

Towards equity: overcoming educational disparities faced by China's migrant and left-behind children

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Abstract: China's hukou system used to create significant inequalities in access to education and social resources for left-behind and migrant children. This paper addresses these challenges and how Chinese governments have done over the years to eliminate the policy and social discrimination. Also, the paper proposes essential acts to improve the situation, such as enhancing policy support, prohibiting discriminatory sponsorship fees, and completion of laws.

Key words: educational inequality; hukou; left-behind and migrant children

1 Introduction

With the continuous progress of China's social urbanization, a large amount of rural surplus labor has flowed into cities. This leads to tens of millions of "rural left-behind children" who stay at hometown with their relatives and "rural to urban migrant children" who enter the city with parents. According to the sample data of China's Sixth Population Census in 2010, there are 61 million left-behind children and 35 million migrant ones, with a trend of growth.

Hukou is a unique household registration system in China, indicating that a person is a resident of a certain area, and recording identity information. People who leave their registered permanent residence are regarded as migrants, and will not enjoy same benefits as locals [1]. The special hukou system in China itself divides children based on their area (rural or urban) and offer distinct treatments to two types of children to some extent, causing rural-urban inequality.

China's left-behind children and migrant children face both policy and non-policy discrimination in education and social discrimination at school because of their rural or non-local hukou. But their rights are now receiving more attention and support from governments and society.

2 Improved policy support

2.1 No longer rejected by public schools for non-local or rural hukou

With the rise of migrant workers, more children are moving to cities with their parents. Urban schools have historically been insufficient to accommodate these children, often prioritizing local students [2]. As a result, many migrant children faced discrimination and delays in school enrollment, with some forced to attend under-resourced migrant schools. This educational inequality further exacerbated social unfairness [3].

In response, the Chinese government has taken steps to address the issue by integrating the education of migrant children into local education plans and assessing schools based on their inclusion efforts. For example, Ningxia No. 7

Primary School, where over 29% of students are children of migrant workers, has implemented special support programs. In Guangxi province, 93.1% of students enrolled in public schools in 2023, with additional subsidies provided to support migrant children.

In conclusion, the urban-rural dual household registration system is becoming less of a barrier for migrant children seeking education in cities.

2.2 Sponsorship fee is prohibited

The education expenditure of migrant workers' children seemed to be quite large, which was mainly reflected in the high sponsorship fees. Another way to enroll in public school was to pay a higher sponsorship fee. Wang et.al (2018) indicate that this discrimination has nothing to do with the government's policy of restricting the inflow of immigrants. Public schools collected sponsorship fee as compensation for local children, which was another form of rejection to migrant children. The sponsorship fee is usually a heavy burden for migrant workers.

To ensure fair access for this special group, governments have successively issued a series of laws, regulations and policy documents to prohibit the sponsorship fee. The auditing of the budget execution in the education sector has been strengthened, illegal fees and charges must be disclosed in audit reports. And more funds are allocated to compulsory education.

3 Social discrimination from teachers and classmates should be changed

3.1 A stereotype in school: left-behind children = problem students

Previous research has claimed that left-behind children are more likely to have psychological problems and have higher risks of committing crimes [4]. Thus a stereotype of "problematic left-behind children" has gradually taken shape.

However, later research also shows that the problems of left-behind children tend to be exaggerated. A research team from Beijing Normal University pointed out that over a period of time, school administrators, teachers and some researchers have exaggerated the negative effects of left-behind children with a large number of negative descriptions, and the tendency of left-behind children to be discriminated is more obvious.

Generally speaking, there is no significant difference in mental health between left-behind students and other students [5]. Although they experience more hardships, bitterness, pain and tears, they are still growing strongly. As a group, their mental health level is the same as ordinary students. They should not be discriminated simply because they have no parents' guardians.

3.2 Migrant children are inferior to local students

Although migrant children can enter the public school, they may have trouble adapting to new environment. A study has found that up to 75% of migrant children feel ridiculed and satirized in their daily lives, the primary reason is "I am a foreigner" (67.3%) [6]. And other reports indicate that migrant adolescents consider chronic incidents of discrimination as the most stressing factors influencing their studies and lives [7]. This discrimination has created obstacles for migrant children's urban adaptation, preventing them from smoothly integrating into urban life.

We believe that migrant students are often discriminated against by urban students for a variety of reasons, such as low socioeconomic status, accent, bad appearance and behavior [8]. Therefore, they are always rejected and excluded. This has a negative impact on the psychology of migrant children, which in turn will affect the overall development of them [9].

4 The necessary improvements

To combat policy and societal discrimination, three key measures are needed: reforming the household registration system, adjusting educational funding, and enacting relevant laws.

4.1 Accelerating the elimination of urban-rural barriers

Reforming the household registration system is not to completely cancel it. The core is to gradually remove the institutional barriers such as employment, medical care, housing, and education, completely break the urban-rural dual economic system that guides the orderly flow of surplus rural labor forces between urban and rural areas [10]. But this is a national policy, which cannot be changed in decades, and more solutions need to be explored by experts.

4.2 Investments in migrant-children schools

Indeed there are limited public schools to accommodate all suitable students. Therefore, schools for children of migrant workers, a special product of an unreasonable education system, need more financial support from the government and other related policy preferences. Strengthening supervision and management of these schools are of great importance. The governments and the education departments should give support and urge them to continuously improve the conditions; and those schools with low teaching quality, poor running conditions, and high safety risks, especially those operating illegally, should be promptly given cancellation and banning. However, at the same time of "revocation", we should also do a good job of "grooming" and rationally divert students.

"The inflow of the government must integrate all aspects of resources to ensure that migrant children receive normal compulsory education." The State Council claimed in the *Opinions on Further Improving Compulsory Education for Children of Migrant Workers in Urban Areas* in 2020. This indicates that more investment shall be given.

4.3 More completed laws

There is already a well-established legal system at the level of law-making, but law-enforcement, judicial, and supervisory systems also need to be established and improved simultaneously. At the same time, efforts must be made to promote the establishment and improvement of a relief system for the education guarantee of these children. Setting up institutions with simplified procedures can provide them with more efficient educational assistance. The essential purpose behind it is to enable them to receive education equally, and judicial support is the legal proof of the right to education protection for left behind and migrant children.

5 Conclusion

In general, this article talks about the special type of education discrimination based on the hukou system in China. Although the situation is far improved by now, more positive actions should be taken to solve the problem. