

The Dilemmas and Solutions of Equalized Urban and Rural Public Services in Preschool Education: From the Dual Perspectives of Institution and Culture

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Abstract: With the promulgation of the Preschool Education Law and the advancement of national preschool education policies during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, preschool education in China has entered a new era of inclusive and high-quality development. Nevertheless, the imbalance of urban and rural public service supply in preschool education remains a prominent issue. Rural regions are plagued by three major problems: difficult access to kindergartens, unaffordable fees, and low education quality. These problems not only violate the principle of educational equity, but also hinder the early cultivation of rural human capital in the context of rural revitalization. Based on the theories of public service equalization and human capital, this paper explores the dilemmas of equalized urban and rural preschool public services from institutional and cultural perspectives. Institutionally, the main problems include unequal financial allocation, ineffective teacher management and mobility mechanisms, and one-size-fits-all policy implementation, which lead to unbalanced resource distribution. Culturally, the development is restricted by urban-oriented social values, low professional identity among rural preschool teachers, and rural parents' misconception of valuing childcare over education. Corresponding solutions are put forward in this study. In the institutional dimension, governments should optimize fiscal investment mechanisms, reform teacher management systems, and implement differentiated policy arrangements. In the cultural dimension, it is essential to change rural parents' educational ideas, enhance rural preschool teachers' professional identity, and foster a social value orientation of urban-rural educational equity. This research can provide theoretical references and practical implications for narrowing the urban-rural gap in preschool education and promoting educational equity nationwide.

Keywords: Preschool education; Equalization of urban and rural public services; Institutional dilemma; Cultural resistance; Solution path

Online publication: July 16, 2026

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and significance

Since the release of the Preschool Education Law, China's preschool education has prioritized inclusive development and quality improvement. The *14th Five-Year Plan Action Plan for the Improvement of Preschool Education* ^[1] clearly proposes to narrow the urban-rural gap in preschool education. However, the unequal distribution of public preschool services between urban and rural areas has not been fundamentally resolved. Rural kindergartens generally suffer from limited enrollment opportunities, high charges, and inferior teaching quality, forming a stark contrast with high-quality preschool resources in cities.

This obvious imbalance between urban and rural preschool education resources seriously damages the realization of educational equity across the whole society. Furthermore, it restricts the cultivation of high-quality rural human resources from an early stage, which will inevitably hinder the sustainable development of rural areas and the smooth implementation of rural revitalization. By systematically analyzing the realistic predicaments of urban-rural preschool service equalization from the dual perspectives of institution and culture, this paper can further supplement and refine existing theories on public service equalization. In addition, the conclusions and countermeasures proposed in this research can provide practical references for local governments to optimize relevant policies. Accordingly, the present study carries prominent theoretical value and practical guiding significance.

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Theoretical research

Existing studies have reached a consensus on the connotation of equalized urban and rural preschool public services, which emphasizes bottom-line equity and differentiated compensation rather than absolute average distribution ^[2]. Two core theoretical frameworks are widely adopted: the theory of public service equalization and the human capital theory. The former highlights the government's leading role in balancing the allocation of funds and teachers ^[3]; the latter regards rural preschool education as a key investment in human capital for rural revitalization ^[4]. Scholars also point out that there is no unified quantitative standard to measure equalization, as some researchers focus on resource input while others attach importance to educational outcomes ^[5].

1.2.2. Research on practical dilemmas

When it comes to fiscal investment in preschool education, the local government-led fiscal decentralization framework is largely responsible for the persistent urban-rural resource gap. Restricted by underdeveloped local economies, rural county-level governments generally suffer from tight budgets and insufficient financial support. The per-student funding for rural kindergartens is far from adequate, reaching only one-third to one-half of the funding level enjoyed by urban counterparts. In the allocation of limited funds, rural authorities prefer to invest in tangible hardware facilities, whereas resources for teaching innovation, professional teacher development, and other intangible software construction are greatly neglected ^[6].

