

EXPLORING GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY
INITIATIVES IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN
HUANGZHONG CHINA

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SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the educational standard in a primary school in rural Huangzhong. The objectives included investigating financial support and resource input initiatives implemented by the government and their alignment with government planning, identifying financial and resource input initiatives provided by the school and society including social and cultural values practised and developing a new integrated educational framework. Guided by Human Capital Theory, Resource-based Theory, and Social Capital Theory, the study used a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through interviews, document analysis, observation and analyzed manually. Seventeen participants were purposively selected, including 5 parents, 5 students, 4 teachers, and 3 school administrators. Findings revealed several government initiatives, but highlighted gaps in infrastructure, technology, sanitation, extracurricular and transportation facilities, teacher training, and educational resources. Document analysis showed that of nine initiatives implemented by the government, only three aligned with planned objectives. School and community efforts included engagement and partnership, student learning development, and sustainable practices. Observation revealed key social values such as collaboration, respect, inclusivity, critical thinking, empowerment, and real-world application. Cultural values included preservation, promotion and integration, interdisciplinary learning, and respect for cultural diversity. A new integrated educational framework was developed to guide stakeholders in improving educational quality. In conclusion, the study emphasized the urgent need for governmental improvements to uplift rural education in Huangzhong. The implication for policymakers is to increase financial investment and resource input with interventions tailored to the specific needs of rural schools, thereby enhancing educational excellence.

MENEROKA INISIATIF KERAJAAN DAN KOMUNITI DI SEKOLAH RENDAH LUAR BANDAR DI HUANGZHONG CHINA

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan meneroka tahap pendidikan di sebuah sekolah rendah luar bandar di Huangzhong. Objektif kajian termasuk meneliti sokongan kewangan dan input sumber yang dilaksanakan oleh kerajaan serta tahap kesesuaiannya dengan perancangan dasar, mengenal pasti inisiatif sokongan daripada pihak sekolah dan masyarakat termasuk nilai sosial dan budaya yang diamalkan, serta membangunkan kerangka pendidikan bersepadu baharu. Kajian ini berpaksikan kepada Teori Modal Insan, Teori Berasaskan Sumber dan Teori Modal Sosial. Kaedah kajian kes digunakan melalui pendekatan kualitatif. Data dikumpul menggunakan temu bual, analisis dokumen, pemerhatian dan dianalisis secara manual. Seramai 17 peserta dipilih secara persampelan bertujuan, merangkumi 5 ibu bapa, 5 murid, 4 guru dan 3 pentadbir sekolah. Dapatan menunjukkan pelbagai inisiatif kerajaan telah dilaksanakan, namun masih terdapat kekurangan dari segi infrastruktur, teknologi, sanitasi, aktiviti kokurikulum, pengangkutan, latihan guru dan sumber pendidikan. Analisis dokumen mendapati sembilan inisiatif dilaksanakan kerajaan, tetapi hanya tiga sejajar dengan perancangan asal. Sekolah dan masyarakat turut menyumbang melalui penglibatan komuniti, pembangunan pembelajaran murid dan amalan kemampanan. Pemerhatian mendapati nilai sosial seperti kerjasama, hormat, inklusiviti, pemikiran kritikal, pemerkasaan dan aplikasi dunia sebenar diamalkan. Nilai budaya pula termasuk pemeliharaan budaya, integrasi antara disiplin, dan penghormatan terhadap kepelbagaian budaya. Akhirnya, satu kerangka pendidikan bersepadu dibangunkan sebagai rujukan kepada pihak berkepentingan untuk menambah baik kualiti pendidikan. Kajian ini menegaskan keperluan penambahbaikan oleh kerajaan serta saranan kepada pembuat dasar untuk meningkatkan pelaburan kewangan dan input sumber dengan mengambil kira keperluan khusus sekolah luar bandar bagi mencapai kecemerlangan pendidikan.

CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK	ii
DECLARATION OF THESIS SUBMISSION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
ABSTRACT	v
ABSTRAK	vi
TABLE OF CONTENT	vii
LIST OF TABLES	xviii
LIST OF FIGURES	xix
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xx
LIST OF APPENDICES	xxi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background of the study	2
1.3 Problem Statement	10
1.4 Research Objectives	13
1.5 Research Questions	14
1.6 Conceptual Framework of the Study	15
1.7 Limitations of Study	17
1.8 Significance of the Study	19
1.9 Operational Definitions (Definition of Terms)	22
1.9.1 Rural Education	23

1.9.2	Rural Schools	24
1.9.3	Rural Culture	24
1.9.4	Resource Input	25
1.9.5	Financial Support	25
1.9.6	Infrastructure	25
1.9.7	Teachers Professional Development	26
1.9.8	Funding Security	27
1.9.9	Social Values	27
1.9.10	Cultural values	28
1.9.11	Initiatives	28
1.10	Summary	30
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW		
2.1	Introduction	31
2.2	Theoretical Perspectives	33
2.2.1	Human Capital Theory	33
2.2.1.1	Historical Background and Evolution of Human Capital Theory	36
2.2.1.2	Application of Human Capital Theory in Rural Education	37
2.2.1.3	Challenges and Critiques of Human Capital Theory in Rural Education	41
2.2.1.4	Limitations of Human Capital Theory	41
2.2.2	Resource-Based Theory	43
2.2.2.1	Introduction to Resource-Based View Theory	44
2.2.2.2	Application of Resource-Based View Theory in Rural Education	44

2.2.2.3	The Impact of Resource-Based View Theory on Educational Policy	48
2.2.2.4	Challenges and Critiques of Resource-Based View Theory in Rural Education	49
2.2.3	Social Capital Theory	51
2.2.3.1	Understanding Social Capital Theory	51
2.2.3.2	Application of Social Capital Theory in Rural Education	52
2.2.3.3	Social Capital as a Resource for Education	53
2.2.3.4	Strengthening Social Capital in Rural Schools	55
2.3	Educational Function in China	57
2.3.1	Education as a Tool for Social Mobility	59
2.3.2	Education as a Promoter of National Identity	61
2.3.3	Education improves Human Capital	63
2.4	Education in Rural Areas of China	66
2.4.1	Educational Challenges	68
2.4.1.1	Financial Constraints	68
2.4.1.2	Resource Input	70
2.4.2	Initiatives by the government	75
2.4.2.1	Rural Compulsory Education Policies and the Urbanization in China	78
2.4.2.2	Four Stages of Rural Compulsory Education Policies	79
2.4.2.3	Financial Support	82
2.4.2.4	Resource Input	85

