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Article

Rural-Urban Disparities in Educational Well-Being: A Study of Secondary School Children in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This research paper explores the disparities in educational well-being among secondary school children in Sri Lanka based on geographic location, focusing on the differences between urban and rural contexts. Significant variation in resource allocation, school infrastructure, and parental educational backgrounds mark Sri Lanka's educational landscape, creating a diverse backdrop for the study. The research examines how these urban-rural disparities influence key dimensions of students' educational well-being, particularly access to educational resources and the development of hard, soft, and social skills that contribute to their ability to lead fulfilling and productive lives. The study aims to identify patterns of inequality, challenges, and opportunities that can inform policy-making and targeted interventions by focusing on the environments in which students live and learn. The research adopts a survey-based quantitative methodology, collecting data from a representative sample of 1,350 secondary school students across Sri Lanka. The data were analysed using Likert scales to measure educational well-being and a One-Way MANOVA to assess location-based differences. The findings indicate statistically significant differences in educational well-being across locations, with urban students scoring higher in all dimensions: access to resources, soft skills, social skills, and vocational skills. This study recommends targeted resource allocation, enhanced teacher training, skill development programmess, and comprehensive support systems, alongside further research, to improve educational well-being and ensure equitable opportunities for both urban and rural students.

Keywords: Educational well-being; urban-rural disparities; resource allocation; skill development and secondary school children.

Introduction

Educational well-being has emerged as a holistic measure of student growth, encompassing academic achievement, emotional health, social development, and practical skill acquisition. This concept is crucial in contemporary education systems, where the focus extends beyond academic success to preparing students for dynamic and interconnected societies. In Sri Lanka, education plays a pivotal role in national development, fostering economic growth and social cohesion. Since the end of the civil war, the country has prioritized education as a means of stability and progress. However, despite its significance, disparities in educational well-being across different geographic locations remain underexplored (Careemdeen et al., 2021). This study investigates differences in educational well-being between secondary school students in rural and urban areas, focusing on access to educational resources and skill development.

Guided by Sri Lanka's Psychosocial Well-being Framework (2009), this research adopts two approaches: the children's rights approach, which emphasizes present-day well-being through a safe and supportive learning environment, and the development approach, which prepares students for future success through skill acquisition. The study examines access to educational resources, including physical infrastructure, quality teaching, extracurricular opportunities, and emotional support, while assessing students' hard, soft, and social skills. Addressing location-based disparities aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates for inclusive and equitable education. If significant differences in access to resources and skill development between rural and urban students are identified, the study will propose policy interventions to enhance teacher training, improve resource allocation, and create supportive learning environments.

Sri Lanka's education system reveals stark rural-urban disparities in enrollment, infrastructure, teacher quality, and learning outcomes, especially beyond the primary level (Dundar et al., 2017; Aturupane et al., 2014). Rural and estate sector students face significant disadvantages in accessing quality education due to poverty, under-resourced schools, and teacher shortages (Ranasinghe et al., 2016, MOE, 2018). These systemic inequities are evident in exam performance and access to resources (Sarma, Licht, & Kalugalagedera, 2018). Due to these persistent disparities, this study was conducted to examine whether differences in educational well-being exist in terms of access to educational resources and the development of soft, social, and hard skills in terms of the urban-rural divide, as well as the functioning and capabilities students need to lead happy and fulfilling lives. This study consists following two research questions.

i. What is the level of educational well-being among secondary school students in Sri Lanka?
ii. How does educational well-being differ between rural and urban secondary school students in Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of access to educational resources, skill development (soft, social, and hard skills), and capabilities necessary for a fulfilling life?

By highlighting these disparities, this research contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity in Sri Lanka. Understanding and addressing these challenges will ensure that all students, regardless of geographic location, receive the necessary resources and support for holistic development, ultimately contributing to Sri Lanka's socio-economic advancement.
goals.

Literature Review

1. Student Wellbeing and Location

Research examining rural and urban differences in student academic achievement and wellbeing has yielded varying results across regions. In Pakistan, rural students in Balochistan outperformed their urban counterparts in three out of four subjects, while urban students in Punjab and Sindh showed better performance in social studies and language, with differences attributed to school conditions, student backgrounds, and teacher characteristics (Tayyaba, 2012). Young (1998) demonstrated that rural students in Western Australia performed less well than urban students, with school location having a significant impact even after controlling for student background. Conversely, rural students in the United States performed as well as or better than urban students in subjects like math, science, reading, and social studies (Fan & Chen, 1998).

