

Article

A Community Perspective: Building and Sustaining Deep Integration of Urban and Rural Basic Education in China

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Abstract: The construction of an urban-rural basic education community is of great significance for promoting the comprehensive and coordinated development of urban and rural education, supporting the building of a strong educational nation, and deepening and advancing the Rural Revitalization Strategy. From the perspective of community theory, this study systematically examines the historical evolution, value implications, and goal orientation of urban-rural basic education integration, and proposes a model for a deeply integrated urban-rural basic education community consisting of four dimensions: shared interests, shared values, shared identity, and shared participation. At the maintenance level, the article emphasizes, from each of these four dimensions, the importance of localized practice and potential pathways for implementation.

Keywords: community theory; urban-rural basic education integration; localized practice

1. Introduction

Basic education is fundamentally oriented toward promoting the comprehensive development of individuals, with sustainable human development as its primary objective. It provides foundational support for the nation's political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological progress [1]. Since 2018, the Chinese government has introduced a series of policy documents — such as the *Opinions on Deepening Education and Teaching Reform to Comprehensively Improve the Quality of Compulsory Education*, the *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of the Rural Teacher Workforce in the New Era*, and the *Opinions on Building a High-Quality, Equitable Basic Public Education Service System* — to enhance the quality of rural education, improve educational conditions in rural areas, narrow the urban-rural education resource gap, and promote the integrated development of urban and rural education.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist in the development of urban-rural basic education. These include overcrowded urban schools, under-enrolled rural schools, disparities in educational quality, and differences in cultural perceptions of education between urban and rural communities. The *2022 Report on the Development of Chinese Rural Education* highlights significant declines in the number of rural primary and secondary schools in central and western regions. Small-scale schools face developmental bottlenecks, while town-based schools often struggle with large class sizes — indicating structural coordination issues in urban-rural education integration. In addition, the imbalance in the composition of rural teaching staff, high teacher turnover, and concerns regarding students' physical and mental well-being and social-emotional development further demonstrate the complexity of rural educational development. These challenges, to some extent, affect the pace and effectiveness of achieving high-quality and equitable urban-rural educational development.

In light of these issues, it is increasingly urgent to explore how to construct and sustain a system that can support deep integration in urban-rural basic education. Grounded

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in community theory, this study focuses on the deep integration of urban-rural basic education. By systematically examining the historical evolution, value implications, and goal orientation of urban-rural educational integration, this study explores how to build a community framework that facilitates such integration. It addresses three key questions: First, what are the core values and objectives of urban-rural educational integration? Second, how can community theory inform the practical implementation of urban-rural educational integration? Third, how can “localized practice” contribute to maintaining an effective integration system? In answering these questions, this paper aims to clarify the construction and evolution of a community that supports deep urban-rural integration in basic education — from a state of ambiguity to clarity — and to provide strategic recommendations based on localized practices that can stimulate internal motivation, narrow the urban-rural education gap, improve educational quality, and advance educational equity.

2. The Value and Objectives of Integrating Urban and Rural Basic Education

2.1. The Connotation of Urban–Rural Basic Education Integration

There is an increasing need to establish and improve mechanisms for integrated urban-rural development [2]. Subsequently, the *Opinions on Establishing and Improving Institutional Mechanisms and Policy Systems for Integrated Urban-Rural Development*, issued by the State Council, outlined key strategic directions [3]. The *Rural Revitalization Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China* further affirms the importance of “urban-rural integration” as a critical component of the rural revitalization agenda. The report to the 20th National Congress reiterated the importance of advancing urban-rural integration and maintaining coordinated development, thereby offering continued policy guidance and support for promoting synergy between urban and rural education systems.

As the cornerstone of the national education system, basic education plays a vital role in advancing the goal of becoming a globally competitive educational power. Narrowing the urban-rural education gap remains a fundamental aspect of China’s broader education development strategy. Scholars have noted that the concept of “urban-rural education integration” represents an extension of the national strategy of urban-rural integration into the educational domain. It also reflects the refinement and evolution of earlier efforts toward “coordinated” and “integrated” urban-rural education. This approach places increased emphasis on the equal status of urban and rural education, encourages mutual support, respects local specificities, and highlights the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation and active participation from both urban and rural stakeholders [4]. From this perspective, the integration of urban and rural basic education can be viewed as a key component of urban-rural education integration, with a focus on the unique issues and characteristics of basic education. It involves clearly defined objectives, scope, and institutional frameworks aimed at enhancing educational equity and overall development.