2.4.3	Initiatives by the Community	88
2.5	Social values practised in rural areas of Huangzhong	90
2.5.1	Social values practised by the society	91
2.5.2	Social values practised by the school	91
2.6	Cultural values practised in rural areas of Huangzhong	93
2.6.1	Cultural values practised by the society	93
2.6.2	Cultural values practised by the school	94
2.7	Effects of social and cultural values practised in rural areas of Huangzhong	95
2.8	Rural and Urban Schools	98
2.9	Summary	103
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY		
3.1	Introduction	105
3.2	Research Design	106
3.2.1	Case Study	113
3.3	Population and Sampling	118
3.3.1	Selection of District and School	122
3.3.2	Participants	124
3.4	Research Instruments	126
3.4.1	Interview Protocol	126
3.4.1.1	Challenges in Developing Interview Protocol	129
3.4.2	Observation Sheet	133
3.4.2.1	Challenges in Developing the Observation Sheet	138
3.4.2.2	Limitations of Using Observation Sheet	143

3.5	Pilot Study	148
3.5.1	Semi-structured Interview Questions	149
3.5.2	Observation Sheet	152
3.6	Data Collection	154
3.6.1	Interview	155
3.6.1.1	Challenges of Interview Sessions	159
3.6.2	Classroom Observation	162
3.6.2.1	Challenges of Classroom Observation	165
3.6.3	Document Analysis	169
3.6.3.1	Challenges of Document Analysis	172
3.7	Data Analysis	176
3.7.1	Semi-Structured Interview	176
3.7.2	Observation Sheet	179
3.7.3	Documents	183
3.8	Validity	187
3.8.1	Interview Protocol	187
3.8.1.1	Conceptual and Content Validity	188
3.8.1.2	Construct Validity	188
3.8.1.3	Face Validity and Pilot Testing	189
3.8.1.4	Ongoing Adjustments and Validity	190
3.8.2	Observation Sheet	191
3.8.2.1	Construct Validity	191
3.8.2.2	Content Validity	192
3.8.2.3	Face Validity and Pilot Testing	193
3.8.2.4	Ongoing Validation	193

3.8.3	Triangulation	194
3.8.3.1	Methodological Triangulation	195
3.8.3.2	Data Source Triangulation	196
3.8.3.3	Thematic Triangulation	197
3.9	Reliability	198
3.9.1	Interview Protocol	198
3.9.1.1	Pilot Testing of the Interview Protocol	199
3.9.1.2	Standardization of Interview Procedures	200
3.9.1.3	Triangulation to Enhance Reliability	200
3.9.2	Observation Sheet	202
3.9.2.1	Inter-Rater Reliability	202
3.9.2.2	Test-Retest Reliability	203
3.9.2.3	Triangulation as a Reliability Check	203
3.10	Research Ethics	204
3.10.1	Anonymity, Confidentiality and Non-Traceability	205
3.10.2	Informed Consent and Beneficence	206
3.10.3	Power Relations	206
3.11	Summary	206
CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS		
4.1	Introduction	207
4.2	Data Analysis Procedures	208
4.3	Demographic Details of Participants	212
4.3.1	Parents	212

4.3.2	Students	213
4.3.3	Teachers	214
4.3.4	School Administrators	215
4.4	Research Question 1: What are the initiatives taken by the government in terms of financial support provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	216
4.4.1	Classroom Infrastructure	217
4.4.1.1	Classroom Facilities	218
4.4.1.2	Ventilation and Lighting	220
4.4.1.3	Essential Teaching Aids	221
4.4.1.4	Maintenance of Facilities	222
4.4.2	Technology Resources	223
4.4.2.1	Digital Learning	224
4.4.2.2	Preparing for Future	226
4.4.2.3	Quality Education	228
4.4.3	Sanitation and Hygiene Facilities	230
4.4.3.1	Health and Well-being of the Students	230
4.4.3.2	Conducive Environment	232
4.4.3.3	Improvement for Maintenance and Upgrading	233
4.4.4	Extracurricular Facilities	234
4.4.4.1	Well-rounded Education	234
4.4.4.2	Develop Interests and Talents Outside Regular Curriculum	237
4.4.4.3	Shape Learning Experiences	238
4.4.4.4	Personal Growth	239
4.4.4.5	Impact on the Community	241

4.4.5	Transportation Facilities	242
4.4.5.1	Impact on the Education	242
4.4.5.2	Affect the Attendance	244
4.4.6	Conclusion of Findings for Research Question 1	247
4.5	Research Question 2: What are the initiatives taken by the government in terms of resources input provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	250
4.5.1	Infrastructure Development	251
4.5.2	Teacher Training and Support	254
4.5.3	Educational Resources Provision	257
4.5.3.1	Teaching and Learning Materials	257
4.5.3.2	Teaching Equipment	259
4.5.3.3	Teachers	260
4.5.4	Conclusion of Findings for Research Question 2	261
4.6	Research Question 3: To what extent have all the implemented initiatives aligned with what was planned by the government?	263
4.6.1	Educational Policy Analysis	263
4.6.1.1	Teacher Professional Development Program	264
4.6.1.2	Youth Empowerment Initiative	266
4.6.2	Government Strategic Plan	268
4.6.2.1	Teacher Training Program	268
4.6.2.2	Infrastructure Upgrades	270
4.6.2.3	Tablet Distribution Program	271
4.6.2.4	Outsourcing of Teacher Recruitment	273