Lounkaew (2013) analyzed the urban-rural achievement gap in Thailand using PISA 2009 data, finding that unmeasured school characteristics explained around 45-48% of the achievement differential, with the gap more pronounced among higher-performing students. In Colombia, rural schools maintained a slight advantage in mathematics when compared to urban schools (Luschei & Fagioli, 2016). After accounting for school-level characteristics, students from rural and metropolitan areas displayed similar levels of academic achievement, well-being, and reading interest (Schwerter et al., 2023).

Chitsamatanga et al. (2020) found that rural area children's education in South Africa is severely affected by inadequate infrastructure, persistent resource disparities, and systemic inequalities rooted in apartheid-era policies, resulting in high dropout rates, insufficient facilities like proper sanitation and libraries,

and alarmingly low matriculation pass rates, with only 1% of rural learners succeeding despite comprising 80% of the school population.

Abamba (2021) discovered no significant achievement differences between rural and urban Nigerian students taught using the 5E learning cycle, recommending its adoption in secondary education. Similarly, UNUGO (2023) found no significant difference in the achievement of urban and rural social studies students in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. International assessments, like PISA, demonstrate significant disparities in mathematical achievement between rural and metropolitan students in Australia, emphasizing the need for inclusive teaching strategies (Panizzon, 2015). Garutsa, ~~T.,~~ & (2020) found that orphans and vulnerable children in Marondera, Zimbabwe face significant challenges due to inadequate resources in the Social Welfare Department, problems with educational access despite programs like BEAM, difficulty obtaining identity documents, and poor implementation of existing child protection policies, leading to the growing importance of NGOs like Save the Children to fill these service gaps.

In Nigeria, a significant achievement gap between urban and rural students was noted, with urban students outperforming their rural peers, although no gender differences were observed ~~(Awodun~~ (Awodun & Oyeniyi, 2018) These studies collectively illustrate how geographical location, school characteristics, and educational policies contribute to differences in student achievement across rural and urban settings.

2. Student Wellbeing in Sri Lankan Context

Sri Lanka is a country where free education was introduced for all in 1945, from primary education up to the tertiary level. Every child in Sri Lanka receives their free school education in their mother tongue and free of charge. Since 1980, the government has provided free school textbooks for all subjects and free school uniforms for all children in grades one to eleven (World Bank, 2011), as well as scholarship programmes that provide financial assistance to deserving children, transportation subsidies for students travelling to school, free medical check-ups in schools, dental care, and free eyeglasses to needy children (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Even though the Sri Lankan government has implemented several measures in order to enhance student wellbeing, several studies have revealed that student wellbeing is an issue in the Sri Lankan setting. For instance, according to the Child Activity Survey in Sri Lanka, which was carried out in 2016, out of an estimated 4,571,442 children in the age group between 5-17 years in Sri Lanka, 452,661 (10 %) children were not attending school. The survey showed that the percentage of children not attending school between the age group between 15 to 17 was comparatively high at 15%. Moreover, the survey revealed that the primary reasons for non-attendance include lack of interest in education/education not deemed valuable, disability, dislike of schooling, financial difficulties, feeling unsafe in school and its environment, chronic illness, and assistance with household enterprise (Department of Census and Statistics, 2017).

Parents, children, teachers, and principals in rural Sri Lankan schools identified various reasons for students dropping out, including poor teaching, ineffective teachers, poor school facilities, teacher absence, unfriendly schools, teachers neglecting individual needs, the heavy burden of the curriculum, children's lack of interest, parental disinterest, parental illiteracy, parental absence from meetings, and poverty (Little et al., 2011). A study among Sinhala medium secondary school students in Colombo district found that life satisfaction was significantly correlated with the psychosocial environment, including relationships with peers and teachers, as well as the physical environment, such as school cleanliness and attractiveness, and overall satisfaction with the school (Nonaka et al., 2012). A qualitative study in Northern Sri Lanka found that the majority of students in Kadalkiramam village dropped out around the time of the GCE Ordinary Level examination due to factors such as parental lack of formal education, poverty, tolerance for dropping out, and early marriage, which further reduced adolescent girls' interest in education (Sarala Emmanuel et al., 2014).

