

*Rural Education in China in the Process of Urbanization:
Development and Reflection*

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Abstract

With the acceleration of urbanization, although the government has vigorously promoted the balanced development of rural and urban compulsory education, the trend of small-scale development of rural education has become increasingly prominent. The family economic conditions of education receivers show the problem of education equity behind the small-scale development of rural education. Despite the government's great efforts to revitalize rural education, rural schools are not prepared to deal with the problem of small-scale development of rural education, and have not made adjustments and changes that are compatible with it. To revitalize rural education, reconstruct the roles and responsibilities of rural teachers and build education capacity of rural schools, the government not only needs to re-understand and position the development of rural education, to change the system of rural school, but also needs to change rural teachers' educational concepts, educational methods and techniques, to reconstruct the roles and responsibilities of rural teachers, to effectively improve educational capacity of rural schools.

Keywords: Rural Education, Small Scale, Education Equity, the Orientation of Development

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Introduction

The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China divides the objects of educational statistics into urban areas, towns and rural areas. Rural education means the existence of non-urbanized education. In the context of urbanization, it can be found that rural education means a kind of non-centralized marginalization⁵. The main issues to be discussed in this paper are: the marginalization of rural education and its main performance, the trend of change rural education presents from the perspective of historical development; the hidden problems behind the small scale of rural schools and the rooted cause; the ways of effectively developing rural education from a given condition. In terms of research methods, the paper uses a combination of empirical analysis and theoretical research to analyze the statistical data of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and that of Education Department in Anhui province in the past 10 years, introducing the development trend of rural education; a case study of a township school in W City, Anhui Province, reveals the problems facing small schools in rural areas. The last part puts forward the policy recommendations for the development of rural education to seek the way to the future development of rural education.

一、 Declining Rural Education and its Hidden Concerns

Before 1980, rural students accounted for 80-90%. With the popularization of compulsory education, in rural schools, whether in primary schools or in junior high schools, the number of students is in full scale. Especially with the development of urbanization, the number of students in rural schools has begun to decrease. By 2000, rural students accounted for 50-60%. Along with the reduction of its number, there is the adjustment of the layout of urban and rural schools. Since 2001, the large-scale withdrawal of primary and secondary schools below the county level has been carried out. The main reasons are the declining birth rate, the decreasing of the number of school-age children, the rapid development of urbanization, the increasing demand for the enrollment in urban schools, the slowdown of the development of rural education, the low investment for education for a long time, the seriously lacking of the funds for running schools in rural areas, the poor conditions for running rural schools, weak teacher resources in rural schools, the widening gap of education quality between urban and rural schools. The adjustment of the distribution and layout of schools in urban and rural areas lasted for more than 10 years, indirectly indicating that the government is in the pursuit of efficiency because of the reduction of the number of students in rural schools. In the process of adjustment, the gap in the quality of compulsory education between urban and rural areas has also widened. The adjustment of more than 10 years has led to a further decline in the number of students in rural schools. In 2017, the number of students enrolled in primary schools was 2,773,600, accounting for 27.50% of the national primary school students; junior high school students in rural areas were 6,643,100, accounting for 14.48% of the national junior high school students. The number of students in rural schools only accounts for 23.52%.²On the one hand, the urbanization rate of education is high; on the other hand, the number of rural schools is huge. According to the statistics from Ministry of Education, in 2017, there were 201522 schools, including kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in rural areas. Most rural primary and secondary schools、 kindergartens present the trend of small classes, and student-teacher ratio in

many areas dropped to 4:1 or 5:1. Among these schools, small schools are becoming a common phenomenon in rural society. “In the end of 2017, there were 107,000 rural schools with small scale, including 27,000 primary schools and 80,000 teaching spots, accounting for 44.4% of the total number of rural primary schools and teaching spots; there were 3.847 million students, 5.8% of the total number of students in rural primary schools, and 9.346 million boarding students in rural primary schools, 14.1% of the total number of students in rural primary schools.”⁸

In the past ten years, in Anhui Province, a province with a relatively low urbanization rate in the central part of China, the number of students in rural areas has also declined year by year. The following picture shows the number of teachers and students in urban and rural areas since 2009.

