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Schooling of migrant children in China: Perspectives of school teachers

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Abstract

The impact of family migration on children's schooling has been the focus of much investigation in western countries. However, there are limited data on such impact in China, despite a large number of rural-to-urban migrants. In-depth interviews were conducted among 20 school teachers in Beijing. Findings reveal that barriers for migrant children to attend public schools include extra financial charge and stigmatization resulting from their migratory status. The schools serving solely migrant children were perceived as having poor teaching facilities and lacking adequately trained teachers. Migrant parents were generally perceived as having limited involvement in their children's schooling. Findings suggest that national policy related to the schooling of migrant children should be improved and support from family and society should be emphasized.

Keywords

rural-to-urban migration; schooling; stigmatization; qualitative research; China

Introduction

The number of rural-to-urban migrants in China has been rising steadily since the late 1970s, when widespread economic reform was initiated (Li, Stanton, Fang, & Lin, 2006). This migration wave has increased to a greater extent since the relaxation of the household registration system (*hukou*) in the mid-1980s (Zhang, 2001; Zhao, 1999). The *hukou* system in China was established in the 1950s and was developed to control population mobility (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Residents are divided into having either agricultural status (almost all rural residents) or non-agricultural status (urban residents), and this status could not be changed without governmental approval. Although enforcement of the system has been relaxed in recent years, the social effects of *hukou* status still persist (Wu & Treiman, 2004). The *hukou* system in China forms a dual division of urban and rural residency (Wu & Treiman, 2004), which forms a structural basis for the social welfare system in

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China. When rural migrants move to the city they are not entitled to the same benefits as local residents, such as government-subsided housing, health service care and schooling (Goodkind & West, 2002). Because of their rural *hukou* status, migrants have experienced various forms of stigmatization at urban destinations (Li et al., 2007), including unequal schooling opportunity for their children.

According to the Beijing Bureau of Statistics, approximately 70, 000 of the 240, 000 migrant children in Beijing failed to receive any type of formal schooling, with more than 80% of the middle-school-aged migrant children unable to attend schools by the end of 2003 (Xinhua News Agency, 2004). A recent study in Guangdong province of China found that migrant children were less likely to be enrolled in school during their first year of migration to the city (Liang & Chen, 2007). In response to the increasing demand for schooling of these growing numbers of migrant children in the city, some temporary schools have been established specifically for migrant children by migrants themselves (i.e. 'migrant children schools', or MCS). However, these schools are usually unlicensed, under-funded and staffed inadequately compared to the public schools in Beijing (Inwin, 2000). The Beijing government initiated a new policy in July 2007 requiring that all public schools accept migrant children without charging extra fees to their families (*People's Daily Online*, 2007). However, no data are available regarding the reinforcement and effectiveness of such a policy (Wong, Chang, & He, 2009).

Global literature has suggested that parental socioeconomic status influences migrant children's schooling (Straits, 1987). Migrant children of poorly educated parents are less likely to be enrolled in school (Hirschman, 2001). Similarly, parental time devoted to overseeing the activities and school work of their children influence the educational achievement of migrant children (Coleman, 1988; Haveman, Wolfe, & Spaulding, 1991). Migrant families often change their residences, resulting in frequent changes of schools, which could also influence children's school performance (Swanson & Schneider, 1999) and lead to behavioral problems in these children (Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). While several studies in western countries have suggested that family migration impacts children's school performance negatively (Long, 1975; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Straits, 1987; Swanson & Schneider, 1999), especially among families with uninvolved and unsupportive parents (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheaton, 1996), much less is known about barriers that impede improvement in the education of migrant children in developing countries, including China. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study in Beijing in April 2004 among both teachers from MCS and urban public schools. The main objective of the study was to identify problems associated with the schooling of rural-to-urban migrant children.

Methods

Participants

The participants in the current study included 10 teachers and administrators (owners) (three males and seven females) from five MCS and 10 teachers (two males and eight females) from two urban public schools. The teachers from MCS were recruited from two MCS in one urban district and three MCS in one suburban district. The public school teachers

were recruited from two urban districts. The age range of participants was 28–70 years for MCS and 25–55 years for public schools. Participants were informed of the purpose and design of the study and assured of their confidentiality in the study. All participants provided written informed consent before being interviewed. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of Wayne State University in the United States and Beijing Normal University in China.

