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Promoting Equitable Quality of Early Childhood Education in Rural and Urban China: A Case Study of Rural-Urban Continuum Model

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Abstract

Through the case of the rural-urban continuum model in China, this study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of local government's policy intervention in promoting equitable quality of early childhood education in rural and urban areas through multi-stakeholders' voices. With simultaneous mixed method approach and self-developed instruments, the authors collected 891 valid parent questionnaires, 184 teacher questionnaires, 52 observational evaluation scales, and conducted interviews with 13 kindergarten principals and 6 administrators. The data were analysed by SPSS and NVIVO Plus. The findings show that a) rural and urban parents' satisfaction levels were significantly different in terms of kindergartens' cost and environment conditions; b) rural and urban teachers exhibited significant difference only when evaluating their professional attitudes and access to material support; c) researchers found no significant difference in quality of play activities and group teaching between rural and urban kindergarten classes, while significant difference was found in child care activities; d) principals perceived positively the effectiveness of the RUC model, yet had big concerns about teachers' quality, and e) government intervention was proved to be a key factor enhancing equitable quality in rural and urban areas.

***Key words**: educational partnership; equity; quality; rural and urban education disparity; simultaneous mixed methods.*

Introduction

Early childhood education lays the foundation for human development. Numerous research findings show that quality early childhood education plays significantly positive role in children's lifelong development, especially for those children living in poor social economic conditions (Heckman, 2016). Meanwhile, low-quality early childhood education is proved to be negative, even harmful to children's psychological and physical development, and the influence may last throughout the life span (Liu, 2014). Therefore, the distribution of quality early childhood education resources greatly determines the level of educational equity for children. Each child has the right to receive quality education. The *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action* set up the overarching goal of "ensuring access to and completion of quality education for all children and youth" (UNESCO, 2015). However, children's unequal access to quality early childhood education is still a huge longstanding obstacle faced by each society due to imbalanced development among different regions and the unequal resource allocation among different types of early childhood education institutions.

In China, where the deeply rooted economic rural-urban dual structure[1] leads to a huge disparity in education in rural and urban areas (Li, 2015), the conflict between people's increasing demands for and the insufficient supply of quality early childhood education becomes a critical national issue, especially in rural areas (Liu, 2017). Since 2010, China has issued a series of policies to address the rural and urban gap issue in early childhood education development. For instance, *The National Guidelines for Long and Mid-term Educational Reform and Development* put forth the concept of "Rural and Urban Educational Continuum" ("*Cheng Xiang Yi Ti Hua"* in Chinese), which defines the national strategy and institutional reform to promote balanced development of education in rural and urban areas (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2010). *State Council's Guidelines on the Current Development of Early Childhood Education* (State Council, 2010) proposed building a basic public education service system covering urban and rural areas, and gradual equalization of basic public education services and narrowing the regional gap. *The Construction of Public Beneficiary Kindergartens* (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2011) initiated institutional reform of kindergartens, that attempts to make quality early childhood education affordable and accessible to every child, especially to rural children, through government intervention in setting up quality benchmarks and lowering admission fees. The third phase of *The Three-Year (2017-2020) Action*

[1] Rural-urban dual structure in China indicates the historically rooted phenomenon that rural and urban regions have distinct difference and disparity in economic, social, educational and many other sections. Urban area refers to the regions where the manufacturing and service industries are dominant, representing resourceful areas with higher socioeconomic status. Rural area refers to the regions where agriculture is dominant, and it represents vulnerable areas with lower socioeconomic status and fewer resources. Rural area in this study indicates a combined area of township and villages.

Plan for Early Childhood Education Development (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017) announced the primary missions and goals for 2020, which include promoting enrolment rate, ensuring basic resource allocation, and improving quality, especially in rural kindergartens.

With all the policy efforts and increasing fiscal investment in early childhood education development, according to the midterm policy evaluation reports released by the Ministry of Education (2015), in the last 5 years early childhood education in China has achieved great improvement in the aspects of environmental conditions, resource allocation, and greatly alleviated the problems of accessibility and affordability, with children's 3-year gross enrolment rate grown by 19.6%, while the disparity between rural and urban kindergartens has been greatly narrowed. However, low quality is still regarded as the greatest risk faced with early childhood education development, especially in rural areas in China (Liu, H.R., 2017). It has become a critical social conflict between insufficiency of high quality early childhood education resources and the people's increasing needs and expectation for them, especially in the context of Opening Policy for a Second Child[2].

In the context of central government's guidelines for improving early childhood education quality and enhancing balanced development of early childhood education development in rural and urban areas in China, local governments at the provincial and city/county level have also been exploring diverse approaches to initiate policies to address the local issues regarding rural and urban gap in early childhood education development. Some of the local governments initiated projects that were identified to be effective, scalable and beneficiary to the local people and children. Among such initiatives, the Rural-Urban Continuum Model in W County in southwest China set up a typical and successful case. This study focused on this model to examine how the county government works to promote equitable quality of early childhood education in rural and urban areas, what the impacts are, and what implications may be drawn to enlighten other regions in China and other cultures with similar issues.

About W County

W county, with a population of 0.27 million, is located in C City in Southwest China. Due to its typical characteristics of rural-urban dualistic structure and disparity in education, C City was designated by the central government as a pilot city to initiate institutional reforms regarding a balanced development in rural and urban education (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2011). W county is one among 38 counties and districts in C City, with the genetic characteristics of huge rural-urban disparity in education.

[2] Opening Policy for Second Child indicates the policy enacted in 2015 that encourages couples in China to have a second child. This policy terminates the well-known One Child Policy enacted in 1978, predicts a new period of baby boom in the near future and creates new challenges for early childhood education and care in China.

As of 2016, there have been 8 towns and 2 administrative communities in W county. The total population of children aged between 3 and 6 years was 7,595. In recent years, W county has attached great importance to the development of early childhood education. Upon implementation of a series of policies, children's one-year (at the age of 6) and three-year (from 3 to 6 years of age) enrolment rates increased significantly up to 100% and 98%, respectively. Currently, there are totally 56 kindergartens for children aged between 3 and 6 years, including 37 public and 19 private ones, 27 of them in the urban region, 16 in township, and 13 in villages in W county. Among all these kindergartens, 52 (about 93%) were involved in the public beneficiary kindergarten initiative, which means, they receive certain funds from the government each year and keep children's admission fee below an affordable benchmark. This initiative is one among many others to narrow the rural-urban gap, and enhance equitable quality early childhood education for all the children residing in the county as well as nationwide.