A study conducted in 28 schools in the Gampaha District of Sri Lanka revealed that teachers' focus on completing the syllabus, lack of attention to student performance, and parents' disinterest in their children's behavioral well-being contributed to the failure of the psychosocial environment to prevent peer violence among adolescent students, with teachers also noting the lack of parental involvement in school policy formulation (Wijeratne et al., 2015).

A study on psychosocial support for adolescent females in post-conflict settings found that poverty was the dominant factor driving psychosocial vulnerability, with many girls dropping out of school due to poverty, early marriage, and romantic relationships, while their well-being was further affected by factors such as limited access to economic assets, parental drunkenness, punishment, parental remarriage, migration, family separation, and domestic violence (Samuels et al., 2017). A report revealed that while Sri Lankan children typically complete 13 years of schooling, the quality of learning equates to only 8.3 years, leaving a learning gap of 4.7 years, and further findings indicated that universities in Sri Lanka fail to produce graduates with the necessary skills for the labor market (World Bank Report, 2018; Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003).

Despite Sri Lanka's long-standing commitment to free education since 1945 from primary to tertiary levels in the mother tongue and numerous policy initiatives to enhance education quality, significant challenges persist. Successive governments introduced key measures such as free textbooks (since 1980), school uniforms (since 1993), scholarship programs, medical and nutritional support, and transport subsidies to support student access and retention (World Bank, 2011). Additionally, major development projects such as SEMP I & II, ESDP, and TSEP were launched with support from the ADB and World Bank to improve access, equity, and quality in primary and secondary education (World Bank, 2011). However, despite these reforms, stark rural-urban disparities remain. Rural students face lower access to quality schools, skilled teachers, and educational resources compared to their urban peers, which negatively impacts their educational well-being (Aturupane et al., 2018; Vengadeshvaran et al., 2018). Socioeconomic and demographic factors—such as poverty, low parental support, family issues, and inadequate infrastructure—exacerbate dropout rates, particularly among boys (Little et al., 2011; Rasmy, 2018; Department of Census and Statistics, 2017). Furthermore, negative school environments shaped by poor teacher attitudes and harsh disciplinary practices further alienate students in disadvantaged regions (National Education Commission, 2016). These persistent inequalities underscore the importance of addressing educational well-being through a location-sensitive lens.

In conclusion, existing studies on student well-being within the Sri Lankan context underscore the necessity for comprehensive research to address the challenges faced by students. The current body of literature has primarily focused on qualitative investigations within limited geographical areas, such as two or three villages, which limits the applicability of the findings to the broader national context. Therefore, there is a pressing need for extensive research that encompasses both rural and urban differences in student well-being, thereby providing a more complex picture of the factors influencing educational outcomes across diverse settings in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to explore the perceptions of secondary school students in Sri Lanka regarding the enhancement of their educational well-being, focusing on aspects such as access to educational resources and the development of soft, social, and hard skills, with an emphasis on location-based differences (rural versus urban). The research employed a stratified random sampling technique to ensure the representation of diverse subgroups within the secondary school student population in Sri Lanka, selecting a total sample of 1,350 students by dividing the country into five regions North, South, East, West, and Central—and randomly selecting 270 respondents from each region.

A customized questionnaire was developed to collect data, tailored to meet the specific objectives of the study. The questionnaire comprised two primary sections: the first gathered demographic information (e.g., age, gender, location, and socio-economic background), while the second assessed students' perceptions of their educational well-being. The second section focused on key constructs such as access to educational resources, the enhancement of soft skills, social skills, and hard skills.

To gauge students' perceptions, a Likert scale was employed, with respondents indicating their agreement with various statements related to educational well-being using five options: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Quite Agree (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). This scaling method allowed for the quantitative measurement of subjective opinions, facilitating a deeper analysis of the perceived differences in educational well-being based on location.

Prior to the pilot survey, the questionnaire underwent a content validation process conducted by three subject matter experts to ensure alignment with the research objectives and clarity for the target respondents. The instrument, comprising 28 items based on variables related to educational wellbeing, was reviewed using a structured format that allowed detailed feedback on each item. To enhance content validity, the expertise of two university professors specializing in the Sociology of Education and a senior lecturer in Education was sought. While the experts generally agreed on the relevance of most items, they recommended improvements in sentence structure and clarity of variable meanings. Reliability analysis of the instrument yielded high Cronbach's alpha values for its subscales access to educational resources (0.926), soft skills (0.917), social skills (0.934), and hard skills (0.945) with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.898, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Therefore, the instrument was deemed valid and reliable for use in the main study.