4.6.3	Official Reports Review	275
4.6.3.1	Improving Student Performance through Remedial Program	276
4.6.3.2	Enhancing Teacher Quality and Support	277
4.6.3.3	Investing in Infrastructure Upgrades	279
4.6.4	Conclusion of Findings for Research Question 3	281
4.7	Research Question 4: What are the initiatives taken by the schools and society in terms of financial support and resources input as education collaborative efforts provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	284
4.7.1	The main research question: What are the initiatives taken by the schools and society in terms of financial support and resources input as education collaborative efforts provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	285
4.7.1.1	Appreciation for Comprehensive Support	286
4.7.1.2	Impact on Student Learning and Development	288
4.7.1.3	Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement	289
4.7.1.4	Community Engagement and Partnership	290
4.7.1.5	Recommendations for Sustainable Development	291
4.7.2	Sub-Research Question 4: What are the social values practised by the school and society to support the school?	292

4.7.3	Sub-Research Question 4: What are the cultural values practised by the school and society to support the school?	295
4.7.4	Conclusion of findings for Research Question 4	298
4.8	Summary	302
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION		
5.1	Introduction	304
5.2	Research Question 1: What are the initiatives taken by the government in terms of financial support provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	310
5.2.1	Government Initiatives: Financial Support	311
5.2.1.1	Classroom Infrastructure	314
5.2.1.2	Sanitation and Hygiene Facilities	316
5.2.1.3	Extracurricular Facilities	318
5.2.1.4	Transportation Facilities	320
5.3	Research Question 2: What are the initiatives taken by the Government in terms of resource input provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	322
5.3.1	Government Initiatives: Resource Input	323
5.3.1.1	Infrastructure Development	323
5.3.1.2	Teacher Training and Support	326
5.3.1.3	Provision of Educational Resources	331
5.4	Research Question 3: To what extent have all the implemented initiatives aligned with what is planned by the government?	340
5.4.1	Alignment of Initiatives with Government Plans	341
5.4.2	Policy Analysis and Strategic Plans	341

5.4.3	Official Reports and Evaluation	342
5.5	Research Question 4: What are the initiatives taken by the schools and society in terms of financial support and resource input as education collaborative efforts provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	344
5.5.1	Financial Support and Resource Provision	345
5.5.2	Community Engagement and Transparency	345
5.5.3	Sustainable Development and Capacity Building	346
5.5.4	Social Values and Their Impact	347
5.5.5	Cultural Values and Educational Enrichment	348
5.5.6	Social and Cultural Values	350
5.5.6.1	Social Values	351
5.5.6.2	Cultural Values	353
5.6	Research Question 5: What are the key components of a proposed framework for implementing quality education in rural schools of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?	354
5.7	Implications and Recommendations	357
5.7.1	Policy Implications	357
5.7.2	Practical Implications	359
5.7.3	Recommendations for Future Research	362
5.8	Summary	364
	REFERENCES	367
	APPENDIX	386

LIST OF TABLES

Table No		Page
1.1	Number of primary schools in each district of Xining City, Qinghai Province	3
3.1	Summary of Selected Participants	125
4.1	Participants Demographic Details	215
4.2	Summary Findings for Research Question 1	249
4.3	Summary Findings for Research Question 2	262
4.4	Summary Findings for Research Question 3	282
4.5	Summary Findings for Research Question 4	300

LIST OF FIGURES

No. Figures		Page
1.1	Conceptual Framework of the Study	17
3.1	Research Design of the Study	111
3.2	Pilot Study for the Semi-structured Interview and Observation Sheet	154
3.3	Methods of Data Collection	176
3.4	Process of Validity and Reliability	201
5.1	New Integrated Educational Framework	356

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RBV Resource-Based View

SES Socioeconomic Status

APPENDIX LIST

- A Interview Questions for Teachers and School Administrators
- B Interview Questions for Parents
- C Interview Questions for Students
- D Observation Sheet
- E Information Sheet
- F Consent Forms

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide some important information about the study that was conducted on the educational quality in rural areas in Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province. It starts with some information on the background of the study and is followed by the problem statement that initiates the interest in the topic investigated. This is then followed by the research questions and research objectives that guided the study in collecting the relevant data to achieve and answer the research questions and research objectives of the study. An explanation of the limitations of the study is presented and this chapter ends with the operational definitions that were used in the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

Xiaotong (1998) highlighted that Chinese society remains essentially rural, with its central structure deeply rooted in traditional rural customs despite speedy modernization. To fully apprehend Chinese society, one has to first have a look at its rural foundations. Sustainable development hinges on prioritizing rural progress, and meaningful change must begin with younger generations—starting in schools. Rural schools play a crucial cultural role, serving not only as centers of education but also as pillars for preserving traditions and fostering progress. Beyond academics, these institutions shape moral values and contribute significantly to the advancement of Chinese society as a whole.

It is reported that in 2016, in rural areas of China, there were 106,403 primary schools, 86,800 teaching points and 16,171 junior high schools in rural areas (*China Education Statistical Yearbook*, 2020). The school in Huangzhong District selected in this study is situated in Xining City, Qinghai Province. Xining City, Qinghai Province is divided into Chengxi District, Chengdong District, Chengzhong District, Chengbei District and Huangzhong District. The number of primary schools in each district is shown in Table 1.1. In terms of basic education reform in rural areas, the development and adjustment of schools are extremely important to prioritize.

Table 1.1*Number of Primary Schools in Each District of Xining City, Qinghai Province*

Districts	Chengxi District	Chengdong District	Chengzhong District	Chengbei District	Huangzhong District
No of Primary Schools	16	22	21	20	14

Education remains a critical issue in rural China. While the government of China has prioritized education on its national agenda, ensuring that rural schools can meet the expectations of reform remains a pressing challenge. Rural education faces several issues, including misalignment in policy orientation, function setting, goals, and content, and this misplacement is focused on educational reform (Wen, 2015). Therefore, this study analyses the current quality of education in rural schools in China, with a particular focus on the Huangzhong District. It examines government and community-led initiatives by the government and community for sustainable development in terms of their implementations and the perspectives of relevant parties involved.

Rural schools, characterized by small student populations, restricted assets, and strong community involvement, play an essential role in less populated regions (Johnson, 2018). Unlike urban schools, which often benefit from advanced facilities, diverse extracurricular programs, and a larger pool of qualified teachers, rural schools frequently face challenges such as teacher shortages, aging infrastructure, and scarce educational resources (Brown & Green, 2020). However, they foster close-knit

environments in which students, teachers, and parents maintain strong connections, developing a unique educational experience (Miller & Smith, 2019).