The gap is also reflected in the construction and popularization of inclusive kindergartens. Affected by scattered residential distribution and higher daily operation costs, rural areas lag far behind cities in the coverage of inclusive preschool services, with a gap of 10% to 15%. A large number of rural inclusive kindergartens operate at a low level, and more than 30% of them fail to satisfy standard quality criteria. At present, relevant policy evaluation still adopts a quantity-oriented model, which overly focuses on the

expansion of kindergarten scale and enrollment figures, but ignores the core goal of improving teaching quality and service level ^[7].

In terms of parental concepts, more than half of rural parents regard kindergartens merely as childcare institutions and pay little attention to curriculum quality. For left-behind children cared for by elderly guardians, less than 15% of guardians focus on educational quality ^[8]. Rural preschool teachers face low social recognition, heavy workload, and poor professional well-being, which creates a vicious circle between low teaching quality and low professional identity ^[9].

1.3. Definition of core concepts

1.3.1. Equalization of urban and rural public services in preschool education

It is a key embodiment of educational equity in the field of early childhood education. Taking the government as the leading subject, it requires the overall planning and balanced deployment of public preschool education resources in urban and rural areas. The ultimate purpose is to ensure every child can gain equal access to preschool education and receive consistent high-standard teaching and childcare services. This equalization does not mean a mechanical absolute average. On the contrary, it adheres to bottom-line equity and implements differentiated compensation policies for disadvantaged rural areas, which are designed to gradually bridge the long-standing urban-rural development gap.

1.3.2. Institutional perspective

Drawing on North's institutional theory, this perspective targets the formal institutional framework of preschool education. It contains a full range of explicit rules and systems, such as industry-related policies, fiscal distribution systems, household management rules, and professional management mechanisms for teachers. These institutional arrangements determine the flow of funds, personnel and educational resources, and become the primary factor restricting the balanced development of urban and rural preschool education.

1.3.3. Cultural perspective

Supported by Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, this perspective focuses on intangible cultural elements that influence the development of preschool education. Its research scope includes the educational concepts and parenting behaviors of parents in urban and rural communities, the professional identity and mental state of frontline preschool teachers, and the mainstream social cognition and value orientation toward rural preschool education. These cultural factors act as invisible forces and exert a lasting influence on the implementation effect of preschool education policies.

2. Dilemmas of equalized urban and rural public services in preschool education

2.1. Institutional dilemmas: Unbalanced resource allocation

2.1.1. Uneven fiscal investment

Local governments bear the main responsibility for preschool education funding. Restricted by weak fiscal capacity, rural areas have far lower per-student public funds than urban areas. According to the 2023 fiscal data, the annual per-student public fund for public kindergartens in an eastern provincial capital reached 1,800 RMB, while the figure was only 600 RMB in rural public kindergartens under its jurisdiction, with a gap of three times ^[10]. In addition, rural fiscal funds are mainly used to update hardware facilities, with inadequate

investment in teacher training, curriculum research, and other soft-power construction.

2.1.2. Defective teacher management system

The distribution of teacher staffing quotas shows a clear urban bias in the current system. Rural kindergartens generally struggle with a shortage of tenured professional teachers, which has become a common dilemma in rural preschool education. Compounded by relatively low remuneration and inadequate social welfare guarantees, rural kindergartens find it hard to retain competent teachers, resulting in a constant outflow of talents ^[11]. While relevant policies have been launched to encourage teacher exchange and rotation between urban and rural areas, the whole mechanism is not well supported. Without scientific evaluation rules and targeted reward systems, the rotation policy cannot play its due role, and the professional competence of rural teachers is unable to be improved steadily.

2.1.3. Improper policy implementation

Relevant policies for inclusive kindergartens adopt a one-size-fits-all model without differentiated designs for urban and rural conditions. Cities can rapidly expand inclusive preschool resources by building new public kindergartens or transforming private kindergartens. In rural areas, scattered population and high operating costs result in low coverage of inclusive kindergartens ^[12]. Moreover, policy supervision and evaluation are inadequate. Local governments usually take enrollment rate and the number of kindergartens as core assessment indicators, turning a blind eye to the low-quality operation of rural inclusive kindergartens.