For data analysis, the study utilized inferential statistical methods to examine the relationships between location (rural vs. urban) and students' perceptions of their educational well-being. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 was used for this purpose, providing the tools necessary to perform detailed statistical analysis. Specifically, the study applied a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to test for significant differences in educational well-being between rural and urban students.

The MANOVA technique was chosen due to its suitability for analyzing multiple dependent variables simultaneously, making it ideal for this study, which involved several aspects of educational well-being. This method enabled the identification of whether significant differences existed between rural and urban students' experiences and perceptions of their educational well-being, offering insights into how location-based disparities affect students' overall development.

By analyzing the data through MANOVA, the study aimed to provide robust evidence on the impact of geographical location on the educational well-being of secondary school students in Sri Lanka. These findings contribute to the understanding of educational inequalities within the country, guiding future research and policy interventions aimed at fostering equitable educational opportunities for all students.

The research seeks to address two primary questions: First, it aims to determine the level of children's educational well-being, focusing on access to educational resources and the development of soft, social, and hard skills. These aspects are essential for enhancing students' functioning and capabilities, enabling them to lead happy and fulfilling lives. Second, the study investigates whether students' educational well-being differs based on their geographical location, assessing whether factors such as urban or rural environments influence the levels of well-being across these key dimensions. To explore these questions, the study tests the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in educational well-being based on location. This hypothesis posits that geographical factors do not play a role in shaping students' access to educational resources or their development of essential skills, such as soft, social, and hard skills. The research aims to either confirm or reject this hypothesis by analyzing the data collected from students in different locations.

The Findings

1. Level of Educational Wellbeing

The descriptive analysis, including mean and standard deviation, was employed to examine the levels of students' educational well-being. The construct of academic well-being encompasses four key dimensions: access to educational resources, development of soft skills, development of social skills, and enhancement of hard skills. These dimensions are crucial for enabling students to function effectively and build the capabilities necessary for leading a fulfilling and meaningful life. The levels of academic well-being, as reflected in these aspects, are presented in Table 1. Seven items were developed for each aspect to assess respondents' views on students' access to educational resources, soft skills enhancement, hard skills enhancement, and social skills enhancement, using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree). Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation for each statement overall.

Table 1. Level of Children's Educational Wellbeing in terms of Access to Resources, Enhancing Soft, Social and Hard Skills Functioning

Aspect	Mean	S.D	Interpretation
Access to Educational Resources	3.932	0.717	Moderately High
Enhancing Soft Skills	3.916	0.737	Moderately High
Enhancing Social Skills	4.070	0.701	High
Enhancing Hard Skills	3.924	0.732	Moderately High
Overall	**3.960**	**0.620**	**Moderately High**

Table 1 presents the construct for assessing the levels of students' educational well-being across four dimensions: access to educational resources, enhancement of soft skills, social skills, and hard skills. These dimensions are fundamental for fostering the effective functioning and capacity-building necessary for students to lead happy and fulfilling lives. The overall mean score for students' educational well-being is 3.960 (S.D. = 0.620), indicating a moderately high level of well-being. Among the dimensions, social skills exhibit the highest mean score of 4.070 (S.D. = 0.701), which is interpreted as high. This suggests that students' ability to interact and communicate effectively with others significantly contributes to their overall well-being. The second highest dimension is access to educational resources, with a mean of 3.932 (S.D. = 0.717), also interpreted as moderately high. This reflects the importance of students having access to the necessary learning materials and support for their academic development. The third highest aspect is the development of hard skills, which has a mean score of 3.924 (S.D. = 0.732), also interpreted as moderately high. Hard skills, including technical and subject-specific abilities, are crucial for students' academic and future professional success. Finally, the lowest dimension is soft skills, with a mean score of 3.916 (S.D. = 0.737), though it is still interpreted as moderately high. Soft skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability, remain essential but show slightly lower levels of development in comparison to the other dimensions. These findings suggest that while students exhibit moderately high levels of educational well-being across all aspects, there may be room for targeted interventions, particularly in enhancing soft skills, to further improve their overall academic well-being.

2. Educational Wellbeing Differences Based on Location

The analysis conducted in this study investigates whether students' educational well-being differs based on their geographical location, specifically examining the potential influence of urban versus rural environments on the levels of well-being across four key dimensions: access to educational resources, soft skills, social skills, and hard skills. To address this inquiry, the study tests the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in educational well-being based on location. The findings will elucidate whether geographical factors significantly impact educational well-being among students.