In China, rural schools, such as those in Huangzhong exemplify these traits while contending with additional challenges like financial constraints and geographic isolation (Zhao, 2021). Concerns over the academic gap between rural and urban regions have long driven government and community-led initiatives to enhance educational access and quality in rural areas (Li, 2017). This study examines such initiatives in Huangzhong's rural primary schools, analysing their impact on student learning and community engagement.

Previous studies on educational quality in China have had a significant limitation: by focusing solely on theoretical analysis, they have assumed that the universal functions of education apply to all education levels and schools across the country (Li, 2020). However, as mentioned by Zhihui (2020), in reality, this is different; different regions, historical stages and even different groups and individuals have different expectations and orientations for educational quality based on their different interests and needs. Given these differences, the quality orientation of rural school education has its own characteristics; which this study seeks to explore and understand. Multi-dimensional perspectives were studied including philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, economics, and others. Apart from this the educational practices and educational philosophy of the participants were also studied including the students, teachers, principals, villagers, town party committee secretaries, education directors and others.

Based on the comparison and analysis made to literature (Eryong, Jian & Xingcheng, 2021; Jian, 2020; Zhihui, 2020; Dandan, Xin & Jinjun, 2015), it is evident that educational theorists hold diverse perspectives on education and educational quality. These differing orientations result in varying pressures and demands influencing how education is defined and how its functions are expected to operate. Consequently, policies, regulations, and strategies are formulated differently to reflect these distinctions.

Given this complexity, adopting a multi-dimensional thinking framework is essential for establishing a more balanced and contextually appropriate approach to rural education quality. By integrating diverse perspectives and orientations, and then choosing a more reasonable path for rural schools; rural education should be more in line with its culture and life, not just a copy of urban education.

In recent years, it is evident that farmers' lives and rural conditions in terms of infrastructure have been greatly improved, however, the education condition of rural children is still not optimistic (Li, 2020). The challenging living environment in rural areas has fuelled a strong motivation and determination among rural students to pursue education, viewing it as a pathway to leave the countryside and seek better opportunities. Apart from this, the backwardness of rural and peasant life and the exodus of aspiring young people have made this worse for rural areas (Dandan, Xin & Jinjun, 2015). Based on a personal survey by the researcher, it is discovered that in many places of rural areas, young people who have been enrolled into universities in the cities rarely return to their hometowns; a large number of educated and outstanding

young people leave their hometowns, hence lead to functional misalignment or deviation.

Education is inherently local, as it is deeply rooted in various social, cultural, ethnic, economic and other backgrounds. The local nature of education encompasses the fundamental characteristics of educational philosophy, motivation, purpose, resources, strategies and methods all of which are inseparable from the local culture. Furthermore, education is not only determined by local culture but its ultimate goal should also be to contribute to local construction and development. This principle applies not only to macro domains such as nations and countries but also to smaller domains. Otherwise, the emphasis placed on local and school-based curricula in the new round of curriculum reform will lose its theoretical basis. It follows that studies and analyses of the role and development of education should not only be based on its historical (diachronic) culture but must also consider its contemporary (synchronic) differences.

As far as rural education in China is concerned, rural schools and urban schools should have certain commonalities in terms of educational policies, objectives and content because they are part of a larger cultural system. At the same time, many differences between urban and rural areas should also fundamentally determine the different paths and functional fundamental differences between urban and rural schools. However, in reality, this is not the case. While the citizens in China generally recognize the significant differences between ethnic groups and regions in China, they also adhere to the long-standing mode of thinking that prioritizes a single value orientation in education. Xingyu, Haoran, and Yi (2021) highlight this issue, stating, "While letting

the villages accept the educational model we designed, they have few choices. We also pre-infiltrate the value of urban orientation, making it the dominant value orientation and value goal of rural education” (p. 61).

This urban-centric orientation erases the differences between urban and rural education and implements education with different characteristics on the same trajectory and play the same function. As a result, this misalignment leads to the dislocation of rural education.

In theory, this educational orientation hinders citizens’ understanding and exploration of educational diversity; in practice, it causes young people to lack a sense of identity and mission toward their hometowns. Their ten years of hard work in school become merely a ticket to leave the countryside—a goal that many ultimately fail to achieve. Those who return to their hometowns often find themselves lost, unable to adapt either to rural life or to local production and labour. For many, migrating to cities for work becomes their only option, leaving their hometowns populated primarily by the elderly, weak, sick, and disabled (Dandan, Xin & Jinjun, 2015). As these villages continue to rely on simple labour reproduction, their path to modernization remains uncertain. If the hometown remains underdeveloped, its residents have little hope of achieving a prosperous life. Thus, rural progress is not just a local concern but a crucial component of national development.

According to a report by *The West China Metropolis Daily*, the national population statistics in 2015 indicated that the population in China was 759 million of which the rural population was 300 million, accounting for 64% (Weng, 2002). With

ongoing urbanization, both rural population size and land area are expected to change. However, at the moment, to understand education in China, one must first understand the education of the rural areas in China. It is believed that there are certain dislocations and deviations from policy orientation, value orientation, educational goals and educational content in rural schools' education in China. These discrepancies manifest in how schools are managed and how their functional roles are defined. This misalignment represents the greatest challenge facing rural education in China. Solving this problem effectively has to be put as the priority, then only an education system that is closer to rural social life, better suited to the needs of farmers and their children, and truly provides happiness to farmers can be developed.

Referring to what has been mentioned before, it is a huge systematic project that involves not only the formulation of macro policies, regulations, goals and contents, but also the specific operations of micro. As far as this study is concerned, there are several elements were investigated: the educational quality was taken as the starting point, the perspective and orientation of the educational quality was taken as the basic clue, the case study was analysed and the current direction of rural school education in China was judged, and some suggestions for the reform and development of rural school education were provided; these are the basic idea of this study. However, it is the premise of the research to examine the quality of rural school education from what standpoint and angle. In the past, people used to analyse rural education from a one-dimensional standpoint and a one-dimensional perspective. It is hoped that this study will change this mindset, give up the 'observer' position, and put oneself in the shoes of 'their' survival and education strategies.