2.2. Cultural dilemmas: Weak public awareness

2.2.1. Urban-centered social cognition

The public and academic circles pay more attention to the optimization and characteristics of urban preschool education. When it comes to rural preschool education, most discussions only focus on hardware improvement rather than teaching quality and educational equity ^[13]. Local governments prefer to invest funds in urban kindergartens because of visible short-term effects, and hold the view that rural preschool education requires high investment but yields slow returns.

2.2.2. Low professional identity of rural preschool teachers

Rural preschool teachers gain low social recognition, as many people question their professional competence ^[14]. Meanwhile, they undertake heavy work: one teacher may be responsible for multiple classes, taking charge of teaching, childcare, and student safety at the same time ^[15]. Long-term overwork leads to burnout and declining professional identity. Some teachers even suffer from self-denial and lose motivation for professional growth.

2.2.3. Biased educational concepts among rural parents

Most rural parents view kindergartens as childcare centers and attach little importance to preschool education quality. This phenomenon is more serious among left-behind children's elderly guardians, who only concentrate on children's daily life and neglect early education ^[16].

3. Countermeasures to break through the dilemmas

3.1. Optimizing institutional systems to balance resource allocation

Institutional reform is the fundamental guarantee to bridge the urban-rural gap in preschool education. Targeted adjustments to fiscal, personnel, and policy implementation systems can effectively solve the problem of uneven resource distribution and lay a solid foundation for the equal development of urban and rural preschool public services.

3.1.1. Improving fiscal investment mechanisms

Governments at all levels shall jointly build a sound fiscal sharing system and tilt more financial resources toward rural preschool education. On the basis of regular operational funds, exclusive special subsidies need to be allocated, which are specially used for updating teaching aids, organizing teacher training, and promoting curriculum research and development, so as to strengthen the soft power of rural kindergartens. Meanwhile, a dynamically adjusted per-student funding standard must be adopted in accordance with local economic conditions and operating costs. To compensate for the higher operational pressure in rural areas, the per-student public fund of rural public kindergartens shall be no less than 1.2 times that of urban counterparts. Such targeted financial support can fully ensure rural kindergartens have sufficient capital to improve overall teaching quality and service level.

3.1.2. Reforming teacher management and mobility mechanisms

To reverse the serious brain drain of rural preschool teachers, a complete salary and subsidy system should be established. The monthly income of rural preschool teachers shall be guaranteed to be no lower than the average salary of local public institution employees. In addition, extra living allowances and housing subsidies should be provided to ease their living burdens and stabilize the teaching team. Furthermore, the existing urban-rural teacher rotation mechanism needs to be standardized and institutionalized. Working experience in rural kindergartens shall be set as a compulsory assessment indicator for urban teachers applying for professional title promotion and merit evaluation. A scientific and comprehensive evaluation system for rotation performance should also be constructed. Teachers who make remarkable achievements in driving the professional growth of rural teachers will be given material and spiritual rewards, so as to avoid formalized rotation and realize genuine two-way communication and common progress among teachers.

3.1.3. Implementing differentiated policy execution

Given the huge differences in population distribution, geographical conditions, and development foundations between urban and rural areas, unified one-size-fits-all policies must be abandoned. Classified and targeted development goals should be formulated for inclusive kindergartens. For urban regions, the core task is to optimize the overall resource structure, standardize the charging standards of private kindergartens, and continuously expand the scale of high-quality public kindergartens. For rural areas where educational resources are insufficient, the top priority is to make up for development shortcomings. Innovative service modes such as village-kindergarten integration and mobile kindergartens can be promoted to solve the difficulty of long-distance travel for children living in remote villages. In terms of policy assessment, a diversified evaluation system covering teaching quality, parental satisfaction and children's comprehensive development should replace the previous single quantitative assessment. Independent third-party evaluation institutions shall be introduced to conduct regular supervision and inspection. Those low-quality inclusive

kindergartens that fail to meet operating standards will be ordered to rectify within a time limit, ensuring that relevant policies can be implemented effectively.