With the belief that early childhood education is the most significant foundation for people's lifelong education, for the development of the holistic education system as well as for the economic development, the county government invested a big portion of fiscal funds for early childhood education (ECE) sector. From 2013 to 2016, the amount invested in ECE sector increased by 119.40% (from 10.31 million to 22.62 million). And the funds were mainly used for the purpose of building and facilities improvement, employee payment, teacher training, daily operation and tending, as well as aids for underprivileged children in rural areas. Since 2013, in order to reduce the rural and urban gap in early childhood education and improve equitable quality at the county level, the county government initiated the Rural-Urban Continuum model that was featured by urban kindergartens leading kindergartens in towns and villages to grow together through mutual support mechanism. This model has received high praise from the government and the people in the county and beyond, and therefore made W County well-known for its achievements in early childhood reform and development.

About the Rural-Urban Continuum Model

Initiated in 2013, the Rural-Urban Continuum Model (the RUC model) is originally a local policy to address the low quality and rural-urban gap issues in early childhood education through urban kindergartens' leadership and partnership with rural kindergartens. The core features of the RUC model include:

a) increasing the ratio of fiscal investment in early childhood education sector,

b) increasing investment in improving environment conditions and quality of facilities, especially ensuring village kindergarten environment indicators meeting national standards,

c) covering the whole county with affordable and good quality government-run kindergartens to keep the quality under control and supervision,

d) ensuring at least one central kindergarten in township connecting the urban kindergartens and leading village kindergartens within its township zone,

e) establishing an open and tight bond between urban, township and village kindergartens, that highlights open communication, mutual learning and support to enhance overall early childhood education quality at the county level,

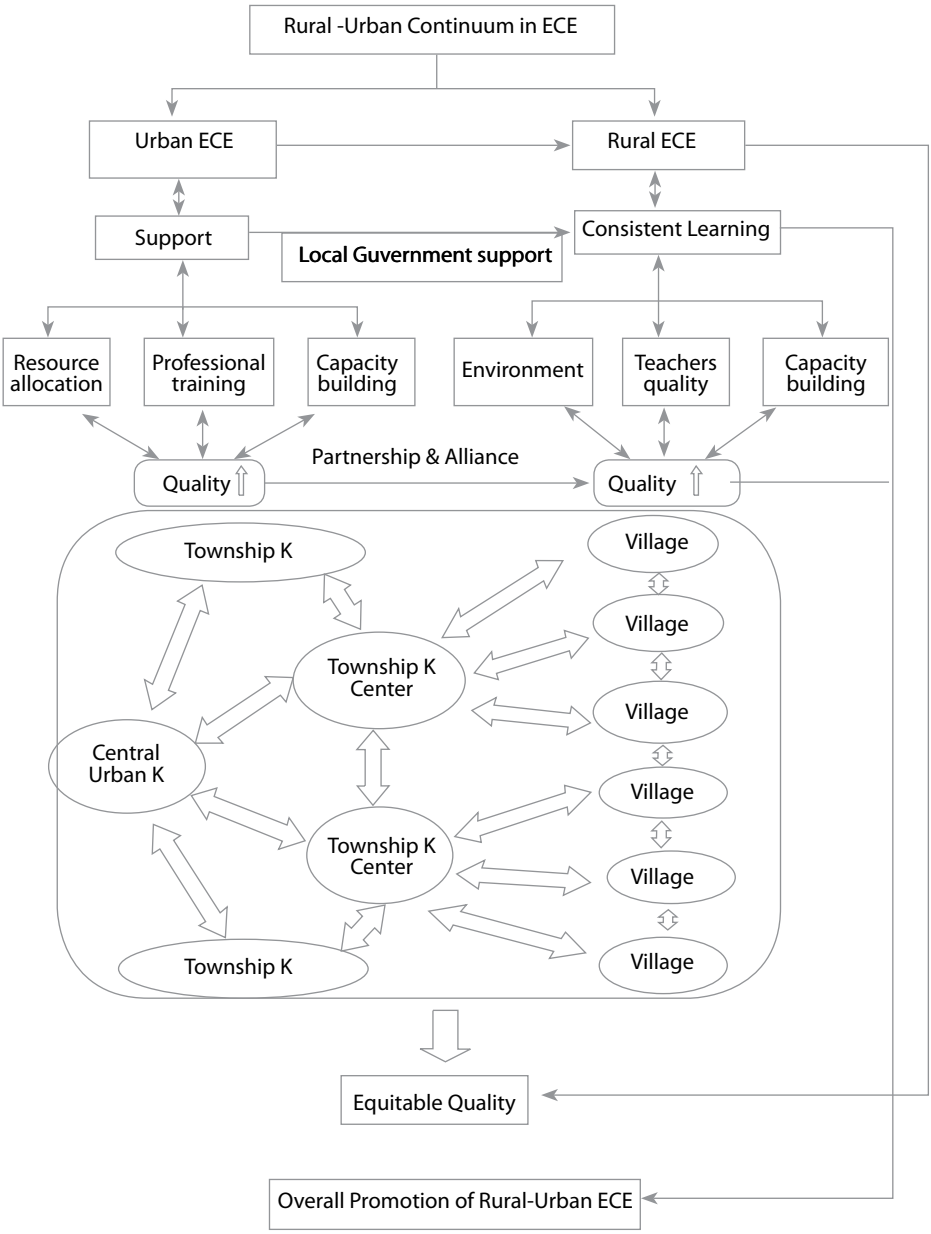
f) initiating the public beneficiary kindergarten program and controlling all kindergartens' admission fees below an affordable benchmark,

g) prioritizing teachers' professional development and quality enhancement through various programs of professional training.