Chinese authorities, along with various network corporations, have implemented numerous initiatives to enhance instructional quality nationwide. Policies such as increased investment, teacher education programs, and curriculum reforms aim to provide students with equitable learning opportunities (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Additionally, infrastructure development projects, digital learning advancements, and network partnerships seek to modernize schools and bridge educational gaps (Liu & Zhao, 2020).

However, despite these efforts, many initiatives fail to effectively reach rural schools. Funding allocation often prioritizes urban institutions, where student populations are larger and resources are more accessible (Wang et al., 2019). Teacher education programs, though widely promoted, struggle with retention in rural regions, as educators frequently seek better career opportunities in cities (Zhang & Chen, 2022). Similarly, curriculum reforms and digital advancements tend to benefit urban schools first, leaving rural institutions with outdated teaching materials and limited technological integration (Huang, 2020).

This raises a critical question: Does the lack of implementation in rural areas erode the quality of education, or do rural schools operate under distinct policies and curricula that inherently place them at a disadvantage? Some argue that rural education policies are designed with local needs in mind but remain inferior due to resource constraints (Li & Sun, 2021). Others contend that without equal access to national initiatives, rural students face systemic disadvantages, perpetuating educational inequalities between rural and urban regions (Chen & Wu, 2018).

1.3 Problem Statement

Since the 1980s there are many people from rural areas have migrated to cities for better education and better job opportunities resulting in fewer children enrolled in schools in rural areas. As a result, many schools in rural areas are closed down by education departments of China. According to Zhihui (2020), it was estimated that 386,500 in total of schools, both primary and secondary, were shut down between 2000 and 2016 resulting in 41% of the total number of school closures in the past 40 years. As far as primary schools are concerned, they have been the main priority of school consolidations by the education department due to fewer children being enrolled in schools. Hence, a total of 333,900 primary schools in rural areas were closed, resulting in a 93.53% decline in schools in rural areas (about 357,000).

The significant number of school closures in rural China is the result of less resource allocation from the central government. Resources are unevenly distributed between urban and rural schools (Eryong, Jian & Xingcheng, 2021). This lack of resources includes poor infrastructure conditions (for example computers, internet connection, the teaching and learning aids) and insufficient professional development support for teachers. As a result, parents in rural areas often migrate to cities in search of better-quality education that offers advanced infrastructure conditions and highly qualified teachers. If the issue of inadequate resource allocation is not addressed by the central government, rural areas will be left with no primary schools at all because fewer children will be enrolled in primary schools. Consequently, the closure of primary schools will lead to a rise in illiteracy among children in rural areas, further diminishing their chances of continuing their education at junior high and also higher learning

institutions. In fact, according to Fu (2015), it is evident from the statistics that rural youth are more likely three times less to be admitted to colleges and universities than urban youth. This problem is crucial to be investigated in this study. The results can be presented to the government to ensure equal resource input is provided to schools in rural areas to attract parents to send their children to schools. Ensuring equal access to education in rural areas will help prevent further school closures and expand educational opportunities for all children in China, particularly those in underserved regions.

Rural schools face severe monetary demanding situations due to constrained aid allocations and inadequate public educational funding from the primary government. A study by Eryong, Jian, and Xingcheng (2021) across 10 provinces, related to education directors and instructors in rural regions, highlights the absence of financial safety for these faculties. Despite the urgent need, the authority's investment in local school students in rural areas stays non-existent, leaving many families—specifically the ones of farmers—not able to have enough money for their kid's schooling. As a result, dropouts among rural students have surged. The financial burden on those households, coupled with the dearth of government help, forces youngsters out of school (Zhihui, 2020). Additionally, insufficient funding has led to negative infrastructure and insufficient transportation, making lengthy and inconvenient commutes another fundamental aspect contributing to school dropouts (Eryong, Jian & Xingcheng, 2021).

The closure of rural schools in China, not best limits access to education but also threatens the renovation of the rural way of life. The migration of families to city areas searching for better instructional and monetary opportunities has brought about a

decline in scholar enrollment, prompting huge-scale faculty consolidations and closures (Zhihui, 2020). With ninety three.53% of number-one colleges in rural regions closing down, fewer academic institutions continue to promote and maintain local traditions, languages, and cultural historical past. The authorities' uneven distribution of sources among city and rural faculties has similarly marginalized rural communities, depriving them of essential instructional centres and cultural packages (Eryong, Jian & Xingcheng, 2021).

Additionally, community projects to safeguard rural tradition have been insufficient, as nearby governments regularly prioritize financial development over cultural upkeep. The lack of investment in rural colleges now not simplest disrupts education but also accelerates the erosion of rural traditions, as more youthful generations are more and more disconnected from their cultural roots. If the government no longer take immediate action to revitalize rural training via equal funding, progressed infrastructure, and cultural integration applications, rural groups will continue to lose their academic opportunities and cultural identification.

Moreover, according to Dandan, Xin and Jinjun (2015), 38% of rural children were unable to complete the nine-year compulsory education program. Additionally, the study found that only six out of 100 rural children were able to enter senior high school, and among them, only three successfully graduated. As a result, those who fail to complete senior high school lose their chance to take the National College Entrance Examination, which is required for admission to higher learning institutions. Among the three students who graduate from high school, only one or two have the opportunity to pursue tertiary education. For others, financial constraints prevent them from

enrolling in higher learning institutions, putting them at a significant disadvantage. The high dropout rate among rural children is alarming. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the issue and urge the government to implement effective solutions that encourage literacy and ensure equal educational opportunities. Providing greater financial support would allow more rural students to complete their education and pursue tertiary studies, which they rightfully deserve.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study has collected the data to achieve the following research objectives:

1. to investigate the initiatives taken by the government in terms of financial support provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province,
2. to investigate the initiatives taken by the government in terms of resources input provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province,
3. to evaluate whether all the initiatives implemented by the government are aligned with what is planned,
4. to identify the initiatives taken by the schools and society in terms of financial support and resource input as education collaborative efforts provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province,

- a. to analyze the social values practised by the school and society to support the school,
- b. to analyze the cultural values practised by the school and society to support the school, and
5. to identify the key components of a proposed framework for implementing quality education in rural schools of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province.