2.2. The Value Implications of Integrating Urban and Rural Basic Education

Urban–rural basic education integration is a reform-oriented model that prioritizes educational equity. Its primary objective is to optimize the distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas, enhance overall education quality, and promote mutual understanding and integration between urban and rural educational environments. In doing so, it supports the coordinated development of the basic education system and lays a solid foundation for sustainable regional development [5].

First, urban–rural integration addresses the challenge of educational equity and serves as a key pathway toward balanced and high-quality development. Educational equity is not only a core component of social justice but also a fundamental goal of educational reform. By narrowing the gaps between urban and rural schools, improving access, and promoting inclusive educational practices, integration aims to ensure that students in both urban and rural areas can enjoy equal educational opportunities. This process also

fosters collaboration, exchange of best practices, and shared growth across regions, enhancing the adaptability and innovation of the education system.

Second, urban–rural basic education integration is viewed as a strategic measure for advancing modernization in education. An inclusive and balanced basic education system contributes to improving national education quality and ensuring equitable access to future-oriented education. Integration facilitates the development of digital, diverse, and innovative education models, supporting long-term human capital development and the cultivation of critical competencies across the population. It also contributes to improving educational satisfaction and social inclusiveness.

Finally, integrating urban and rural basic education is essential for advancing the sustainable development of rural regions. By improving the infrastructure and learning environment of rural schools, it enhances the attractiveness of rural education and helps retain both students and educators. Integration contributes to capacity-building, encourages innovation in rural education, and supports the development of local communities. Through stronger collaboration and shared development frameworks, it fosters educational cohesion and supports the broader goals of rural development [6].

In summary, urban–rural basic education integration plays a crucial role in advancing equity, educational modernization, and balanced regional development. It involves the rational allocation of educational resources, enhancement of instructional quality, and alignment with contemporary educational concepts. This process supports the goal of establishing a more inclusive, adaptive, and cohesive education system for the future.

2.3.1. Jointly Promote High-Quality Balance

The primary goal of integrating urban and rural basic education is to consolidate resources from both urban and rural areas to achieve shared high-quality educational opportunities and promote balanced development. This objective highlights the importance of leveraging and sharing educational resources across regions, which is a key driver of integration. The aim is to foster comprehensive development that benefits all stakeholders. Currently, the unequal distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas presents a significant challenge, with urban regions generally having greater access to resources while rural areas often face shortages. Integration can address these disparities by improving infrastructure and teaching expertise in rural schools, thereby broadening the range of subjects available to students and providing a better learning environment. By aligning resources across urban and rural areas, integration can help bridge the existing gaps, create a high-quality, balanced system of basic public education, and ensure coordinated progress in education that ultimately benefits both regions.

2.3.2. Support Rural Development

The goal of integrating urban and rural basic education is closely tied to supporting rural development and promoting balanced urban-rural growth. This goal carries significant strategic importance, aiming to enhance educational conditions in rural areas and foster more coordinated development between urban and rural regions. The integration of urban and rural education reflects a focus on addressing disparities between these areas and underscores the vital role of education in promoting rural progress. It emphasizes the need for collaboration between urban and rural education systems, with urban areas contributing their educational resources to support mutual learning and complementarity between regions. This approach cultivates rural talent with both innovative and practical skills, providing essential intellectual and cultural support for the balanced development of urban and rural areas.

In summary, the goal of integrating urban and rural basic education is to achieve educational equity, improve education quality, and contribute to rural development. It

plays an essential role in advancing educational modernization, strengthening the education system, and ensuring that education meets the needs and expectations of all communities.

3. Constructing a Community for the In-Depth Integration of Urban and Rural Basic Education

3.1. Theoretical Basis

German scholar Ferdinand Tönnies was the first to introduce the concept of “community”. He developed his “community” theory based on the understanding of civil society both during and after an individual’s lifetime [7]. Tönnies viewed the community as a social organism built upon natural human will, such as emotions and habits, as well as kinship and geographic connections. Drawing on Tönnies’s theory, Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong proposed the concept of the “small community”, emphasizing rural economic drivers and the complementary development of urban and rural areas, which is of great practical relevance for China’s ongoing urbanization and integrated regional development [8].