To achieve the primary goals of narrowing the rural and urban gap in early childhood education quality, the RUC model highlighted rural-urban kindergarten partnership and alliance in terms of resource allocation, teachers' professional training and kindergarten capacity building. Village kindergartens, which used to be the less resourceful ones, are now in the position of learners to learn and get support from township kindergartens, which in turn gain support from urban kindergartens. Urban kindergartens in the position of mentors also seek better development through mutual interactions with other kindergartens. Hopefully, all the urban, township and village kindergartens stay in a symbiotic bond and grow together to achieve equitable quality at the whole county level (see Figure 1).

To quote Bainer's definition, educational partnership refers to a relationship between two or more individuals or agencies, at least one of which is an educator, school, or school district (1997). He classified school-based educational partnership into four models, according to four variables of partnership: cooperation or collaboration by the level of involvement, partnership or relationship by the level of interaction, helping hands or project-driven or reform-based partnership by the level of impact, teams or packs or chains by the level of organization. Research studies focusing on educational partnership commonly address the following general issues: What are the goals for the partnership? What are the pros and cons of the partnership? Does the partnership work or not? What are the final effects/outcomes of the partnership? To what extent does the partnership achieve the original goals? What are the difficulties and challenges of the partnership? How do the partners/stakeholders involved in partnership perceive the partnership and its impacts? Is the partnership sustainable and how are the positive impacts maintained?

The RUC Model is essentially a kindergarten-kindergarten partnership, a partnership between rural and urban kindergartens. Such a partnership model was featured by, as expected, high level of involvement, constant interactions and mutual support, teamwork and is reform-based. However, little scientific evidence or grass voices were collected by either policy makers or researchers to prove its effectiveness. In its 5th year of implementation, there are critical issues worth questioning: What are the impacts of this rural-urban kindergarten partnership model in narrowing the rural-urban gap and enhancing equitable quality? What could be drawn from such modality? What challenges are the governments and kindergartens still facing?



(Note: K indicates kindergartens; P. D. indicates professional development)

Figure 1. The rural-urban continuum model to enhance equitable quality in W county

Research Questions

In the context of the above mentioned national and local policies addressing the imbalanced development issue of early childhood education between rural and

urban areas, and the low quality issue especially in rural areas, this study focused on W county's case to exemplify local governments' actions and effectiveness to narrow the rural-urban gap in early childhood education quality and enhance balanced development. W county explored and constructed the RUC model characterized by rural and urban kindergartens' partnership in terms of resource reallocation, teachers' professional development and capacity building. This model was scaling up in the whole county by the local administrators, and received positive feedback from teachers and parents in the communities. Based on field studies in selected kindergartens in W county, this study aims to collect evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of the RUC model and its reproducibility in other regions, even in cross cultural settings. Sense-making framework, which emphasizes the perspective of participants in reviewing certain policies (Coburn, 2005, 2001) was also applied to this study. Parents, teachers, principals, educational administrators and researchers involved in this policy were sampled, and their multi-stakeholders' voices were collected through questionnaire surveys, interviews, and observations to address specific research questions as follows.

I. From the parents' perspective, are they satisfied with their children's kindergarten quality after the implementation of the RUC Model in 5 years? Are rural and urban parents' satisfaction levels different?

II. Based on teachers' perceptions, how do they evaluate their improvement in professional development and competences after the implementation of the RUC Model? Are rural and urban teachers' self-evaluation scores significantly different?

III. From the researchers' observations, how do they evaluate the quality of rural and urban kindergartens?

IV. From the kindergarten principals' perspective, how do they perceive the RUC Model, and how do they evaluate the effectiveness of the Model in enhancing the quality of their kindergartens?

V. From the administrators' stand, how do they evaluate the effectiveness of the RUC Model in enhancing equitable quality of rural and urban kindergartens? What issues and challenges are they still faced with for further improvement?

Methods

Research Design

Centring around the research questions proposed above, this study employed a systematic analysis using simultaneous mixed methods design, which involved both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the effectiveness of W county's RUC Model in impacting the equitable development of early childhood education, and in promoting quality of early childhood education in rural areas from the stakeholders' perspectives.

According to Morse (1991), qualitative or quantitative methods may provide core or supplementary components respectively in a study, and these components can be conducted simultaneously or sequentially in order to serve the purpose of description

and understanding in the study. Sequential mixed method approach refers to multi-phase design of quantitative method and qualitative method in a timely order, with one phase being the basis of the next one. The final inferences of the study are based on the results of both phases; the second phase is conducted to either confirm/disconfirm the inferences of the first phase, or to provide further explanation for the unexpected findings of the first phase. On the contrary, simultaneous mixed method approach refers to multi-section design of quantitative method and qualitative method happening at the same time; findings from different sections of studies are complementary to each other to compose more comprehensive results to improve readers' understanding. This study adopted simultaneous mixed method design, aiming at generalizing evaluation and feedback information on the quality of education in both rural and urban kindergartens in W County from different stakeholders' perspectives through questionnaires and scales. And meanwhile, through qualitative approach of interviews and observations, this study attempted to seek confirmation or disconfirmation, and further explanation from the principals' and educational administrators' perspectives. Hopefully, the two sets of data will allow for a comprehensive examination of W county's RUC model and its impact.

Specifically, as shown in Table 1, in the quantitative section of the study, questionnaires developed by the authors were distributed to teachers and parents of selected classes (for 4-5 and 5-6 years old children) in the selected sample of kindergartens in order to learn about their satisfaction and perceptions of the kindergarten quality. Meanwhile, 8 trained researchers conducted classroom observation in selected classes, every two researchers in charge of one class, using the classroom quality observation scale developed by the authors to evaluate class-level quality. In the qualitative phase of the study, a focus group interview was conducted with 6 educational administrators from W County Department of Education, who had been in charge of policy making and implementation in the sector of early childhood education and in the formation of the RUC Model. All kindergarten principals included in the sample also participated in interviews to provide their evaluation about the impact of the RUC Model.