1.5 Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions are developed:

1. What are the initiatives taken by the government in terms of financial support provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?
2. What are the initiatives taken by the government in terms of resource input provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?
3. To what extent have all the initiatives implemented aligned with what is planned by the government?
4. What are the initiatives taken by the schools and society in terms of financial support and resource input as education collaborative efforts are provided to the selected primary school in a rural area of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?

- a. What are the social values practised by the school and society to support the school?
 - b. What are the cultural values practised by the school and society to support the school?
5. What are the key components of a proposed framework for implementing quality education in rural schools of Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province?

1.6 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Human Capital Theory, Resource-based Theory and Social Capital theory are three theoretical frameworks that help to explain the relationship between education and economic development. These theories are applied to the study of education in rural areas and how they have impacted the development of the Huangzhong district.

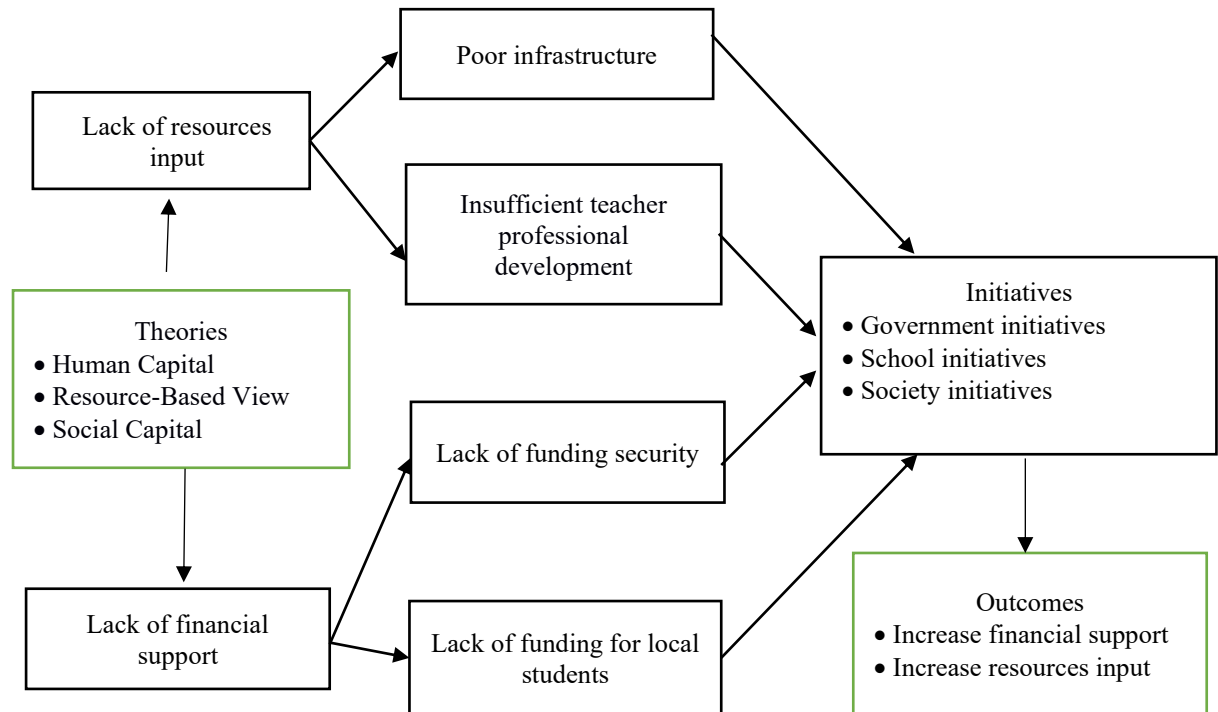
Firstly, the Human Capital Theory asserts that investing in education increases human capital – knowledge, skills and abilities – which in turn leads to economic development (Becker, 1993). From this perspective, education in rural areas can contribute to the development of the district by providing the necessary skills and knowledge needed to bring about economic growth.

The second theory is Resource-Based Theory positing that the development of a community depends upon the resources available to it (Barney, 1991). Education can be seen as a resource that can be leveraged to develop the community in which it is

located. The education system in rural areas can provide specialized knowledge and skills that can be harnessed to support local industries and improve economic outcomes.

Finally, the Social Capital Theory emphasizes the role of social networks and relationships in community development (Putnam, 2000). Education in rural areas can help foster social capital by promoting collaboration and cooperation among community members. This can lead to improved community cohesion and stronger relationships between business owners, local organizations, and other community stakeholders.

In the context of the study, these three theories have informed the understanding of the potential impact of education on the development of the district. By investing in human capital, leveraging education as a resource, and fostering social capital, education in rural areas has contributed to the overall development of the district. How the theories relate to the study is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1*Conceptual Framework of the Study***1.7 Limitations of the Study**

There were some constraints in this study. Firstly, the location of the study was only limited to one district, Huangzhong district in Qinghai Province; the data was also collected in this particular district. Since the data was collected in only one district in the province, hence the findings could not be generalized either to other districts in the same province or another province. Although it would have been useful to include other districts from other provinces, this study was, however, based on a comprehensive approach in that the majority of the students from one school in the district will be invited to participate in the study.

Another limitation of the study is the participants involved in this study. The participants were only selected from rural areas of Huangzhong district in Qinghai Province and only from one school. Apart from this, the number of participants was also limited in numbers, not all from Huangzhong district in Qinghai Province were involved; not all students, teachers and parents all over the district were selected in the data collection, only students from a school. Hence, the data collected from all the participants could not be generalised as a comprehensive list of the society in Huangzhong district.

Given the limitation of participants, careful attention was given to Inviting all eligible participants to complete the questionnaire. This limitation was addressed by carefully selecting them from the district. As for the students, they were selected carefully so that they would be at least between 30% and 40% representatives of the whole student population in Huangzhong district. Another limitation was the selection of participants for the interview sessions. Not all students, teachers and parents were invited to participate in the interviews Meaning only a selected group was involved in the interview sessions; not everyone in the district was involved. Due to this limitation, the findings from the interviews could not be generalized to represent the perspectives of all people in the Huangzhong district.