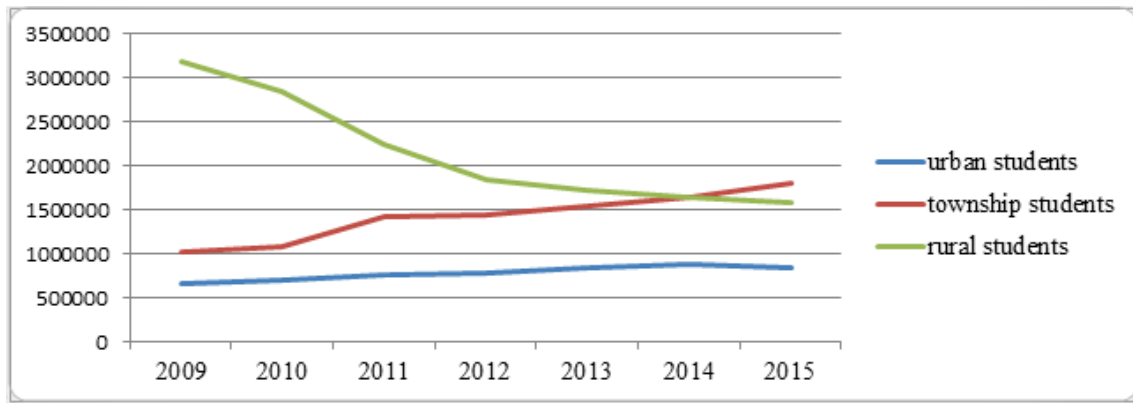


Figure 1: the number of students in primary schools at different levels

The development trend of small-scale rural education can be seen more clearly from the micro-social perspective. Take Erba Town in Jiujiang District, Wuhu City for example. According to the “Guiding Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening the Construction of Small Schools and Township Boarding Schools in Rural Areas” issued by the General Office of the State Council, in terms of the definition of small schools with less than 100 students, there are 12 primary schools in the town, including 7 small schools and 2 schools with an excessive number of students. The following table is for details:

Schools	The Number of Students	The Number of classes	The number of Teachers	Notes
XL School	130	6	11	
EB Primary School	712	14	40	excessive class size
HS Primary School	229	6	16	
LQ Primary School	207	6	12	
MN Primary School	71	6	12	
TH Primary School	99	6	12	
DW Primary School	90	6	11	
YN Primary School	650	13	34	excessive class size
YQ Primary School	147	6	11	
JS Primary School	74	6	11	
LT Primary School	100	6	10	
FS Primary School	41	6	9	
The Total	2543	87	191	

Take MN primary school and LQ primary school for example. Both are complete schools from first to sixth grade with principals and directors for teaching affairs. LQ primary school is a relatively large school with 207 students and has better education quality in rural areas, so that people in the town have great confidence in this school. The principal of LQ primary school graduated from a normal university with a master's degree and majored in the arts. The most of 12 teachers in total are young and they have great enthusiasm in teaching and work. Though there are only more than 200 students, the school conditions are up to the standards set by the Ministry of Education. The school's hardware facilities and functional classrooms are all set up, Each teacher owns one computer, which can hook up to the internet and can meet the requirements of educational informationization and technical teaching. Two of the teachers participate in the teacher studio in the city and it works well.

MH primary school is a small school. The official statistics show that there are 71 students, but the principal said there are only 47 students. The fourth grade with the fewest students has only 4 students. Under the circumstances, students in the third and fourth grade usually have such lessons as sports, music, fine arts, information technology education together. Those who have lessons together are just more than 10 students. The largest class is the first grade with 15 students. The government is carrying out the project of shantytown rebuilding, so one of the reasons for the loss of students is family relocation. Due to the proximity to the central school, many parents expect their children to attend the central school. As for the current trend of development, MN primary school is planned to be integrated into the central school.

Though the school is small, the school conditions are also basically up to the standards. Although the fact is that the number of students in this school is less than 100, the government allocates the public funds on the basis of 100 students to the school, which is able to meet its public needs.

The issue of education equity lies behind the small-scale rural education. For people in rural areas, the flow of rural schools means making a choice, and the process of making a choice is also the process of stratification based on family economic conditions in rural society. Urbanization, on the one hand, is the integration of resources and information, which means the market plays a decisive role in resource distribution; on the other hand, it is the process of people's differentiation and the reconstruction of people's identities. Those in poverty-stricken areas have to stay in rural areas for economic reasons and have to study in rural schools, forming a dual left-behind identity—left-behind children and left-behind students. The studies have shown that students in a small school often come from poor families. They are mainly the children of the disadvantaged people—20% of people with the lower social status, who are in deep poverty and unable to attend school in a city, and obviously they are the core target group of stopping the intergenerational transmission of poverty.⁹ Poor people in rural areas do everything in their power to let their children receive quality education by enrolling into central schools or other complete schools.