Table 1

Types of instruments developed and applied in this study

Two sections of the study	Method and instruments	Participants	Research questions to address
Quantitative approach	Questionnaire	Parents	RQ I
		Teachers	RQ II
	Observational evaluation scale	Trained researchers	RQ III
Qualitative approach	Interview	Kindergarten principals	RQ IV
	Focus group interview	Education administrators	RQ V

Instruments

For the quantitative section of the study, the authors designed questionnaires for teachers and parents from the sample kindergartens. Based on literature synthesis and the research purpose, the questionnaire for parents was designed to compose five dimensions, including parents' satisfaction with children's access to quality kindergartens, admission fee, educational quality, environment conditions, and teachers' quality. The questionnaire includes a total of 40 statements for the parents to evaluate from 1 ("very unsatisfied") to 5 ("very satisfied"). Questionnaire for teachers is composed of eight dimensions, including teachers' internal evaluation about their own professional competence, involvement, attitude, commitment, professional development planning, and their external evaluation about interpersonal support, material support and managerial support from the kindergartens and beyond. These dimensions were tested with 76 statements, and participants could choose from 1 ("absolutely incorrect") to 5 ("absolutely correct"). Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaires for parents and teachers were 0.949 and 0.896, respectively.

For classroom observation, the authors developed an appraisal scale composed of 3 subscales. Based on literature about early childhood education quality evaluation, daily routine child care activities, group teaching and play activities were the commonly observed points as key process variables of quality in Chinese context (Li, 2017, pp. 79-148; Liu, 2011). Therefore, the 3 subscales were designed in accordance with such findings. The first subscale aimed for appraising the quality of children's daily care activities such as the routine work of organizing children's arrivals at and departures from kindergartens, meal-taking, sleeping. There are totally 47 items in this subscale. The second subscale was used to evaluate appropriateness and quality of group teaching activities in three dimensions, which are: goal setting, content design, and teachers' instructional approach. There are 21 items in this subscale. The third subscale was designed to evaluate the quality of children's play activities in four dimensions, including play design and schedule, material sufficiency and appropriateness, teachers' instruction and interference, and children's performance during the play. All of the subscales were 5-point Likert-type scales with positive and negative statements (1 indicating "strongly disagree", and 5 indicating "strongly agree"). Cronbach's Alpha of the three subscales were 0.961, 0.923, 0.953, respectively.

For the qualitative section of the study, the authors designed focus group interview questions for the educational administrators in the county-level department of education, mainly addressing questions related to what policies were made, what the input had been, and what activities had been conducted to enact the RUC Model, and what had changed in the rural and urban kindergartens since its enactment. As for interviews with the kindergarten principals, questions mainly included the type of activities they participated in while implementing the RUC Model, what benefits they witnessed or received from the Model, and their perception of the Model.

Participants

According to the geographical features, economic status, the population of 3-6 year olds, and the number of kindergartens in rural (including township and villages) and urban areas in W county, the authors stratified 13 kindergartens (for children aged 3-6), including 4 kindergartens in the city, 5 at the township level and 4 in the villages. Among these sample kindergartens, one mid-level class for 4-5 years old children and one senior-level class for 5-6 years old children were randomly selected in each kindergarten.

Totally, 184 teachers and 891 parents from the selected kindergartens and classes participated in the questionnaire surveys and provided valid data. Thirteen interviews were conducted with chief principals of all the sample kindergartens. Eight observation researchers, consisting of 1 professor, 4 master candidates, 2 doctoral candidates and 1 post-doctoral fellow, all of whom had majored in the field of early childhood education, were equipped with professional knowledge and skills about early childhood education quality evaluation as well as about the instruments, and they participated in 8 hours of observation and appraisal work per day. Observations were conducted among 26 selected classes. Since there were two researchers observing and appraising one class, totally 52 scale sets of data were collected. One focus group interview was conducted with 6 administrators in the W County Department of Education who were in charge of the RUC Model design and implementation (see Table 2).

Table 2

Distribution of rural and urban sample kindergartens and participants

Participants	Urban area	Rural area		Total
		Township	Village	
Kindergartens	4	5	4	13
Parents	527 (59.1%)	245 (27.5%)	119 (13.4%)	891
Teachers	95 (51.6%)	89 (48.4%)		184
Principals	4 (30.7%)	5 (38.4%)	4 (30.7%)	13
Researchers	8			8
Administrators	6			6

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected through the questionnaires, observation and the appraisal scale were analysed by SPSS, and the qualitative data collected through interviews were coded and analysed by NVIVO Plus.

Results

Results Regarding Research Question I: Parents' Satisfaction

Some researchers are critical about the validation of parents' involvement in evaluating early childhood education quality due to their lack of professional knowledge and competence (Yuan, 2011). However, being the guardians of children

and clients of the early childhood education service, parents are significant witnesses of the quality of kindergartens their children attended. Therefore, their satisfaction level is an important evidence to reflect kindergarten quality in terms of meeting the parents' needs and expectations.

As shown in Table 3 and Figure 2, the overall satisfaction level of parent participants with the quality of the kindergartens that their children attended was above the middle level, with the medians of 3.92. Comparing different satisfaction levels of parents from different areas, it is obvious that parents from villages have the lowest medians in all five dimensions, and parents from the urban area have the highest satisfaction level in almost all dimensions except cost. According to the *t*-test result about *p* value (see Table 3), among the five dimensions, rural and urban parents' satisfaction differences in terms of cost and environment are both significant, while parents from different areas do not differ in their satisfaction with opportunities and access, educational quality and teachers' quality. Comparing parents' satisfaction level with five different dimensions, teachers' quality gained the highest recognition from all parents from different areas, environment ranked the second, and educational quality ranked the third. Parents' satisfaction with cost and children's opportunities and access to quality kindergartens gained relatively lower satisfaction from parents. In terms of cost, parents from townships were most satisfied, more than those from the city and villages.