Finally, the topic of the study is another limitation. The study focused only on the educational quality in the Huangzhong district of Qinghai Province a very limited rural area in China; other rural areas in another province could be investigated. Though there are many other districts in the same province and other provinces, due to time constraints, only one district in one province was examined. Nevertheless, the issues

explored and investigated were given thorough attention to their importance in the context of rural areas in China. On top of this, the issues that were investigated and explored also have provided new insights to the literature concerning the educational quality in China generally, and the Huangzhong district of Qinghai Province specifically.

1.8 Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding and improvement of education in rural areas. Its contributions include the empirical research gap about the quality of education in rural areas, addressing educational inequality, policy implications, Sustainable Development Goals, contextual understanding, identifying successful practices and enhancing research methodology.

Firstly, there is a substantial gap in the research literature regarding the quality of education in rural schools, in specific regions like the Huangzhong District in China. While there are numerous studies examining educational quality in general, the specific focus on a rural school in Huangzhong District was identified as a research gap. This study aimed to address this gap by providing valuable insights and knowledge about educational quality in a rural setting. Rural schools often receive less attention compared to urban schools in academic research. By conducting a comprehensive study in this specific context, this study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on rural education and provides valuable empirical data that can be used for comparative analyses and future research.

Secondly, this study has shed light on the inequities and disparities that exist between rural and urban education. By focusing on educational quality in a rural school, this study has shed light on the specific issues and disparities faced by these institutions. This study aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on educational inequality and provide insights into potential strategies to bridge the gap between rural and urban schools. Rural schools often face significant challenges in providing quality education due to limited resources, infrastructure, and teaching staff. Therefore, this study will help policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to recognize and address these inequalities, ultimately working towards a more equitable education system that benefits all students, regardless of their geographical location.

Thirdly, there are policy implications. The findings from this study have practical implications for policymakers, educational administrators, and stakeholders involved in rural education development, hence informing the development of educational policies that specifically target rural schools in the Huangzhong District and similar areas. By understanding the specific challenges faced by these schools, including limited resources, lack of qualified teachers, and infrastructure issues, policymakers can design effective strategies to enhance educational quality, such as the provision of additional resources, training programs for teachers, or infrastructure improvements. Furthermore, by identifying the factors that influence educational quality in the studied rural school, the research can inform policy decisions aimed at improving infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum development, and resource allocation. It can contribute to evidence-based policy-making and ultimately lead to positive changes in rural education.

Next is contextual understanding. Selecting Huangzhong District, as the specific research site, has allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the educational landscape in a rural setting. By conducting an in-depth study of this particular district, this study has captured the unique characteristics, challenges, and strengths of the local educational system. This context-specific understanding is crucial for designing effective interventions and policies tailored to the needs of rural schools in similar regions.

Another implication includes identifying successful practices. From this study, successful practices and strategies that have been implemented in the rural school in Huangzhong District were identified, and thus can then be shared and replicated in other rural schools facing similar challenges. This will foster collaboration and the exchange of best practices among educational institutions, ultimately improving the overall educational quality in rural communities.

Apart from all the implications stated before, another implication is the Sustainable Development Goals. By conducting this study to identify elements to improve the quality of education, has achieved a crucial aspect of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4: Quality Education. By exploring educational quality in a rural school, this study has aligned with the global agenda of ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all. The findings can contribute to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities in achieving this goal, not only in China but also in other countries facing similar circumstances.

The final implication is enhancing research methodology. This study has contributed to the academic field by providing insights into the methodological challenges and approaches to conducting research in rural educational settings. The study has offered guidance on how to navigate the unique contextual factors and logistical issues that may arise when conducting research in such remote areas, resulting in advancing the methodology used in educational research.

Overall, this study has significant implications for educational policy, practice, and research by addressing the educational quality in a rural school in Huangzhong District, China. It has the potential to promote more equitable education opportunities, inform policy decisions, and contribute to the improvement of educational quality in rural areas globally. In summary, studying educational quality in a rural school in Huangzhong District, China, holds significance in terms of addressing educational inequality, providing context-specific understanding, suggesting policy implications, filling empirical research gaps, and contributing to the broader goal of achieving quality education for all.

1.9 Operational Definitions (Definition of Terms)

This section will provide the operational definitions of the main terms used in the study. Among them are rural education, rural schools and rural culture referring to the rural areas of Huangzhong district of Qinghai Province, the location of the study conducted.

1.9.1 Rural Education

Rural means “any place where residents live in an unincorporated area or town of less than 2500 people and over 30 miles from an urban centre” (Miller, 1993, p. 86). Therefore, rural education refers to the education that residents of rural areas receive either formal or informal. On the other hand, for the interpretation of education, academic circles generally believe that there are broad and narrow senses. Education in a broad sense refers to social practice activities that consciously take people as the direct object and have an impact on the physical and mental development of people, including school education outside institutional and non-institutional educational activities (Nazief, 2017). Education in a narrow sense refers to school education, which is “a social activity undertaken by full-time personnel and specialized institutions with a purposeful, systematic and organized objective of affecting the physical and mental development of students” (Chazan, 2022).

In this study, rural education has broad and narrow meanings. Rural education in a broad meaning refers to education that serves rural constructions. It targets school-age children and villagers in the vast countryside, including rural schools. In addition, education also includes other informal and informal rural education activities, as well as general higher education and secondary and higher vocational education in cities that directly or indirectly serve the needs of rural development. In a narrow meaning, rural education mainly refers to school education in rural areas, that refers to the purposeful, systematic and organized efforts to influence the physical and mental development of rural students in schools in ‘townships’ and ‘villages’ as formal social institutions and practical activities for immediate goals.

1.9.2 Rural Schools

Rural schools are not only a learning field to educate school-aged children, but also a political field for national citizens and a cultural field for the recognition and emergence of local consciousness (Irvin, Soo-Yong, Meece & Farmer, 2012). Rural schools are also defined as “the country in the village” (Jingrong, Desmet & Feyter, 2016) and are an important political space for the realization of national governance, and also an important place for transmitting the village culture in the rural public space. As far as this study is concerned, rural schools refer to schools that are situated in rural areas in China specifically rural areas in Huangzhong District that impart education in formal settings of classrooms.

