

Migrant Children Education Problems In China: The Existing and Possible Influences and Solutions

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Abstract: Educational exclusion of rural-urban migrant children, especially in developing countries, has been one of the most frequently discussed issues in contemporary education. China can be taken as a representative example of this. Due to its large population, the dual “hukou” policy of rural or urban resident identities, and household registration system, China has such a group of parents who are with their migrant children and usually do low-paid work. They live in temporary residency and their children receive poor education. This has caused a dual-track system. The extent of this issue in China is complicated, and has thus wide discussion from researchers and academics over the decades. This article introduces the current educational situation of Chinese rural-urban migrant children, and apply existing theories to illustrate the influences of this issue and the necessity of solving it, proposing possible solutions to this problem.

Keywords: urban, rural, policy, migrant children

1. The Current Education of Chinese Migrant Children in Urban China

Under the staggering development of urbanisation and the market economy in China, over 100 million workers have left their rural homes to join the urban labor market in the past two decades. As a result, the urban public school system has been confronted with a great challenge caused by the increasing number of migrant children [1][2]. Moreover, these schools, which, in many cities, are in the charge of local educational institutions, only take responsibility for local children and thus migrant children usually receive informal education of relatively low quality in private and unregulated schools. In addition to the creation of two streams of education, the phenomenon is likely to worsen the rigidity of social stratification and reproduce marginality through generations [1][3][4].

Meanwhile, the Chinese dual “hukou” and household registration system has exerted an influence on the problem [5]. While citizenship is generally defined as inclusion in a whole community with a series of responsibilities and rights [6][7], in China it is defined by the urban housing registration and cultural practices [8][9].

Such aspects are often difficult for migrant children to obtain due to common financial disadvantages and cultural differences. Thus, urban children enjoy many resources not available to migrant families, including the ability to send their children to public schools with low fees [1].

In addition to the failures of certain policies and the worsening effect of others, the rapid economic development witnessed by China over the decades has been a focus for both central and local authorities. As each province and city in China has their own features and economic situations, the central government has set up new policies of decentralisation and encouraged local authorities to design and implement their particular policies, including in the educational department [10].

However, these are influenced by the prioritisation of the economy, causing local authorities to attempt to combine education with market needs, meaning schools with high educational quality and abundant resources setting high fees which most migrant families cannot afford [10][11][12]. Despite the central government issuing policy guidelines calling upon local authorities to solve this issue, such calls are largely ineffective [1]. This can be attributed to a lack of requirement to reverse market and economic development-based policies and the greater priority given to them over education, leading educational policies to regard economic development as its base, and reluctant to change these policies due to the increased financial burden it would cause [10].

2. The Influences and the Need for a Solution

The difficulties faced by migrant children could lead to a widening in the gap between rural and urban populations with a community, in particular in terms of institutional, financial, and cultural exclusions [1].

Institutional exclusion is a result of certain institutional processes in which individuals are excluded by the actions of certain agents or powerful 'insider' groups [13]. In Chinese urban areas, the institutional exclusion faced by migrants is the result of the disadvantages caused by the housing and citizenship systems [1]. In terms of economic exclusion, the largest contributor is the requirement of migrant children to pay expensive fees to study in public schools. However, most migrant parents usually received poor education before entering the urban areas and thus struggle to gain employment in all but low-paid jobs here. Thus, they are unable to pay the fees [10]. Finally, cultural exclusion is a consequence of not only the place of origin but also the existence and use of migrant schools which lead to lost chances to communicate and interact with urban peers to gain and share information, knowledge and learning resources [1].

Such exclusion can be interpreted by Bourdieu's social capital theory [14]. Social capital can be understood as social connections, about whom one knows and the social circle one is in, creating a social base from which to advance themselves due to the poor and segregated education they receive [14].

In addition, Bourdieu noted the aspects of cultural and institutionalised capital, defining the former as the skills and knowledge which are mainly recognised and demonstrated by qualifications and the latter as capital associated with specific 'fields' in society [15]. Seeing the association between these different forms of capital, for instance, in the institutional field of academia which involves a combination of institutional capital (in the form of qualifications) and cultural capital, Bourdieu concluded that social, institutional and cultural capital could transform into certain forms of each other as they are mutually associated [15]. This means the gap between migrant and urban children will be widened since the former do not possess the same capitals as the latter, leading to a greater advantage of one group over another [15].

There is a need to address this issue as in general, a society develops best as a whole. As such, educationists indicate there is meaning in considering everyone in pedagogy and believe no one should be an outsider. However, as Wang warned, the problem faced by Chinese urban migrants in education is not merely an educational issue, but rather has the potential to influence children multidimensionally, depriving migrant children of gender, economic, and political rights, a loss of good educational opportunities, self-development and future employability [1].