Table 3

Rural-urban difference in parents' satisfaction with the quality of kindergartens

Dimensions	Urban area		Rural area				p value
			Township		Village		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Opportunities and access	3.82	0.65	3.71	0.67	3.71	0.68	.06
Cost	3.83	0.88	3.93	0.79	3.61	1.14	.00**
Educational quality	4.02	0.60	3.98	0.58	3.90	0.78	.13
Environment	4.09	0.69	3.99	0.63	3.93	0.82	.03*
Teachers' quality	4.14	0.69	4.14	0.67	4.08	0.80	.65

(Note: * indicates p< .05, ** indicates p< .01)

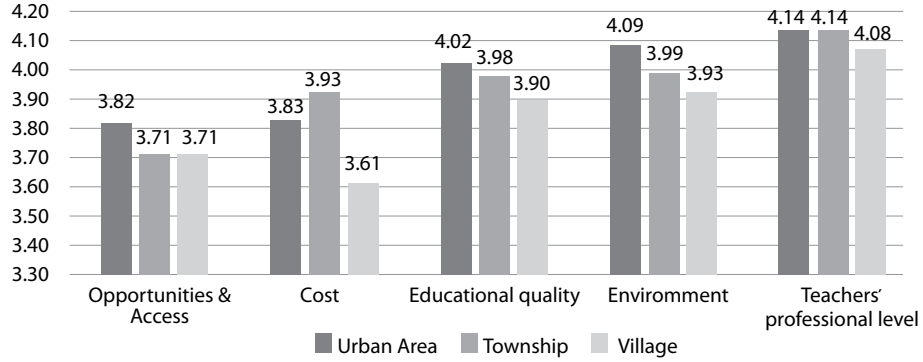


Figure 2. Rural-urban difference in parents' satisfaction with the quality of kindergartens

Generally speaking, from parents' view, the effectiveness of W county's RUC Model was significantly positive in enhancing kindergarten environmental conditions, teachers' professional development, and their educational quality in rural and urban areas. However, there is still much more to do to increase rural children's access to quality early childhood education resources at a lower cost.

Results Regarding Research Question II: Teachers' Evaluation

Teachers are the most critical factors affecting the quality of education. In accordance with such belief, the policy makers of the RUC Model put teachers' professional development into the central place of the policy framework. Teachers' internal evaluation about their changes in professional competence, involvement, attitude, commitment and planning, as well as their external evaluation about the changes in interpersonal, material and managerial support from the kindergartens and their partners since the implementation of the RUC Model can greatly reflect the policy effectiveness and issues.

As shown in Table 4 and Figure 3, teacher participants' average score of the overall evaluation is about 3.81. Comparing evaluation scores of teachers from different areas, only evaluation results in terms of attitude to the job and material support (such as salary) were significantly different between urban teachers and rural teachers. For all other aspects, there was no significant difference found between them. All rural and urban teacher participants have commonly high evaluation of their competence, involvement, emotion and interpersonal support, while evaluation of some other aspects were relatively low, such as commitment for the career, professional development planning, managerial support and material support. Among all the dimensions, teachers exhibited the lowest score on commitment to the job and career (3.35 by teachers from the city, 3.32 by teachers from the township and 3.34 by teachers from villages). It may be one of the predictors to explain the high mobility rate of kindergarten teachers in the county, as well as at the national level (Li, 2017, pp. 359-373). The low score in managerial support might partially result from the aggregating empowerment of the kindergarten principals in urban areas to lead the rural partners in the continuum bond, and the weakening of the managerial rights of the rural kindergartens. But the high results in recognition of teachers' competence, involvement, and attitude make up important evidence showing the positive impact of the RUC Model. The high recognition of interpersonal support (4.32 by urban teachers, 4.32 by teachers from the township and 4.10 by teachers from villages) was also important evidence to recognize the effectiveness of the rural and urban kindergarten alliance initiatives that promote mentorship and interactions between urban teachers and those from township and villages.

Table 4

Rural-urban difference in teachers' internal and external evaluation of impact of the rural-urban continuum model

Dimensions	Urban area		Rural area				p value
			Township		Village		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Competence	4.35	0.43	4.27	0.78	4.11	0.70	0.16
Involvement	4.22	0.59	4.23	0.59	4.06	0.50	0.38
Attitude	4.12	0.45	3.92	0.66	3.89	0.58	0.04*
Commitment	3.35	0.43	3.32	0.60	3.34	0.52	0.96
Planning	3.77	0.90	3.73	0.77	3.42	0.85	0.14
Interpersonal support	4.32	0.49	4.32	0.62	4.10	0.75	0.16
Material support	3.76	0.79	3.43	0.70	3.48	0.79	0.02*
Managerial support	3.48	0.85	3.22	0.95	3.17	0.72	0.09

(Note: * indicates p< .05, ** indicates p< .01)

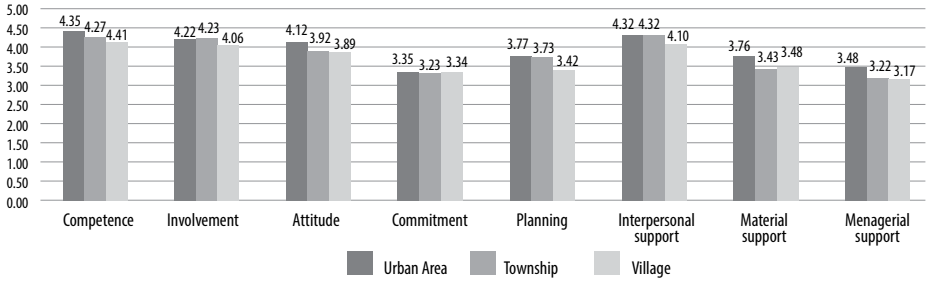


Figure 3. Rural-urban difference in teachers' internal and external evaluation of impact of the rural-urban continuum model

Results Regarding Research Question III: Researchers' Observational Appraisal

Third party evaluation of early childhood education can provide objective, professional and scientific judgment and diagnosis of early childhood education quality and related issues. Trained researchers participated in the classroom observation survey using the scale tools developed by the authors, which can add important evidence of the impact of the rural-urban continuum model upon quality enhancement in both rural and urban areas.

Rural-Urban Difference in the Quality of Daily Care Activities

Based on their professional knowledge, skills and experiences, researchers were trained to evaluate the quality of daily care activities referring to four key points, which are: conditions of the facilities involved in the activities, children's feelings and behaviours shown in the related activities, teachers' care-giving through the related work, teachers' responsibilities and professional performance during the activities. The subscale was composed of quality rating for three aspects: a) routine care activities for children's life, including arrival and departure, meal-taking, sleeping; b) overall

environment maintenance, including security, sanitation and health, and c) emotional care, including peer relationship and teacher-child relationship.