Tönnies’s ideas were influenced by Marx’s theory of the “true community” [9]. Marx developed his concept of community while analyzing capitalist society and its alienating effects. In a capitalist system, natural social relations among individuals are replaced by market-driven interactions, leading to alienation. The “true community”, according to Marx, is a social form where human relationships are based on shared interests and the free development of individuals, rather than on financial transactions or market exchanges. In this ideal community, means of production are collectively owned, private property is eliminated, and class antagonisms are resolved, allowing every individual to freely develop their capabilities [9]. Essentially, Marx’s concept of the “true community” describes a society centered on fairness, with resources distributed equitably and social members freely developing and contributing to the community as a whole.

As population movements increase and urban-rural integration becomes more common, contemporary society is gradually forming a regional community that transcends the “small community”, incorporating both urban and rural areas. Marx and Engels, while analyzing the evolution of urban-rural relationships, suggested that these relationships progress through various stages: undifferentiated unity, urban-rural separation, urban-rural opposition, and urban-rural integration [10]. Marx’s vision of “urban-rural integration” aligns with his broader theory of the “true community”, as both seek to balance social and economic relations, aiming to eliminate internal conflicts and establish systems based on freedom, equality, and shared development. “Urban-rural integration” represents a concrete manifestation of the “true community” theory in the context of urban-rural interaction, promoting the ideals of social development rooted in equality and mutual benefit.

In summary, community theory emphasizes the interconnectedness and symbiosis between individuals, society, and nature, advocating for shared goals, common identity, belonging, and equitable benefit distribution. It provides a valuable framework for addressing the urban-rural divide and promoting comprehensive urban-rural development.

3.2. Dimensions for Constructing an Urban-Rural Basic Education Community

Based on a comprehensive review and analysis of community theory, this paper defines a community as a social relationship model based on common interests, values, identity, and participation. It serves as a fundamental means of human survival and development, as well as a vital safeguard for social harmony and progress. A community encompasses four main dimensions: the interest dimension, referring to the correlation and coordination of interests among members, which is the foundation and driving force for community formation; the value dimension, referring to the shared ideological and value orientations among members, serving as the code and goal that sustain the community;

the identity dimension, referring to the cultural identification and emotional belonging among members, which provides the bond and support for community stability; and the participation dimension, referring to interactive engagement and cooperative collaboration among members, which serves as the pathway and mechanism for community development.

Urban-rural basic education interest community. An interest community refers to the stakeholders whose interests are deeply intertwined in the integration of urban and rural basic education, including urban and rural schools, teachers, students, parents, and communities. Among them, there is not only exchange and interaction but also conflict and coordination. Building an urban-rural basic education interest community encompasses establishing and refining mechanisms for coordinating interests, such as interest distribution, adjustment, and supervision, always prioritizing educational benefits so that all parties can fairly enjoy the resources and outcomes of the community. It also involves strengthening connections among the interests of community members through measures such as interest sharing, complementarity, and mutual benefit, enabling all parties to support and promote one another and thus form a genuine interest community. Additionally, it is important to expand the scope of interests within this community so that all parties can continuously enhance their own benefits and achieve sustainable development.

Urban-rural basic education value community. The principles for constructing an urban-rural basic education community aim to achieve value consensus among community members, including educational concepts, goals, and norms. Therefore, maintaining the urban-rural basic education value community includes: cultivating and promoting value concepts such as equity, quality, and collaboration, enabling all parties to identify with and follow the development direction and principles of the urban-rural basic education community; constructing and optimizing the value system, including value objectives, standards, and evaluations, allowing all parties to clearly understand and meet the development requirements and expectations of the community; promoting and enhancing value practices, such as value dissemination, exchange, and creation, enabling all parties to continuously strengthen both the connotation and extension of values within the urban-rural basic education community.

