highly qualified teachers. Furthermore, the programme is designed to foster the professional growth of educators through a variety of training and continuing education initiatives, ultimately improving their pedagogical skills and professional competencies while bolstering their job confidence and stability[5]. Moreover, the initiative aims to establish a sustainable teaching workforce by enhancing compensation and providing professional development opportunities to draw in and maintain high-caliber educators in rural regions over the long term, thereby decreasing teacher attrition rates. Furthermore, the initiative

seeks to bridge the educational divide between urban and rural areas by augmenting educational resources and teaching standards in rural settings, fostering educational equity, and guaranteeing that every child has access to quality education, irrespective of their geographical circumstances.

2.2. Solutions

In 2019, China recorded an enrollment of 35 million rural students in educational institutions, supported by around 3.45 million full-time rural educators. Throughout this timeframe, housing subsidies for rural teachers experienced an average increase ranging from 10% to 15%, alongside a significant expansion in medical insurance coverage. Additionally, maintaining a stable teaching workforce remains a primary goal of the "Rural Teacher Support Programme"[4]. In the preliminary stage, the policy predominantly aimed at increasing the remuneration of rural educators and offering fundamental financial incentives to tackle the scarcity of teachers and elevated attrition rates. The implementation of the Special Post Teacher Programme significantly motivated numerous university graduates to pursue teaching positions in rural regions. These initiatives have partially mitigated the deficit of rural teachers and have resulted in initial enhancements in their living and working environments.

3. Analysis of the Influence of Rural Teacher Support Plan on Educational Equity

3.1. Improving the Quality of Education and the Pay of Teachers in Rural China

The "Rural Teacher Support Programme" has been instrumental in elevating the educational standards in rural China. By improving the living conditions of educators and offering professional development opportunities, this initiative has effectively drawn in and maintained a larger pool of qualified teachers. Notably, around 75% of rural educators cited salary-related issues as their foremost concern[4]. Through structured professional development initiatives such as the "National Teacher Training Programme," educators have successfully enhanced their pedagogical competencies and professional expertise, resulting in a significant uplift in the standard of education in rural areas. For instance, in Hubei Province, the enrollment in teacher training programs surged by 25% after the policy's introduction, leading to a notable improvement in teaching quality[1]. Furthermore, the policy advocated for the integration of digital educational technologies within rural educational institutions, tackling the shortage of instructional resources and facilitating access for rural students to superior educational materials. Research indicates that the implementation of digital education technology enhanced classroom engagement in rural schools by 15%. The collaboration between urban and rural schools, coupled with teacher exchanges and resource sharing, enabled rural schools to leverage enhanced educational resources, resulting in a comprehensive enhancement of student academic outcomes [5].

The "Rural Teacher Support Programme" has played a pivotal role in enhancing rural education in China by elevating the living standards of educators and offering professional development opportunities, which in turn helps to attract and retain qualified teaching personnel[1]. In Hubei Province, there was a 25% increase in teacher training participation, which resulted in a significant enhancement in the quality of education[5]. Moreover, the policy enabled the integration of digital educational technologies in rural schools, tackling the scarcity of educational resources and providing rural students with enhanced educational opportunities.

3.2. Narrow the Education Gap between Urban and Rural Areas and Reduce the Transmission of Poverty between Generations

The initiative has successfully reduced the educational disparity between urban and rural regions through various strategies. Primarily, by offering housing subsidies, health insurance, and additional incentives, it has elevated the living standards of rural educators, thereby increasing their commitment to long-term teaching in these areas[6]. Furthermore, the initiation of the Special Post Teacher Programme has drawn a considerable influx of university graduates to rural regions, contributing to the mitigation of the rural teacher deficit. Statistics indicate that following the launch of the Special Post Teacher Programme, the population of rural educators rose by 20%, while the turnover rate among teachers diminished by 30% [6]. Furthermore, the policy has enabled the exchange of educational resources between urban and rural regions, ensuring that rural students have access to the same high-quality education as their urban peers. For instance, programs like urban-rural school collaborations and teacher exchange initiatives have resulted in consistent annual enhancements in the academic performance of rural students, progressively narrowing the disparity between rural and urban learners. These strategies have not only diminished the educational divide between urban and rural areas but have also played a significant role in alleviating intergenerational poverty by elevating educational standards, thus fostering educational equity.