As shown from the findings regarding the quality of daily care activities (see Table 5), township kindergartens were rated with the highest score (4.10), and rural kindergartens were at the lowest level (3.19). Comparing the rural-urban difference, the quality gap regarding security maintenance activities was most significant between rural and urban areas. There were a big number of village kindergartens located in the mountainous area with no fixed roads or gates, and a lack of a person to perform a job of the security guard or multi-tasking of the security person (for instance, one female responsible for security, cooking and cleaning) might all be the reasons for such disparity. Quality of all the routine activities and sanitation health maintenance activities also show a significant difference between rural and urban kindergartens. Financial and resource disparities, as well as social and economic status difference may all contribute to such a gap. However, the quality of peer relationship and teacher-child relationship did not show significant difference among kindergartens in different areas. Such findings were important evidence to explain the positive effect of the teachers' professional development initiatives through the RUC Model.

Table 5

Rural-urban difference in the quality of children's daily care activities

Dimensions	Urban area		Rural area				p value
			Township		Village		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Arrival and departure	3.66	0.34	4.16	0.57	3.46	0.65	.031*
Meal-taking	3.50	0.14	3.97	0.52	3.21	0.55	.008**
Sleeping	3.67	0.44	4.03	0.65	2.97	0.41	.007**
Security	3.95	0.62	4.23	0.61	2.40	0.90	.000***
Sanitation and health	3.52	0.76	3.88	0.55	2.88	0.47	.008**
Peer relationship	3.74	0.51	4.18	0.65	3.51	0.55	.071
Teacher-child relationship	4.18	0.42	4.27	0.54	3.92	0.48	.339
Average	3.75		4.10		3.19		

(Note: * indicates p< .05, ** indicates p< .01, *** indicates p<.001)

Rural-Urban Difference in the Quality of Group Teaching

Group teaching is a fixed part of daily activities in Chinese kindergartens, featured by teachers' designed instruction and children's participation. The quality of group teaching was rated in three dimensions including the learning goal setting, content design and teachers' instructional approach. Researchers evaluate the quality based on their judgment on the appropriateness of the teaching objectives, contents and methods, to see whether they were in alignment with children's developmental characteristics, needs and way of learning.

As shown in Table 6, the overall rate of group teaching quality was at a moderate level. According to the mean scores, rural teachers were rated with the lowest score (3.28), while teachers from townships were rated with the highest score (3.71). However, there was no statistically significant difference in all dimensions between teachers from rural and urban areas. Among the three dimensions, all teachers' performance in setting of goals exhibited the lowest score. It was a common phenomenon that teachers, especially those from villages, followed the "teachers' guidebooks" composed by well-known professionals in the field to teach lessons on everyday basis, and were not quite clear or critical in what they expected the children to learn or were not clear about the way they teach during group teaching. This might be a reason for the low score in all these three dimensions.

Table 6

Rural-urban difference in the quality of group teaching activities

Dimensions	Urban area		Rural area				p value
			Township		Village		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Goal setting	3.17	0.59	3.53	0.52	3.00	0.40	0.10
Content design	3.55	0.53	3.64	0.60	3.33	0.32	0.47
Instructional approach	3.82	0.60	3.97	0.76	3.52	0.34	0.35
Average	3.51		3.71		3.28		

Rural-Urban Difference in the Quality of Play Activities

Unlike group teaching, children' play activities indicate children's free choice of play with materials available in the classroom and with the necessary guidance from the teachers, usually at a fixed schedule of the day. Children learn through play. Many researchers regard play as the essence of the early childhood education curriculum (Yu, 2015). The quality of children's play activities is therefore an important indicator and composition of early childhood education quality (Li, 2017, pp. 290-326). In this study, the quality of play activities was rated in four dimensions including children's engagement of the play, materials supporting the play, teachers' design and organization, and teachers' intervention during children's play. Researchers evaluate the quality of play activities based on their observation of teachers' language and behaviour, children's performance and teacher-child interaction.

As shown in Table 7, the overall quality of children's play activities was rated below the moderate level. Specifically, teachers from villages obtained the lowest score, while teachers from township obtained the highest score in almost all aspects, except teachers' intervention. Among all dimensions, the quality of teachers' intervention gained the lowest score, which reflected the issues of teachers' exaggerating, inappropriateness or lack of interference during children's play. Children's engagement in and aspiration for play won the highest score, which could not be diminished by anything. Statistically,

there was no significant difference in all aspects between the quality of play activities in rural and urban kindergartens.

Table 7

Rural-urban difference in the quality of play activities

Dimensions	Urban area		Rural area				p value
			Township		Village		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Children's engagement	3.81	0.50	3.88	0.69	3.59	0.26	.55
Supporting materials	3.63	0.65	3.65	0.57	3.20	0.82	.36
Design and organization	3.74	0.32	3.75	0.64	3.50	0.52	.60
Teachers' intervention	3.09	0.62	2.90	0.66	2.70	0.66	.53
Average	3.57		3.55		3.25		

Results Regarding Research Question IV: Kindergarten Principals' Feedback

Principals as leaders of kindergartens play a critical role in enacting government policies and reforming the kindergartens with their philosophies and understanding about early childhood education quality. The interviews with 13 kindergarten principals were mainly related to their quality improvement achievements and issues after the implementation of the RUC Model. The findings enabled authors to generalize what the principals thought about and acted through the process of the initiatives of rural-urban partnership model, and to complement the quantitative findings from surveys with other stakeholders.

With the application of NVIVO Plus, the authors found 10 key coding nodes, as shown in Table 8. The three top priorities that principals commonly focused on were teacher force building (23.18%), philosophy and quality status (16.65%) and curriculum development (11.30%). As can be seen from the specific coding nodes, in terms of teacher force building, most principals showed big concerns about the teachers' quality. Due to the low salary and material support, it was hard to attract and retain quality teachers. A big number of in-service teachers either had no certificate or had only a low degree, and they had quite low commitment to the job and high mobility. When asked about kindergarten quality, principals mostly cared about enrolment rate, competitive strength with other kindergartens in the region, and reputation among parents and in the community. In terms of curriculum development, most principals had concerns about curriculum design and implementation. They relied on teachers' guidebooks and various types of "curriculum digital resource packages" on the market and trained the teachers to follow those standardized scalable instructional techniques from the book, restraining teachers' autonomy in the classes. Even children were required to buy "textbooks" that work together with teachers' book in the areas of language, maths, arts and social skills, so that teachers were able to teach the fixed content lesson by lesson following the curriculum schedules fixed in each

academic year. Principals shared a common belief on the effects of the "curriculum resource package", just as one principal put it:

> "We do not have sufficient resources of good quality, and we do not have enough good teachers. Those ready-to-use curriculum and textbook resources were composed by the best teachers and researchers in the nation, and they were recommended by the professionals in this field. Through such resources, children indirectly learn from more professional teachers of good quality. It would generate more positive effects for children if teachers strictly followed the guidebooks to teach than letting them struggle for their own way of teaching. Our teachers lack competence and creativity to design good lessons. The resources make the process easy. Now the teachers cannot teach without such resources."