As a result, small schools in rural areas are often composed of “teach-badly” teachers and “difficult-to-teach” students. In order to mobilize the enthusiasm of teachers, the government makes changes in a qualification-based post employment system by implementing the policy of “job rotation”. Excellent teachers are firstly employed by urban schools and the rest of teachers can only work in remote areas or teaching spots. These rural teachers are often not well qualified for education because of their poor work ability or bad work attitude. At the same time, children in poor families are confronted with many problems for the lack of family education. In short, since the adjustment of the layout of rural schools, “the poor groups are even more incapable of responding to changes in school's position, and in the process they are further excluded and squeezed...At this point, the policy of ‘school closures and mergers’ does not promote education equity, but brings about new form of education unfairness.”⁶ Even in the context of the government's efforts to promote the balanced development of urban and rural education, this situation has not been reversed fundamentally.

二、 The Analysis of the Problems Facing the Development of Rural Education

In the new century, the increasingly widening gap between urban and rural compulsory education has caused widespread social concerns, and urges the government to push forward the balanced development of compulsory education in urban and rural areas. The balanced development of compulsory education sets the basic goal that the conditions of school operation shall conform to the standards of schools above the county level and the standards of the state on running schools. In 2012, the State Council issued the “opinions of the State Council on Further Promoting the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education”. The Ministry of Education subsequently issued “Interim Measures for the Supervision and Evaluation of Balanced Development of County Compulsory Education (2012)”, on which the

evaluation of the balanced development of compulsory education at the county level is based. In 2016, “Several Opinions on Coordinating and Promoting the Integrated Reform and Development of Urban and Rural Compulsory Education in Country Area” was issued by the State Council. In 2017, Ministry of Education issued “Measures for the Supervision and Evaluation of the High Quality and Balanced Development of County Compulsory Education”. For the balanced development of urban and rural education, the goal set by the government is that “within the county area, the school construction standards are unified; the standards of budgeted posts management are unified; the basic standards on the average public-use operating funds for students of schools shall be unified; the standards of basic equipment allocation are unified and the policy of ‘two exemptions and one subsidy’ (the exemption of book fees and other miscellaneous fees; provide financial aids to needy students) covers all areas, basically realizing ‘the balanced development of compulsory education and the equalization of basic public education services in urban and rural areas’”.⁷ It is worth noting that though the efforts of the governments at all levels the development trend of small-scale rural education has not been controlled. The problem reflected should be considered.

(一) Structural Problems in the Development of Rural Education

The contradictory relationship between the balanced development and the imbalanced structure is the reflection of urban-rural social structure in China. Therefore, to understand the imbalanced development of urban and rural education, the understanding of urban-rural social structure is needed. The structure of rural education is closely related to that of rural society. So far, the government’s policies on balanced education haven’t touched this area. Its political structure, economic structure, family structure and population structure in rural areas have a high degree of meshing and isomorphic relationship with rural education. Counties, towns and villages are not only the political structure of Chinese rural society, but also highly reflect the level of economic development and educational forms in rural areas. Correspondingly, they also indicate the hierarchical relationship between families, which generally presents a pattern of wealthier rural families, ordinary rural families, poor families at the bottom of the line. The class relationship presented by rural society and families is a reflection of political structure and economic structure in rural areas, and it shows, in terms of education, the corresponding choice of rural schools. Clearly can be seen the pattern: town—administrative village—natural village(village politics); well-off family—poor family(village economy); central primary school (town)—rural complete school(administrative village)—teaching spot(natural village). The system, central primary school(in a town)—complete school(primary school in a village)—teaching spot, is not only consistent with the political system of rural society, but also reflects the economic gradient radiation of rural society and the natural distribution of the population.

The structural problems of the development of rural education are also revealed in the structural relationship between school education and family education in rural areas. The parents of these left-behind children are usually migrant workers, so the responsibility for raising children is given to the previous generation and schools. Going out and staying behind, survival and education constitute the structural contradiction of family education in rural areas. Due to the lack of parental

management and restraint, left-behind children often fall into a “let it be” situation. These “difficult-to-teach” students in small schools profoundly reflect the structural problems of home-school.

(二) Resource Issues in the Balanced Development of Urban and Rural Education

Anthony Giddens pointed out that “‘structure’ refers not only to rules implicated in the production and reproduction of social system but also to resources.” “It’s always the case that the day-to-day activity of social actors draws upon and reproduces structural features of wider social systems.”¹ Although the government is eliminating the institutional roots of urban-rural duality, the allocation of resources is not just the government’s ability to dominate. The market plays an important role in it. So far, in the policies and researches on the development of rural education, the importance of resource problems in the development of rural education has been keenly noticed. Both the policy formulation and the research hypothesis focus on the core issue of resources, and all particularly stresses that a balanced allocation of educational resources is achieved through the government’s increasing financial input to rural education. However the composition of resources in reality is complicated.