Interview procedure

Interview guides were developed for the interviews, which included open-ended questions related to the perceptions or experience of working with migrant children and their families, history and conditions of the MCS, parents' involvement and other issues related to the schooling of migrant children. The interviews were conducted in the offices of participating teachers by trained interviewers (psychology faculty members and graduate students of Beijing Normal University). Each interview took approximately one hour. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Coding and data analysis

Data analysis was guided by grounded theory (Bernard, 2006) to explore the issues related to schooling among migrant children. Coding themes were developed through the reading and re-reading of the transcript texts. New themes were identified and added during the coding process. ATLASti version 5.0 (Writley & Crawford, 2005) qualitative research software was used to analyze the data. Two researchers coded the transcripts independently and the average intercoder agreement between two independent coders for all themes was 90%.

Results

Financial burdens for migrant children attending public schools

Because public schools are financed by the local government in China, students are often required to pay extra fees such as 'education endorsement fees' or 'temporary learning status fees' if they attend schools outside the jurisdiction of their household registration (*hukou*) (Liang & Chen, 2007). The majority of migrant families in China are not able to obtain local household registration status and are therefore required to pay those extra fees if they want to send their children to urban public schools.

Most teachers we interviewed reported that the public schools in the cities are generally neither accessible nor affordable to migrant children in China. Most public schools in Beijing are not willing to accept migrant students because of concerns that accepting migrant children could lower the school's academic ranking. For those public schools willing to accept migrant students, the extra fees constitute a significant financial burden for most migrant families and are a major impediment for migrant children to attend public schools. One MCS teacher complained:

> In Beijing, the education endorsement fees for migrant families are too high; it is about ten thousand Yuan [to complete the 6-year primary education].

(male, aged 40 years)

One public school teachers provided details about the fee schedule for his school:

> Coming to this school, [migrant children] pay 370 Yuan more than the local children for 5 months [one semester], 720 Yuan for one year, or 1000 Yuan for three years … This [fees] is set up by the government.

(male, aged 55 years)

Migrant children face social stigma in the public schools

In addition to the cost barriers for migrant children, another theme which emerged from the interviews was stigmatization against migrant children in the public schools. Teachers believed that some migrant children did not want to attend public schools because of the social stigma. Teachers interviewed mentioned that in their classes migrant children were leaving public schools to attend MCS. Teachers perceived that some migrant students whose families can afford public schools did not want to go to public schools where they might be stigmatized because of their *hukou* status, their cloth and their accent. One MCS teacher elaborated:

> Parents do not want to send their children to the public schools because their children may suffer from depression, face discrimination, be looked down upon, feel lonely, and have no other students talk to them.

(female, aged 45 years)

Another MCS teacher reported:

> I asked some of the students in my class why they did not go to the public schools. They said that they were afraid that the students in these public schools might look down upon them.

(female, aged 50 years)

The teachers we interviewed reported that the migrant students often did not like others to mention the *hukou* issue, as it embarrassed them or made them feel anxious. The fact that they were often perceived to be ‘different’ from other students because of their *hukou* status often left migrant children with feelings of low self-esteem and social withdrawal. As one public school teachers pointed out: ‘The hukou issue is a problem that affects the self-esteem of many migrant children in my school’ (female, aged 30 years).

Another public school teachers observed that migrant children and local children were separated in some activities in the same school: ‘[In my class] migrant children do not like to play with other classmates’. (female, aged 26 years)

Inferior teaching conditions of MCS

Many teachers we interviewed considered that both the extra fees and the stigma faced by migrant children at public schools were the main reasons for the emergence of MCS, as these schools could provide affordable education and a comfortable learning environment to a growing number of migrant children. However, the teachers also expressed concerns that conditions in the schools were inferior because of the lack of qualified teachers and adequate

equipment and facilities as a result of lacking governmental recognition and support. One MCS teacher described the conditions in her school:

> The educational facilities in our school are not good. We have only 16 computers so far and they are the 686 model that finally replaced the old 386 [computer]. These computers were donated by an American educator when he visited our school.
>
> (female, aged 45 years)

Another MCS teacher told the interviewer:

> Regarding the teaching condition [in our school], it is not great, but it is better than other MCS. There are many other schools with worse teaching conditions than ours.
>
> (female, aged 28 years)

Because of the lack of qualified teachers, some MCS had to rely on volunteers or retired teachers for teaching:

> Last year our English classes and social science classes were all taught by students from your university [Beijing Normal University]. There are many students from other universities who have also provided teaching support voluntarily.
>
> (female MCS teacher, aged 45 years)

> … almost all our primary school teachers were local retired teachers, and most middle school teachers were migrants who were teachers in their hometown.
>
> (male MCS teacher, aged 40 years)

A female MCS teacher reported that the teaching load in her school was very heavy and that a shortage of teachers was an ongoing problem for MCS. Each teacher at MCS often had to teach multiple subjects and the work was usually overloaded.