Table 8

Distribution of coding of kindergarten principals' interviews

Key coding node (Total)	Percentage (%)	Specific coding nodes
Philosophy and quality status (183)	16.65	History (20), enrolment (45), culture and characteristics (27), philosophy (34), parents' feedback (25), competitive strength (14)
Sanitation and health control (112)	9.58	Sanitation and health of the cook and kitchen (34), nutrition of food (27), procedure of meals (15), sanitation for children's daily use (12), bathroom cleaning and sterilization (12)
Daily care quality improvement (53)	4.53	Daily routine arrangement (19), schedule plan (24), sleeping (4)
Curriculum development (132)	11.30	Children's and teachers' books (18), kindergarten based curriculum development and design (37), elimination of inclination to primary school education (21), curriculum and play (35), curriculum and group teaching (17)
Teaching and research (77)	6.59	Strengthening teachers' instruction (49), organizing research-based seminars and training (15)
Teachers force building (271)	23.18	Salary (23), professional training (97), mobility (54), identity (31), career ladder (19), quantity and structure (16), quality and certification (12)
Environment improvement (91)	7.78	Infrastructure (44), functional rooms and space design (11), quality control and maintenance of facilities (14), security control (10), meeting children's needs (8)
Financial input and usage control (66)	5.65	Admission fee (14), financial support from the government (18), usages of funds (11), financial insufficiency and needs (17)
Policy enactment (114)	9.75	Development planning in accordance with policies (28), guidance and support from the government (19), perception of policies (21)
Partnership with other kindergartens (70)	5.99	Shared philosophy (25), leadership and autonomy (16), partnership and involvement (19), equity and equality (10)

Although principals from urban areas had lower aspirations for such high quality curriculum resources, they also regarded them as necessary and important complements for teachers to refer to when they prepare their classes. This might be a reason explaining why no significant difference was found between rural and urban teachers' quality (see Table 3) and group teaching quality (see Table 6).

Most principals, especially rural principals, had very positive perceptions of the government's great support and intervention in promoting their growth. They recognized the significance of educational equity and alliance with other kindergartens, especially partnership between rural and urban kindergarten. Some of the urban and township kindergartens regarded village kindergartens as their "brothers" or "babies", and contributed wholeheartedly whatever they could to the village partners' development. Almost all village principals showed appreciation to their partners and the local government. They have witnessed overthrow changes before and after the RUC Model implementation, especially in terms of environment and facilities improvement. However, all principals from different areas still had common concerns about financial insufficiency and low quality of teachers.

Results Regarding Research Question V: Administrators' Reflection

In China, local governments, being the primary and direct administrative authority over the sector of education, have a great influence on the development of early childhood education through fiscal investment and policy interventions. The findings from the focus group interview with the educational administrators in W county may add important complementary evidence to the effects of the RUC Model. As shown in Table 9, four key coding nodes were detected and analysed. Administrators provided in-depth explanation about the policymaking background, philosophy about equitable quality of early childhood education, as well as experiences and difficulties in the process of policy enactment. To address the issues of low early childhood education quality and rural-urban resource allocation disparity, W county government initiated various policies and invested a big portion of financial resources each year to intervene in building new and affordable public kindergartens to ensure all children's access to quality kindergartens, controlling kindergartens' admission fee below an affordable benchmark by providing government subsidy, standardizing quality facilities in existing kindergartens, strengthening teachers' professional development through various forms of training, prioritizing rural kindergarten development, and promoting rural-urban alliance. However, impacts were just visible in terms of increasing kindergarten number and enrolment rate and hardware facilities and environmental improvement; yet, teachers' quality was still the most critical weak point challenging the whole county, especially rural areas. Just as one administrator expressed,

> "We made great efforts to make changes, and now you cannot see too much difference between urban and rural kindergartens. You may even get more impressed by rural kindergartens' changes in terms of environment. We see them grow as our own children. And you may see the happiness on rural children's faces. However, the biggest challenge for our government as well as for all the kindergartens is still teachers' low quality. We are eager to attempt whatever strategies or resources. Yet, no obvious changes. We are helpless…"

Table 9

Distribution of coding of education administrators' interview

Key coding node (Total)	Percentage (%)	Specific coding nodes
Policy making and enactment (124)	55.85	1st "3-year Plan" (28), 2nd "3-year Plan" (26), local supporting policies (32), local plan for ECEC development (18), government supervision (10), achievements (10)
Fiscal investment in ECEC sector (38)	17.12	Investment (8), usage of funds (17), rural-urban balanced development, (9), risk management (4)
Government intervention in management (19)	8.56	Staff management (8), quality issue and improvement (6), quality control of new kindergarten(1), intervention (3), standard development for ECEC quality (1)
Equitable quality promotion in rural and urban areas (41)	18.47	Priority in rural development (3), mutual support (4), rural-urban gap issues (25), equitable development plan (2), Quantity control and equal allocation (3), autonomy in kindergartens (1), public beneficiary of all children (3)

Discussion and Conclusions

With qualitative and quantitative approaches and from multi-stakeholders' perspectives, this study aimed to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of a rural-urban educational partnership policy model constructed by a local government in Southwest China in promoting equitable quality of kindergartens in rural and urban areas and narrowing the huge gap between them.