Hypothesis testing for this research was performed using the One-Way MANOVA Test. Before MANOVA analysis was carried out, the researcher conducted a test to determine the homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices using Box's M test. Table 2 shows the results of Box's M tests.

Table 2. Box's M

Box's M	F-Value	Df1	Df2	Sig
23.058	2.297	10	3452509.151	0.011

***** Significant at P<0.05

Based on Table 2, it was found that there were significant differences in variance-covariance among the dependent variables for all levels of independent variables (F=2.297, p=0.011 (p<0.05). This means the variance-covariance of the dependent variable is not homogeneous across all the independent variables. Stevens (1986) pointed out that although the metrics for homogeneity of variance-covariance (Box's M test) is significant, it is not a problem for the MANOVA test if the sample size is large and almost the same (biggest sample/ smallest sample < 1.5) due to the impact of type I error, which is very small. In this study, the number

of sample sizes is large and almost the same, and therefore the above test hypothesis can be done by using MANOVA test. Table 2 shows the results of analysis MANOVA test.

Table 3 Wilks' Lambda

Wilks' Lambda Value	F-Value	DK between group	DK within group	Sig.
0.976	7.151	1350	4	**0.000**

* Significant at P<0.05

Based on Table 3, the value of Wilks' Lambda = 0.976, F=7.151 and p =0.000 (p<0.05). The results showed that there is significant difference for educational wellbeing based on location. Next, the multiple MANOVA tests have been used to record the differences in the mean score of each dependent variable in the educational wellbeing based on location as an extension of the MANOVA analysis. Table 4 shows the MANOVA analysis for the difference in mean scores obtained for educational wellbeing based on location.

Table 4 One–Way MANOVA Difference Aspects of Student Educational Well-Being Based on Location

Variable	Location	N	Mean	S. D.	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Total Square	F	Sig.
Access to Educational Resources	Urban	430	4.08	0.72	14.660	1	14.660	29.065	0.000
	Rural	920	3.86	0.70					
	Total	1350	3.93	0.71					
Soft Skills	Urban	430	4.04	0.73	10.501	1	10.501	19.594	0.000
	Rural	920	3.85	0.73					
	Total	1350	3.91	0.73					
Social Skills	Urban	430	4.18	0.70	7.933	1	7.933	16.314	0.000
	Rural	920	4.01	0.69					
	Total	1350	4.07	0.70					
Hard Skills	Urban	430	4.03	0.74	7.963	1	7.963	14.985	0.000
	Rural	920	3.87	0.72					
	Total	1350	3.92	0.73					

* Significant at P<0.05

The results from Table 4 indicate a statistically significant difference in students' educational well-being across different locations for all four dimensions: access to educational resources, soft skills, social skills, and hard skills. Specifically, the analysis reveals significant variation based on location for access to educational resources (F = 29.065, p = 0.000), soft skills (F = 19.594, p = 0.000), social skills (F = 16.314, p = 0.000), and hard skills (F = 14.985, p = 0.000). These findings demonstrate that location plays a critical role in shaping students' educational well-being. Further analysis shows that students from urban areas consistently report higher mean scores across all four dimensions of educational well-being compared to their rural counterparts. Urban students exhibit a higher mean score for access to educational resources (M = 4.08), indicating better availability and accessibility of learning materials and academic support. In terms of soft skills, urban students also report a higher mean score (M = 4.04), suggesting stronger development in areas such as communication, problem-solving, and adaptability.

Similarly, urban students score higher on social skills (M = 4.18), reflecting better interpersonal and collaborative abilities, which are essential for academic success and personal development. Lastly, the mean score for hard skills among urban students (M = 4.03) is higher than that of rural students, indicating a more robust acquisition of technical and subject-specific competencies. These results suggest that urban students generally benefit from better educational resources and opportunities to develop critical skills, leading to higher levels of educational well-being compared to students in rural areas. This underscores the need for

targeted interventions to bridge the gap in educational support and skill development between urban and rural students**.**

Discussion

The study's findings show significant rural-urban disparities in Sri Lankan secondary education, with urban students demonstrating superior outcomes across all measured dimensions of educational well-being. These results present both expected patterns and surprising contradictions that merit careful examination within global and local contexts.