1.9.3 Rural Culture

Culture is a relatively complex concept, with different interpretations from different disciplines, perspectives, and even different schools. Correspondingly, the academic circle does not have a unified definition of rural culture. According to the views of scholars (Li, 2019; Zhang, 2018; Zhang, 2016), rural culture refers to the material and spiritual achievements formed in a certain rural area with farmers as the main body, and in the long-term labour and production process, that has a unique local cultural atmosphere. It mainly includes four basic elements: the peasant group as participants and creators of rural cultural culture; the cultural facilities and places for rural cultural expression; the products and services of rural culture; and the organizational system and values supporting rural cultural activities. As for this study, it uses this definition.

1.9.4 Resource Input

Resources input refers to a situation in which resources are obtained from certain providers or are provided by certain parties for example; infrastructure, money, resources for people and space (Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor II, 2017). As for this study, resource input refers to the resources provided by the central government to help the selected school in terms of its infrastructure as well as its teacher professional development.

1.9.5 Financial Support

Financial support refers to the support provided by a certain party in the form of money to finance a need, program, or project (Kaschny, 2018). As for this study, financial support refers to the money allocated by the central government for educational purposes provided to the selected primary school to assist the students, especially those poor ones.

1.9.6 Infrastructure

Infrastructure assets are the physical structures, facilities, and networks that provide essential services to the public. These assets include transportation structures (roads, bridges, tunnels, railways, airports, and seaports), energy and utility companies, communication entities, and social services such as educational facilities and hospitals

(Chambers, 2007). As far as this study is concerned, infrastructure refers to the facilities provided by the central government to the selected primary school for the benefit of its students for their educational purposes.

1.9.7 Teachers Professional Development

Teacher professional development refers to teachers' learning including how they learn to learn and how they apply their knowledge in practice to support their students' learning (Avalos, 2011). Learning in this context refers to how teachers can learn through participation in various courses conducted on the school grounds in which they reflect on their own teaching and in observation of and reflection on others' teaching in co-operation with colleagues (Postholm, 2012). This learning may occur in various ways, both in formal situations and informal situations. As for this study, teacher professional development refers to the resources and support provided by the central government to assist the teachers in the selected primary school with their teaching and learning process. This support includes the pieces of training needed by the teachers to equip themselves with all the knowledge and practice in current and latest teaching approaches, and methodology including the use of technology in the teaching and learning process.

1.9.8 Funding Security

Funding security refers to having sufficient financial resources to sustain one's lifestyle and achieve personal goals (Folayan, 2012). In the context of this study, funding security refers to the help provided by the central government in terms of money to the students of the selected primary school. This funding security ensures that poor students complete their primary school and also their senior high schools. Moreover, this funding is very essential to the respective students because their parents are poor and are not able to support them financially.

1.9.9 Social Values

Social values refer to the beliefs, principles, and norms that shape individual and group behaviour within cultural, social, and historical contexts (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). In the context of education in rural areas, social values encompass the attitudes and perspectives of the local community towards education, as well as their expectations and aspirations for their children's education. Referring to this study, social values are operationally defined as the cultural and societal norms, beliefs, and expectations that influence and shape the education system in the local community of Huangzhong district. Furthermore, the sources of social values in Huangzhong district could include cultural traditions, community beliefs, religious teachings, and historical legacies. These social values can impact multiple aspects of education such as curriculum content, teaching methods, and expectations for student success.

1.9.10 Cultural Values

Cultural values refer to the shared beliefs, customs, traditions, and practices of a particular cultural group (Brislin et al., 2010). In the context of education in rural areas, cultural values encompass the cultural perspectives and expectations of the local community towards education.

As for this study, cultural values are operationally defined as the values and beliefs that shape the education system in the local community of Huangzhong district, including how education is viewed, the purpose of education, and attitudes towards learning. Additionally, the sources of cultural values in Huangzhong district could include traditional practices, religious beliefs, historical legacies, and regional customs. These cultural values could influence aspects of education such as teaching styles, learning material, and expectations for educational outcomes.

1.9.11 Initiatives

Initiatives are purposeful and proactive actions, programs, or strategies undertaken by individuals, organizations, or institutions to address specific challenges, achieve goals, or bring about positive change in a particular area or field (UNESCO, 2005). In the context of research or academic studies, initiatives often refer to innovative approaches, projects, or interventions designed to tackle complex issues, drive progress, and create impact in diverse domains such as education, healthcare, social welfare, and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, initiatives can take various forms, including

policy reforms, community projects, awareness campaigns, capacity-building programs, research studies, technology implementations, and advocacy efforts, among others. These initiatives are typically aimed at addressing identified needs, seizing opportunities, and catalysing positive outcomes within a specific context or community.

For example, in education, initiatives may focus on improving student learning outcomes, enhancing teacher professional development, promoting inclusive education practices, strengthening school infrastructure, or fostering community engagement in the educational process. These initiatives play a crucial role in advancing educational quality, equity, and access for learners of all ages and backgrounds.

In the context of this study that focused on exploring educational quality in rural Huangzhong, the term 'initiatives' typically refers to specific actions, programs, projects, or strategies undertaken by governmental bodies, community organizations, or other stakeholders to address challenges, improve educational quality, and promote sustainable development in primary schools (Zheng & Li, 2008). These initiatives are proactive efforts aimed at bringing about positive changes in the educational landscape of rural areas, often targeting key areas such as curriculum enhancement, teacher training, infrastructure development, community engagement, and student support services. In addition, in the context of this study, 'initiatives' can encompass a wide range of activities and interventions aimed at advancing educational quality and promoting sustainable development in primary schools (Zheng & Li, 2018). By examining the effectiveness, impact, and challenges of these initiatives, researchers can gain valuable insights into the strategies that are most effective in addressing the unique educational needs of rural communities like Huangzhong.

1.10 Summary

This chapter has provided background information about the area investigated. The discussion and explanation include the background of the study and the problem that triggered the researcher to focus on the educational quality for sustainable development in Huangzhong District, Qinghai Province. The research questions and objectives that guide data collection are also presented in this chapter. Additionally, the chapter outlines the study's limitations and explains how these limitations will be addressed before concluding with the operational definitions which help narrow the scope of the investigation. In the next chapter, the literature review will be presented to highlight the literature gap that will be filled by the findings of this study.