Instability of schooling

Because of the migratory style of their families and the difficulties encountered by migrant children in urban schools, many migrant children changed schools frequently, especially when their families returned to their home of origin or decided to send children back to their hometown for schooling. Most teachers considered the frequent change of schools a serious issue among migrant children:

> Mobility of migrant children [in my school] is a serious issue. For example, in my class, seven to eight students disappeared suddenly.
>
> (male public school teachers, aged 55 years)

A similar situation happened at MCS:

> He [migrant child] is here this semester, but next semester he may drop out.
>
> (female MCS teacher, aged 70 years)

One public school teachers offered the opinion that the main reason for migrant children quitting school was the migrant parents' poor attitude towards schooling. Many migrant

parents allowed their children to decide whether or not to continue with their studies. If those children did not wish to go to school, their parents allowed them to simply quit and help the family make a living. One public school teachers concerned about the consequences of such dropouts:

> After dropping out they do not have anything to do and sometimes they may meet undesirable people in the society and then they themselves go on to become undesirable elements in the society.
>
> (male, aged 25 years)

Limited parental involvement in schooling

Many teachers reported limited parental involvement in the schooling of migrant children and attributed this lack of such involvement to parents' stressful lifestyle and being busy making ends meet in the city. One MCS teacher provided an example of parents selling vegetables:

> [The parents] get up at four a.m. or five a.m. to go to the wholesale market. They have to go to the morning market at six a.m. They cannot return home until it is dark. They are so tired and have no time [to take care of their children]. Moreover, migrant parents do not know how to educate their children.
>
> (male, aged 40 years)

Other teachers also concurred with the view that most migrant parents had poor parenting skills:

> Migrant parents are genuine in their support for schools. However, they have at best a weak ability to help their children with school work.
>
> (male public school teachers, aged 55 years)

Some teachers complained that many parents of migrant children did not even have time to attend parents' meetings held by the school:

> … teachers had to inform the parents at least 6 months prior to each meeting. In spite of that, at best only 50% and at worst only 20–30% of parents of migrant children attended the meeting. It is difficult to make contact with the parents. Sometimes, the telephone number is wrong.
>
> (male MCS teacher, aged 40 years)

Some teachers reported that even home visits did not work for some parents:

> It is difficult for us to do home visits. One time I tried to make an appointment with parents of a migrant child on a weekend for a home visit, and I was told: 'Teacher, please don't come. I have still not sold our rice and vegetables. What will I do if my vegetables get rotten and I cannot sell my rice?'.
>
> (female MCS teacher, aged 70 years)

Suboptimal family environment for child learning

In addition to limited parental involvement in the schooling of their children, some teachers perceived that the physical family environments of migrant families were not optimal for child learning. Some teachers believed that the substandard living conditions of many migrant families had affected negatively migrant children's school performance and subsequently their educational aspirations. One public school teacher shared her observations during home visits:

> I have visited students' families. Many students do not have space for studying. Some families are stall-keepers. The stall is just outside their living place … I visited a family last week. The parents and the child, along with several helpers, lived in a small room of 20 square meters. The child had to study in this environment … In another example, some children were woken up by the parents coming home late from work and talking with their helpers. The children did not get adequate sleep and in the following day were unable to concentrate in class … this influences their ability to study and also affects their health.
>
> (female, aged 30 years)

Another MCS teacher offered similar observations:

> Most migrant families live in a very small rented room. There are about three to four family members in the small room, and it is very crowded.
>
> (female, aged 28 years)