Resources related to the development of rural education can be divided into different subjects. At least, the concept of resources related to education is analyzed from three subjects. Firstly, in the sense of the school as a subject taking charge of education, educational resources are mainly related to funds, teachers, facilities and so on; secondly, in the sense of the composition of education, educational resources are educators, education receivers and intermediary resources that link both of them, including educational concept, technique, method, content, media and so on; thirdly, as educational resources that can be possessed by education receivers, they are usually the combination of the above two. Different types of educational resources have their own specific ways and means of circulation. Meanwhile, they are dominated and restricted by different mechanisms. Generally speaking, the resources for running a school are mainly based on government allocation and supplemented by market mechanisms; as the constituent elements of education, resources are dominantly allocated by the government in urban areas, while they are mainly market-oriented in rural areas. Especially for the sources, students, self-selection has become the main means of mobility. Resources enjoyed by education receivers are the result of a long-term accumulation. Once they form, it will be solidified into a certain brand and become the object of pursuit. Under the control of the conventional view of quality education or people’s practical awareness formed by the systematical structure of education and the structure of society, the specific educational actions are decided, including the actions of selecting a school, the actions involved in education, the actions of school management and teaching and so on. Also the flow of resources for educational constituent elements is determined. Among these resources, students serve as the important educational resources, and their mobility and the direction of the mobility directly affect whether government investment in resources can be effectively converted into output. This is mainly because in terms of improving the quality of education, students are important participants in educational activities. When students as main participants directly influence the quality of education, the flow of students will form the “Matthew effect”, which can in turn exert great influence on students’ and parents’ actions of choosing a school.

Nevertheless, on the basis of a balanced allocation of the resources for running a school, the balanced development of urban-rural education cannot control the flow of the resources for educational constituent elements. A peculiar contradiction in the current development of rural schools emerges. On the one hand, the government has continuously injected resources for running rural schools, from funds, management philosophy to new technologies and methods; the important resources of educational constituent elements — students, as education receivers, and (or) teachers — continuously outflow. On the other hand, the conditions for running schools in rural areas have been improved; the scale of rural schools is shrinking.

(三) Reform Rural Education with the Experience of the Development of Urban Education

Another problem facing the development of rural education is the trend of urbanization in rural education. Rural education is developed and reformed with reference to the development of urban education. Some researchers point out that “urban-oriented education has brought rural education into a difficult position.”⁴ For China’s education reform, all kinds of new educational concepts are gradually introduced on the basis of the exploration and practice of urban education, and then penetrate into rural schools. To transform a new concept into specific daily teaching actions, the tool of the policy is used to achieve it. This tool for putting these educational concepts into practice is used on the basis of the conclusion of educational practice in urban schools and the analysis of problems facing urban education. In this way, it is conducive to solving the problems of urban education. For example, the implementation of the burden reduction policy in rural schools has had a tremendous negative impact on rural education. Students in rural schools are out of school too early in the afternoon, causing much time wasted, which is a problem that is basically ignored. However, it is impossible to urbanize all rural schools. Unrealistically improving rural education by following the standards of urban education will certainly bring about an educational form that is superficial and has no substantive content.

(四) The Lack of Local Knowledge in Rural Education

The fundamental problem of rural education is the development of children. To solve the problem of children in rural areas, it is necessary for teachers to have universal knowledge of education and psychology, and to have the unique knowledge of understanding children. However, in teachers’ training, great care was taken to implant in teachers not the knowledge of how to understand these children, but the elite’s educational ideals, the romantic educational views, the model and experience of urban education, the state’s will and intention of educational reform. The problems facing children are obviously different. Educational methods and tools that can solve the problems of children in urban areas may be ineffective for children in rural areas. Rural teachers usually lack the knowledge of how to solve those unique problems facing children. For rural education, especially for students in small schools, the most pressing problem is how to make them meet the basic educational requirements of compulsory education, academic work and morality included.