Social capital is a key feature of social life, in which norms, trust and networks are deeply involved enabling individuals to act together more effectively for the pursuit of the shared goals [16]. Woolcock notes three levels of using social capital, referring to (i) to bond individuals in similar situations, such as within the family, or between close friends and neighbours, (ii) to bridge more distant people, such as acquaintances and workmates, and (iii) to link individuals outside of the community, enabling people to share a wider range of resources within the community to help those outsiders [17]. This process, however, is impeded when disadvantaged groups have economic, cultural, and political barriers [18]. While the features defining a whole group and community such as economic status and race have meaning, individual freedom and rights are vital. Thus, by denying or discouraging migrant children from engaging with their local peers, the Chinese education system and the policies behind it deprive them of this key integration into mainstream society, constantly 'othering' them and increasing the segregation and potential discrimination.

3. Possible Solutions

3.1. Dual "hukou" system and housing registration should be changed

As Vegas and Petrow indicated, the expansion of educational opportunities has not moderated the social inequality and poverty apparent in China and despite the increasing amount of migrant schools in urban locations, the problem has not been effectively tackled [19]. As a result, the failure can be more strongly attributed to their quality rather than their quantity and range.

Currently, human capital theory and human rights are the two dominant approaches to

understanding and exploring educational quality [20].

The human capital theory identifies rural/urban inequality as a significant factor within social inequality as people from rural areas have relatively poor socio-economic backgrounds, reproducing inequality through generations. It sees human development as a multidimensional and interactive issue within economics, politics and culture [20]. From this perspective, it is clear Chinese dual-track policies such as the “*hukou*” and housing registration systems are worsening the problem and putting migrant children from rural areas in disadvantageous conditions.

Therefore, these policies must be changed and include consideration for migrant children to enable them to receive an education equal to that of their urban peers.

3.2. Extra fees for migrant children studying in public school should be cancelled

Some related policies within China have not offered effective solutions to the problem. In Beijing, China’s capital, for example, the recent policy allows migrant children to study in public schools with their urban peers, but with the caveat of extra fees [1], statistics show the fear of which puts off many migrant children from studying in public schools, despite wanting to [10].

Moreover, while some urban educational authorities have implemented new types of schools combining inclusive public schools and segregated migrant schools, these schools only allow a limited range of migrant children enter whose families are in high socioeconomic status [21]. Whereas the establishment of migrant schools by the government which require lower fees than other public institutions, particularly for migrant students [1], impedes migrant children as they are further persuaded away from studying in mainstream urban schools with their urban peers. In addition, they are often unregulated, informal, of poor educational quality, and usually located in the outskirts of cities due to the lack of authoritative attention and financial support [1][22].

Therefore, no extra high fees should be required in urban public schools for migrant children. Instead, the government and related educational institutions ought to reduce the normal fees for them or set up a scholarship to help migrant children who are in poor conditions.

3.3. Public schools and teachers should accept migrant students and treat them equally

The establishment of combined schools, while a positive step, has the same issue as the entrance of migrant students in mainstream public schools with high costs [21]. Thus, they cannot solve the issue at it ignores the needs of those migrant families with low incomes and may contribute to capability deprivation, usually via reproducing existing inequalities [20], and issues such as transfer experiences and cultural discrimination [1]. Hence, finding a new way to enable migrant students to attend local public schools and to study with local peers would be the most effective method of promoting equality. In this way, urban China has much space for development, and thus has a responsibility to make greater efforts to establish a more inclusive education system. This does not simply mean enabling an atmosphere of diversity, promoting instructional programmes for each student’s development, and also building up relationships between teachers and students [23].

Moreover, some teachers hold indifferent attitudes towards migrant children without sympathy or care [23], with issues potentially being caused by teachers’ stereotypical impression of migrant children and sometimes showing discomfort with such diversity. This attitude could negatively influence these students’ learning motivation and confidence [24][25]. From this perspective, specific training for teachers and other school staff on this issue should be designed.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this article mainly analyses three problems of the issue (the “*hukou*” system, high tuition fees for migrant children in public schools and urban cultural exclusion of them), explain the necessity of solving the problem and raises three possible solutions to the issue.

While this article discusses specifically Chinese urban migrant children and their educational difficulties in terms of failed politics, the influences of the issue and the need to solve it, and some potential solutions, such debate could have international significance. This is particularly the case in certain developing countries and regions where there are sometimes similar policies and phenomena as seen in China [1][26] [27].

However, in terms of the solutions provided above, there are some limitations. For instance, there could be some potential trouble when applying the theories in practice. Additionally, this article focuses on the migrant children's educational rights and does not consider the effect of such solutions on the current local students.

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