Issues with educational advancement of migrant children

Teachers from MCS reported that several problems could hamper the migrant children's future educational opportunity such as high school or college admission. One problem is the lack of verifiable school records. Migrant children do not have permission to take high school or university entrance examinations in urban areas (because of their *hukou* status) and have to return to their home of origin to take these examinations. Because most MCS are unlicensed, their school records may not be considered legitimate. In addition, migrant children change schools frequently without any formal record-keeping, and both attendance and/or grades may not be well documented. As one MCS teacher explained:

> They [migrant children] move in and move out without any formalities and any record.
>
> (female, aged 45 years)

Another MCS teacher shared her worry:

> I am not sure whether they [migrant children] are allowed to participate in the higher school entry examination … I heard that our children might not be allowed entry in some schools since they require the study records. As our school does not have governmental permission, migrant children's scores are not official, and therefore may not be accepted. We are still not sure about it.
>
> (female, aged 45 years)

Discussion

The schooling of migrant children in China has been a serious social issue in recent years that has challenged educational policy makers and local governments. Despite efforts by the Chinese government to promote equal access to the nine-year compulsory education for all children in China, rural migrant children continue to face difficulties in obtaining equal access to schools in urban destinations. The results of this qualitative study suggest multiple barriers for migrant children's equal access to quality education at urban destinations. Given the important role of education in child development and societal socioeconomic development, these barriers and resultant educational disadvantages of migrant children are likely to have negative long-term consequences for migrant children, their families and society. The issues of schooling among migrant children deserve further attention by educators and policy-makers.

Most of the barriers for migrant children's equal access to quality education are part of the manifestations of systematic stigmatization and discrimination against migrant families in urban areas (Li, 1996; Li et al., 2007). These stigmatizations reflect the unfair treatment and social inequality at various levels that include government (e.g. social benefit system) and local public schools (unwillingness or extra fees schedule to enroll migrant children). While the government's recent efforts (Xinhua News Agency, 2004) will help to reduce or eliminate certain structural barriers for schooling of migrant children in urban areas, it will take a long time to reduce and eliminate the cultural and social stigmatization against rural migrants and their children. Therefore, addressing the schooling issue is a major priority for the government and local community to promote further the elimination of various forms of stigmatization and discrimination against migrants and their children in urban areas.

There are several potential limitations to this study. First, participation was limited to teachers and did not include migrant children and their parents. Future studies need to explore similar issues from the perspectives of migrant children and their parents. Secondly, the participants were recruited from one metropolis of China based on convenience sampling. In addition, the sample size was relatively small. Both these factors may limit our ability to generalize the findings to other areas of China. In spite of these limitations, this qualitative study has several important implications for migrant children's schooling.

First, the Chinese government should reform the household registration system by breaking the dual system of rural vs. urban household registration, which has been a fundamental factor impeding adequate schooling of migrant children in urban areas. The dual household registration system makes it difficult for rural migrants to access the government welfare system equally in urban areas. More importantly, the dual system provides a structural justification for systematic stigmatization against migrant children and their families. While the Chinese government has relaxed the restriction on population movement in recent decades in order to benefit urban development, it is time to reform the household registration system for migrants to benefit fully from the economic development to which they have contributed.

Secondly, the Chinese government should further promote equal educational opportunity for all children, regardless of the origin of their household registration. Such efforts should include the opening up of local public schools for migrant children and the elimination of extra charges for migrant children to attend local public schools. Equal education efforts should also go beyond the nine-year compulsory education and make high school and college education equally accessible and affordable to migrant children.

Thirdly, the Chinese government should increase support and provide necessary regulatory oversight to the MCS. Because of continuous urbanization in China, it is anticipated that the number of migrants and migrant children will continue to increase in urban areas. Although MCS has been, and most probably will continue to be, a temporary solution for affordable education for migrant children, most of these MCS are currently unlicensed and unregulated. The government should consider these MCS as complementary venues to public schools and provide regulatory oversight and necessary financial support to maximize their benefit to migrant children and their families.

Fourthly, the Chinese government should promote the socioeconomic well-being of migrants in urban areas and improve their living and working conditions. The economic hardship faced by migrant families and inferior living conditions may impair migrant children's ability to focus on school work. Therefore, the improvement in socioeconomic well-being will not only help to eliminate stigmatization against migrants but will also increase parents' involvement in their children's education. Such efforts will also provide migrant children with the hope of a better future and help migrants and their children to integrate effectively into urban communities. In addition, the local community and schools should develop necessary training programmes for migrant parents regarding parenting skills and promote parental involvement in the education of their children.

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