三、 Conclusion: The Future Development and the Orientation of Rural Education

In 2018, according to “Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Comprehensively Strengthening the Construction of Small Schools and Township Boarding Schools in Rural Areas”, “the overall layout of small schools, township boarding schools and rural primary schools should be coordinated.” “In a village with a relatively concentrated population and sufficient numbers of students or in conjunction with an adjacent village, a complete primary school shall be set up; in a remote area with a shortage of students, a small school with a lower grader in the village and in the township, a central boarding school are set up, meeting the needs of students.” “For small schools, the informationization, facilities of sports, music and art, as well as teaching equipment, libraries and necessary functional rooms are all ensured, and living and health conditions are improved.” Although the central government makes a formal request for rural education, particularly for the construction of small schools and boarding schools in rural areas, it is not enough to rely solely on the government’s financial investment in rural education.

(一) Re-understand and Re-position the development of rural education

Different from students in urban areas, the social status of students’ families in rural areas is usually at the bottom of society, especially those in small schools. The educational status of these students and the level of education associate with stopping intergeneration transmission of poverty. That is to say, if these students are not able to receive quality education, it may lead to intergeneration transmission of poverty. Therefore, running small schools means a lot for achieving the fairness of whole society. The reason why the scale of rural schools becomes so small is precisely the result of the choice of people with the background of low quality of education in rural areas. The key is to clarify the development orientation of rural schools, and to continue to increase investment in rural education, to ensure that rural schools not only meet the national standards and requirements, but also these schools are “small and beautiful”, “qualified”.

(二) Reform the System of Rural Education

As for the system of rural schools, the hierarchical system— “central primary school at the town level—complete primary school at the village level—teaching spot”, is reconstructed into the single flat one. Instead of setting up different schools at or below the town level, schools should be set up with the town as the unit. The original rural school system is the one with an individual school as the unit. Each school is self-contained. Though entrusted by the administrative department of education, the central school has the responsibilities of teaching, making researches and other tasks for the complete primary school at the village level, such tasks as the management of budgeted posts and the average expenditure on per enrolled students, daily management of school education all attribute to different schools. Even a school is small-scale and self-contained with the loose affiliation with the central primary school. It has caused the school to fall into a more random and non-normative state of loose management, and also led to the lack of rural teachers’ self-development motivation. The establishment of a single, flat school system means that the division of functions of schools at different levels. A complete school and a small school at the

village level are responsible for the organization and management of school teaching activities, while such tasks as personnel power, the right to handle matters, financial authority are handed over to a central school, which realizes the integration of running township central schools and running township small schools with the same size, the cooperative development and the comprehensive evaluation. The principal responsibility system is adopted. Meanwhile, for a central school and a small school, school curriculum, teaching arrangements, teaching and research activities and teacher management are unified, and teachers' collective teaching and research preparations are promoted. In addition, the arrangement of classes is coordinated and teachers in music, sports, art and foreign languages can move to different teaching jobs among different schools.

(三) Reconstruct the Roles and Responsibilities of Rural Teachers

In terms of the concept of rural schools' development, the long-standing, deeply rooted view of educational quality and school development shall be changed. It is needed to re-understand the concept of teaching and learning and to change the role of teachers from people simply transferring knowledge to instructors. Dominated by the traditional concept of education, particularly the concept of "test-oriented education", small schools in rural areas still follow the pattern of the division of labor among urban teachers. As the result of each teacher teaching only one subject or a limited number of courses, the subject of teachers' work is not students, but courses. The problem lies in the fact that education is multifaceted and the division of work often doesn't cover all aspects of education. The growth and development of students is the result of the joint efforts taken by many educations and by many teachers. For this reason, a moderate division of work is necessary, but it is not unique. In the development of rural education, it is necessary to break the division of work and to regard the solutions to students' problems as teachers' responsibilities and tasks. Only in this way can schools truly realize "individualized teaching and targeted counseling." The situation that there are limited teachers and students with the division of work attaches great importance on the strength and power of the education team. It is an organizational change within a school that echoes the changes in the school system. Without such a change, the system of rural school reform will lose its support and guarantee.

(四) Vigorously Improve the Educational Capacity of Rural Schools

The issue of rural education development is fundamentally the problem of its education ability, especially the problem of individualized teaching and targeted counseling. It is the problem of "we need to know what we should do for children and what can be distinguished for them".³ Rural education requires personalized instruction and targeted guidance. Things have pros and cons. Without proper guidance, children whose minds are immature are extremely vulnerable to negative things that may contaminate children and damage their characters. Once adverse consequences are produced, the power of education is weak and cannot integrate positive educational power. Therefore, in Recommendation No.8 concerning the organization of rural education, the International Bureau of Education adopts the recommendation that teachers shall "adapt their curricula to local conditions and, in particularly, to draw their 'centers of interest' from the environment in which pupils live".¹⁰ This is the place where rural teachers' abilities are lacking and it is also the

key to improving the educational capacity of rural schools in the future.

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