Urban-rural basic education identity community. An identity community is built upon subjects' acceptance of each other and of urban-rural educational integration. Establishing and developing an identity community requires strengthening identity symbols, such as names, logos, and culture, enabling all parties to distinguish and recognize the characteristics and image of the urban-rural basic education community; stimulating and cultivating identity emotions, allowing all parties to feel and express the warmth and atmosphere of the community; and enhancing and consolidating identity behaviors, such as participation, contribution, and dedication, enabling all parties to demonstrate and prove the capabilities and value of the urban-rural basic education community.

Urban-rural basic education participation community. A participation community refers to the participatory approaches in the deep integration of urban-rural basic education, including the participation and collaboration of urban and rural schools, teachers, students, parents, communities, etc., in planning, implementation, evaluation, improvement, and other aspects of urban-rural education. These represent the joint actions and means of urban-rural education, as well as its common innovations and effects. The construction of an urban-rural basic education participation community includes: ensuring and expanding participation subjects, such as community leaders, members, and partners, allowing all parties to equally enjoy participation rights and opportunities; standardizing and improving participation mechanisms, such as procedures, methods, and channels, enabling all parties to effectively participate in various affairs and activities; encouraging and incentivizing participation motivation, such as motivations, purposes, and effects, enabling all parties to actively engage in the construction and development of the urban-rural basic education community.

4. The Localized Maintenance of the Urban-Rural Basic Education Community

Constructing an urban-rural basic education community aims to achieve a deeper integration of urban and rural basic education, thereby promoting educational equity and improving quality. However, this cannot be accomplished overnight, it is a continuous process of maintenance and ongoing development. Maintaining this community refers to activities, built on the foundation of its establishment, that employ effective mechanisms and measures to preserve and enhance both the community's internal cohesion and its external adaptability, allowing it to continuously fulfill its functions and purposes.

Localized practice is critically important in sustaining the entire urban-rural basic education community. First, localized practice tailors educational measures to the specific needs of an area, meaning that educational resources and initiatives can more precisely address the distinct disparities and problems between urban and rural settings. Second, when educational measures align with local culture, economy, and social conditions, they tend to achieve wider acceptance and better outcomes. Third, localized educational practices encourage broader regional participation and identification, strengthening community members' sense of belonging and responsibility toward shared goals. Finally, localized strategies, grounded in local capabilities and existing resources, are inherently sustainable.

Therefore, localized practice is not only important but also indispensable for maintaining the urban-rural basic education community. It ensures that the community can effectively meet the specific needs of each region while promoting equality, fairness, and sustainability in education.

4.1. Localized Maintenance of Interests

"Rethinking Education" introduces the concept of "common interest", which emphasizes that jointly created achievements should be shared by everyone, and viewing education as a common interest implies that education is essentially a social collective endeavor. The goal of maintaining an urban-rural basic education community is to maximize the interests of all members of that community, including government, schools, teachers, students, parents, and the broader community.

From a local perspective, maintaining common interests means fully respecting and utilizing local natural, social, and cultural resources, forming a mechanism for interest distribution and linkage that facilitates the sustainable development of local economies, ecosystems, and societies, and ultimately achieving the internal vitality and innovative capacity of the local community.

Specifically, interest distribution needs to consider factors such as local development level, developmental needs, and potential. It requires formulating reasonable standards and methods for distributing benefits to prevent imbalances and unfairness, thus promoting the harmony and stability of the interest community.

Linking interests necessitates taking into account local resource advantages, cultural characteristics, and social networks, as well as establishing effective platforms and channels for that linkage. Through these efforts, the synergy and innovative capacity of the community can be harnessed to boost its vitality and competitiveness.

Interest space must consider local development opportunities, challenges, and trends, and adopt appropriate strategies and measures, leveraging both internal and external resources and forces within the interest community to achieve adaptation and expansion.

4.2. Preserving the Value of Localization

Value concepts refer to the shared beliefs and value orientations of the urban-rural basic education community, serving as its spiritual pillar and guiding principle. From a localization perspective, value concepts must consider factors such as local educational traditions, needs, and visions, forming an educational philosophy that aligns with local

characteristics and development objectives. In doing so, all parties can coordinate and cooperate under a common vision, thereby enhancing the cohesion and sense of unity within the urban-rural basic education community.