The findings obtained from the data collected from multi-stakeholders provided comprehensive feedback, evaluation and explanation about the RUC Model, disclosed fully and in-depth the pros and cons of rural-urban partnership, and enabled other regions and cultural settings to draw implications from it. The findings show that parents' satisfaction with the overall county-level early childhood education quality was above average. There was a significant difference in terms of parents' satisfaction with the cost and environment conditions, while no significant difference was found in their satisfaction with children's educational opportunities, educational quality, and teachers' quality. As Yuan (2011) argued, parents were not able to provide scientific and objective evaluation but subjective, fragmented and irrational feedback due to lack of professional knowledge about the education process happening inside kindergarten classes and about children's needs. This might be a reason that they were not able to scientifically judge and detect various levels of teachers' quality and educational quality. However, as the clients of early childhood education service and through teacher-parent interactions and children's changes in life, as well as through open classes available to them, parents are getting more and more knowledgeable and skilful in understanding and identifying different levels of educational quality. Accessibility and affordability are primary indicators for measuring equitable quality (Friese & Others, 2017), and parents are the best choice to provide feedback for such

aspects. Significant differences found in rural and urban parents' satisfaction with cost reflected rural and urban gap in regional economic status as well as in socioeconomic status of families.

A significant difference in teachers from rural and urban kindergartens was found only when evaluating their professional attitudes and material support access. With the standardized and convenient supply of high-quality curriculum resources, rural and urban teachers are commonly confident in competence, involvement and planning. Mutual interaction mechanism between rural and urban kindergarten teachers and principals enabled them to have high interpersonal and managerial support, however, material support was evaluated as significantly different between rural and urban teachers. This might be explained by the low level of teacher payment and subsidy, especially in rural areas.

Observational evaluation findings showed that difference of qualities in rural and urban kindergartens are significant in terms of care activities, but are not significant in terms of group teaching and play activities. The RUC Model effectively enhanced the overall quality of the early childhood classroom and narrowed the gap between rural and urban areas in W county. However, according to observational researchers, there is still much to be done to improve the quality of process variables in early childhood education. Significant difference in child care activities may have resulted from low quality of child care teachers in villages (in Chinese "Bao Yu Yuan"). It is commonly known that public kindergartens have stricter requirements about the teachers' certificates, yet in rural areas, a large number of child care teachers in private schools had no certificate, since kindergarten employers held the belief that persons in charge of children's life activities (sleeping, having meal, using bathroom) do not have to be professional. Although no significant difference was found in group teaching and play activities; they were both rated around or even below the median line. Such findings were in accordance with some other scholars' findings based on national large-scale data analysis that the overall quality of play activities was very low (Li, 2017, p. 174). Such concerns over teachers' low quality was also confirmed by principals' feedback and administrators' reflections through interviews. Learning from good quality multi-media resources, teachers in rural and urban areas indeed received high quality guidance and improved their skills and knowledge, however, the homogeneous approach of teaching led to teachers' potential loss of creativity and critical thinking.

Generally speaking, the teacher alliance model and joint-action model in terms of enhancing teachers' professional development are proved to be well perceived and effective by the stakeholders. In recent years, aiming at promoting equitable quality of early childhood education in rural and urban areas, W county has established professional support system through various types of modalities, and strengthened open sharing mechanism of rural-urban kindergarten alliance towards the ultimate goal of bridging the quality gap between kindergartens in rural and urban areas. Although partnerships are popular in collective cultures as China, demonstrating their good or bad effects remains illusive to be judged. Good partnerships help improve

the quantity and quality of links between schools and community or other partner types, provide needed resources and opportunities for all those involved, and promote creativity and energy (Bainer, 1997). Such is the positive side of the case of the RUC Model. However, when considering the difficulties and challenges of educational partnership, it is obvious that partnership may also lead to potential loss of autonomy and authority of rural kindergartens. Just as Bainer (1997) concluded, partnerships are highly situational in nature, and the partnership effect varies from case to case, on individual basis. There is no single successful model that could work with all scenarios. Complexities and uncertainties in situations are the key factors hindering partnership programs from achieving their goals in a linear path and preventing them from working universally. However, the interactions between the partners matter in the way that the partners could identify and reflect on their real needs and wants through the partnership by being helped by or helping others, that they could struggle their way toward improvement through conflicts with the partners, and that they may generate a redistributed organization or system using external intervention and provision. The RUC Model enabled W County to form a new landscape, modality and system of early childhood education and care development, which is of great significance both theoretically to the researchers and practically to practitioners in other regions. However, due to certain limitations of this research, such as small sampling size, this paper has still space to extend and improve to reveal more comprehensive findings about the policy effectiveness.

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Promicanje pravedne raspodjele kvalitetnog odgoja i obrazovanja u ranom djetinjstvu u ruralnim i urbanim područjima u Kini: studija slučaja modela ruralno-urbanog kontinuuma

Sažetak

Cilj ove studije je, putem slučaja trajnog modela ruralno-urbanog razvoja u Kini, glasovima više dionika provesti evaluaciju učinkovitosti intervencija lokalnih vlada na razini politika u promoviranje pravedne kvalitete predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja u ruralnim i urbanim područjima. Primjenom pristupa istodobno kombiniranih metoda i instrumenata koje su istraživači sami razvili, autori su izradili 891 upitnik za roditelje, 184 upitnika za učitelje, 52 evaluacijska upitnika, te su proveli intervjue s 13 ravnatelja dječjih vrtića i 6 administratora. Podatke su analizirali s pomoću SPSS i NVIVO Plus. Rezultati pokazuju: a) da se razina zadovoljstva cijenom vrtića i uvjetima uvelike razlikuje između ruralnih i urbanih roditelja, b) da se ruralni i urbani učitelji uvelike razlikuju samo u evaluaciji svojih profesionalnih stavova i pristupa materijalnoj podršci, c) da istraživači nisu našli značajne razlike u kvaliteti aktivnosti igara i grupnom podučavanju između sati u ruralnim i urbanim vrtićima; značajne razlike su ustanovljene u aktivnostima skrbi za djecu, d) da ravnatelji učinkovitost modela RUC ocjenjuju pozitivno, no dosta ih se brine o kvaliteti učitelja, e) da su se vladine intervencije pokazale ključnim čimbenikom u povećanju pravedne kvalitete obrazovanja u ruralnim i urbanim područjima.

Ključne riječi: *obrazovno partnerstvo; pravednost; kvaliteta; nejednakost u ruralnom i urbanom obrazovanju; istodobno kombinirane metode*