The consistent urban advantage in resource access (M=4.08 vs 3.86) aligns with established literature on educational inequity (Tayyaba, 2012; Aturupane et al., 2018), yet proves particularly striking given Sri Lanka's long-standing free education policies. This paradox suggests that policy existence alone cannot guarantee equity, a phenomenon similarly observed in post apartheid South Africa (Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2020). The disparity likely stems from systemic urban-biased resource allocation, where better-trained teachers and private sector partnerships concentrate in cities (Garutsa & Masuku, 2020).

Skill development patterns reveal more nuanced insights. Urban students' stronger soft skills (M=4.04 vs 3.85) support Lounkaew's (2013) arguments about urban educational environments, while contrasting sharply with Abamba's (2021) Nigerian findings, where rural students excelled under tailored pedagogies. This contradiction suggests that location itself may be less determinative than teaching methodologies. Similarly, the urban social skills advantage (M=4.18 vs 4.01) echoes Young's (1998) findings about diverse urban peer interactions, yet diverges from Luschei and Fagioli's (2016) Colombian study showing rural math advantages through community cohesion, highlighting how local social dynamics mediate educational outcomes.

Theoretical implications emerge when examining these findings through SDG 4's equity framework and Sri Lanka's Psychosocial Well-being model. While both emphasise access and environment, our results demonstrate that quality adjuncts (teacher training, counselling) prove equally crucial, particularly in rural areas where policy implementation falters (Abeyasekera et al., 2008). The 4.7-year rural learning gap (World Bank, 2018) underscores this implementation crisis.

Notably, rural students' moderately high overall well-being (M=3.96) challenges deficit narratives, paralleling Fan and Chen's (1998) findings about rural resilience. This suggests untapped community strengths that could inform policy. Similarly, the absence of gender disparities contrasts with Samuels et al.'s (2017) work, potentially indicating Sri Lanka's unheralded progress in gender equity. These findings collectively argue for:

i. Targeted rural teacher training programs
ii. Context-specific pedagogies building on community strengths
iii. Robust monitoring of policy implementation
iv. Qualitative research into rural protective factors

This research contributes to global educational equity discourse by demonstrating how universal policies require localised implementation strategies to achieve meaningful impact.

Conclusion

Overall, these findings demonstrate that location significantly impacts students' educational well-being. The consistent trend of urban students performing better across all measured dimensions underscores the need for targeted interventions to address the disparities in educational resources, skill development, and support between urban and rural students. This aligns with the broader literature, which stresses the importance of equitable access to educational opportunities to enhance student well-being and achievement.

To bridge the persistent rural-urban divide and enhance educational well-being in Sri Lanka, the government must adopt targeted and equity-driven policy interventions. A key step is implementing equity-based resource allocation, ensuring rural and underserved schools receive prioritized funding for infrastructure, teaching materials, and facility upgrades. Improving teacher deployment through incentives such as rural allowances, housing, and professional development opportunities is critical to addressing

shortages in remote areas. Expanding access to basic infrastructure water, electricity, internet, and transport can significantly enhance learning environments in disadvantaged schools. Additionally, strengthening student support systems through school counselling, after-school enrichment programs, and expanded nutritional and health services will promote holistic development. Scholarship schemes should be widened to include more vulnerable students, along with conditional cash transfers to reduce dropout risks. Encouraging community-school partnerships and parental engagement can further build accountability and support at the grassroots level. Lastly, establishing a national education equity index and using disaggregated data for planning will ensure that interventions are responsive and context-specific. These strategies collectively aim to promote equitable access to quality education and support the development of skills and capabilities essential for students to lead fulfilling lives, regardless of geographic location.

While this study highlights significant rural-urban disparities in educational well-being, several areas warrant deeper investigation to inform more targeted interventions. Future research should explore how differences in school leadership, teacher motivation, and community involvement influence student outcomes across regions. Longitudinal studies tracking students' educational trajectories could provide insights into how early disparities impact long-term opportunities and well-being. Additionally, there is a need to examine the role of digital access and technological integration in learning, especially in post-pandemic contexts where remote education has become more prominent. Investigating the effectiveness of current government interventions—such as scholarship programs, nutritional support, and teacher deployment strategies—can also help identify gaps in implementation and areas for improvement. Finally, qualitative studies focusing on students' voices, particularly from marginalized rural communities, could offer valuable perspectives on their lived educational experiences and aspirations.

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