The value system encompasses the value goals, standards, and evaluations that establish a normative and orderly framework for the urban-rural basic education community. It provides institutional assurance and operational mechanisms for the community. From a localization standpoint, the value system must address local educational conditions, challenges, and reforms, constructing a system suited to the local context and stage of development. By operating under a unified system, all parties can more effectively standardize and advance their efforts, ultimately improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the urban-rural basic education community.

Value practice refers to the activities and processes of value dissemination, exchange, and creation that constitute the practical and innovative momentum of the urban-rural basic education community. From a localization perspective, value practice should take into account factors such as local educational resources, fostering value-based practices that meet local needs and tap into development potential. Examples include strengthening educational publicity and training, promoting educational exchange and cooperation, and encouraging educational exploration and innovation within the urban-rural basic education community. This shared practice allows all parties to learn and develop together, bolstering the community's vitality and competitiveness.

4.3. Maintaining Localized Identity

Identity symbols refer to the shared markers and value orientation of the urban-rural basic education community, serving as its spiritual pillar and representative image. From the perspective of localization, shaping and strengthening these symbols means incorporating local culture, traditions, and history into the education system. This can be achieved by developing curricula, teaching materials, and school activities that include local cultural elements. Meanwhile, creating community-specific identifiers can help students and teachers develop a sense of belonging.

Identity sentiment refers to the shared emotions and value significance of the urban-rural basic education community, acting as its emotional bond and value orientation. From a localization perspective, this sentiment can be stimulated and nurtured by organizing various cultural activities, community service initiatives, and interschool exchanges, thereby enhancing emotional connections among students and teachers.

Identity behavior refers to the collective actions and value practices of the urban-rural basic education community, serving as the carrier of its initiatives and the driving force behind its values. To foster and consolidate identity behavior, it is essential to encourage community participation and implement projects and activities that reflect local characteristics and meet local needs.

4.4. Sustaining Localized Participation

Participating entities refer to the participants and stakeholders of the urban-rural basic education community, serving as core elements and supporting forces of the community. From a localization perspective, it is necessary to consider factors such as the current state of local education, educational needs, and educational resources to broaden the range of participating entities in line with local conditions and developmental stages — such as urban and rural schools, teachers, students, parents, and communities — so that all parties can equally enjoy opportunities to participate in the urban-rural basic education community, thereby enhancing the community's representativeness and inclusiveness. Notably, local education administrative departments, schools, and communities should be more actively involved, ensuring they play important roles in educational decision-making and implementation, thus effectively promoting deeper integration in basic education.

Participation mechanisms refer to the rules and methods that govern the involvement of various entities in the urban-rural basic education community, functioning as the institutional safeguard and operational structure of the community. From a localization perspective, participation mechanisms should factor in local educational traditions, culture, and vision, among other considerations, to standardize and refine mechanisms aligned with local characteristics and development goals — such as the procedures, methods, and channels of participation — so that all parties can effectively engage in the community's various affairs and activities, thereby improving the community's coordination and transparency.

Participation motivation refers to the motives and outcomes driving involvement in the urban-rural basic education community, serving as the community's practical carrier and source of innovation. From a localization perspective, it is important to identify and reinforce motivating factors that match local needs and developmental potential — such as motives, objectives, and anticipated results — so that all parties can engage proactively in building and advancing the urban-rural basic education community, ultimately enhancing its vitality and competitiveness.

5. Conclusion

In the context of urban-rural integration, constructing and maintaining a unified urban-rural basic education community is essential for achieving educational equity, improving quality, and ensuring sustainable development. The integration process, while complex and gradual, requires addressing various dimensions, including shared interests, values, identity, and participation. Localized practices play a pivotal role in sustaining this community, as they allow educational initiatives to be tailored to local needs, traditions, and conditions, fostering broader participation and a stronger sense of belonging among all stakeholders. Moreover, the active involvement of local educational institutions, communities, and policymakers ensures that education systems are not only adaptive but also deeply embedded in the region's socio-cultural fabric. Ultimately, through a collaborative approach that combines local engagement with systematic value and identity maintenance, the urban-rural education community can evolve into a cohesive, efficient, and equitable system that promotes shared prosperity and social harmony.

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