The alleviation of intergenerational poverty signifies that, alongside bridging the educational divide between urban and rural areas, the policy has facilitated greater access for rural children to migrate from their mountainous locales to urban centers for educational pursuits. This transition equips the forthcoming generation with an enhanced educational landscape, cultural resources, and increased opportunities, thereby averting the perpetuation of poverty cycles and diminishing the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

3.3. Enhancing the confidence and learning interest of rural students.

The "Rural Teacher Support Programme" has markedly improved the confidence and enthusiasm of rural students towards learning through a variety of initiatives. The essence of this policy focuses on elevating the pedagogical skills and professional capabilities of rural educators, alongside improving their living and working conditions, which collectively contribute to a more enriching classroom experience for students. For example, through targeted professional development and ongoing education, teachers have undergone systematic skill enhancement, which is directly evident in the heightened engagement and participation of students during lessons. Data indicates that in schools involved in the "Rural Teacher Support Programme," 70% of students reported increased active participation in classes, accompanied by a significant rise in their interest in learning [5]. Additionally, the policy encompasses the mental well-being of both educators and learners by advocating for mental health support programs, offering counseling services to assist them in managing the challenges posed by academic demands and everyday life, ultimately enhancing the overall educational atmosphere [4].

The widespread implementation of digital educational technology represents a notable advancement of the "Rural Teacher Support Programme." This initiative has expanded the learning resources and contemporary pedagogical approaches available to rural students, thereby igniting their curiosity and enhancing their motivation to learn. Online education platforms have facilitated effective connections between urban and rural educational institutions, granting rural students access to high-quality curricular content from urban schools. For instance, the live streaming of classes provides opportunities for synchronous learning experiences. Additionally, electronic learning tools, including tablets and e-books, have been integrated into rural classrooms, significantly boosting students' engagement through interactive applications and gamified learning strategies. Furthermore, the incorporation of virtual classrooms and remote instruction has enabled students in isolated regions

to participate in immersive educational experiences utilizing virtual reality technology. Remote teaching has also empowered highly qualified educators to conduct lessons via video conferencing, effectively transcending geographical limitations and delivering quality education to rural learners. The utilization of online tutoring and learning management systems further fosters personalized learning by allowing students to seek academic support at their convenience and enabling educators to organize course materials, monitor student progress, and provide constructive feedback, thereby enhancing students' abilities for self-directed learning [5]. Furthermore, a multitude of educational applications and digital resource repositories have been extensively utilized, offering students immersive learning experiences via virtual experiments and interactive activities, thereby igniting their curiosity [4]. Research indicates that in educational institutions that have implemented these digital learning technologies, there has been a notable increase of over 20% in students' confidence and engagement in the learning process [5].

In Yichun City, Jiangxi Province, the advancement of digital education and mental health resources has markedly increased students' engagement in learning and bolstered their self-assurance. The educational reforms implemented in Yichun focus on improving the professional development landscape for educators and elevating their professional competencies, which in turn has a direct effect on students' learning dispositions and academic achievements [4].

These initiatives have significantly enhanced the confidence and motivation of rural students, establishing a robust foundation for their future growth. By offering increased educational resources and mental health support, students experience heightened attention and encouragement during their educational journey. This constructive academic environment has profoundly ignited their enthusiasm for learning and elevated their self-assurance.

4. Conclusion

Tackling these challenges necessitates a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond the existing framework of the RTSP. By concentrating on these strategic domains, policymakers can improve the program's efficacy and make substantial strides toward achieving educational equity throughout the varied geographical regions of China [7]. The effective execution of educational policies, bolstered by adequate resources and tailored to local circumstances, is essential for the long-term success of rural education programs.

This research has analyzed the effects of the "Rural Teacher Support Programme" on the treatment, compensation, and staffing of rural educators in China. The policy's implementation has led to a substantial increase in rural teachers' salaries, and the provision of housing and living allowances has significantly enhanced their quality of life, thereby making the profession more appealing. Furthermore, the growth of the Special Post Teacher Programme has created additional formal employment opportunities for rural teachers, thereby increasing job security and fostering a younger teaching demographic. Nonetheless, various challenges persist during implementation, such as inadequate infrastructure, cultural disparities, and uneven resource distribution. Notably, in remote regions, the disproportionate allocation of educational resources and outdated teaching facilities continue to pose significant obstacles to enhancing educational quality. Although the policy aims to equalize urban and rural educational resources, the inconsistent levels of local government enforcement and financial backing have resulted in marked disparities in policy effectiveness across different areas. Future policies and research should prioritize these challenges to ensure educational equity and elevate the overall quality of rural education. These findings offer critical insights and evidence for policymakers as they strive to further rural education reform and improve teacher welfare.

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