3.2. Reshaping cultural atmosphere and updating educational cognition

Apart from institutional improvements, cultural construction is an indispensable part to eliminate implicit obstacles. It is necessary to change outdated educational ideas, enhance teachers' professional sense of belonging, and establish a society-wide value of urban-rural educational equity.

3.2.1. Guiding rural parents to establish scientific educational concepts

The long-standing misconception of valuing childcare over education has restricted the development of rural preschool education for a long time. Local governments and kindergartens should launch systematic preschool education popularization activities by making full use of township cultural stations, village WeChat groups, parent schools and other accessible channels. Invite professional preschool education experts and outstanding frontline teachers to popularize the growth rules of children aged 3 to 6 and explain the far-reaching influence of high-quality preschool education on children's lifelong development. Rich home-school interaction activities, including kindergarten open days and parent-child courses, should be regularly held, enabling parents to personally experience the value of scientific preschool education. In particular, for left-behind children who are taken care of by elderly guardians in rural areas, village committees and social workers should provide one-on-one targeted guidance, helping guardians master scientific parenting methods and establish correct educational views.

3.2.2. Enhancing rural preschool teachers' professional identity

Low social recognition and poor professional identity have become important factors dampening rural teachers' work enthusiasm. Local mainstream media should actively publicize the touching stories and professional achievements of outstanding rural preschool teachers, and carry out selection activities for rural education role models to elevate their social status and public recognition. A sound professional development support system should be built for rural teachers, including regular online joint teaching research and long-term paired assistance with urban excellent teachers. Considering their heavy workload and mental pressure, special psychological counseling services shall be provided to relieve emotional distress and job burnout. Moreover, regional teacher communities can be set up to create a positive atmosphere of mutual learning, communication, and joint growth among rural preschool teachers.

3.2.3. Establishing the social concept of urban-rural educational equity

The deep-rooted urban-centered cognitive bias needs to be corrected throughout society. Mass media should carry out in-depth and objective reports on rural preschool education. Instead of only focusing on hardware construction, more attention should be paid to the actual development status of rural children and the work status of rural teachers, and publicize the important position of rural preschool education in rural revitalization strategies. At the government level, the progress of narrowing the urban-rural gap in preschool education should be incorporated into the official performance appraisal system. This institutional arrangement can urge local governments to attach equal importance to urban and rural preschool education, and finally form a long-term policy orientation for the balanced and fair development of preschool education across the country.

4. Conclusion

Promoting the equalization of urban and rural public services in preschool education is not only a basic requirement of educational equity, but also a fundamental initiative to cultivate rural human capital and narrow the urban-rural development gap. After analysis, we find that the development of rural preschool education is trapped in a dual dilemma of institutional defects and cultural constraints. Institutionally, unreasonable fiscal allocation, unreasonable teacher staffing and mobility rules, as well as the lack of differentiated policy implementation, make rural areas unable to obtain sufficient and high-quality educational resources. Culturally, the prevalent urban-biased value orientation, rural preschool teachers' poor professional recognition and work motivation, plus the widespread "prioritizing childcare over education" mindset among rural families, further slow down the quality improvement of rural preschool education.

To reverse this situation, we must adopt a two-pronged approach. First, we need to comprehensively reform the existing institutional systems, improve fiscal investment, teacher management, and policy assessment mechanisms tilted toward rural areas, and lay a solid institutional foundation for resource balance. Second, we should carry out long-term cultural construction: raise social recognition of rural preschool education, enhance teachers' professional well-being, and popularize scientific educational ideas among rural parents. The integration of institutional improvement and cultural reshaping is the key to realizing the balanced and high-quality development of urban and rural preschool education.

This study mainly focuses on macro-level dilemma analysis and countermeasure discussion. Future research can focus on micro-level practices in different counties. Through field research, case tracking, and comparative analysis, scholars can summarize targeted development paths suitable for regions with different economic levels, which will help refine policy measures and make the reform of preschool education public services more targeted and effective.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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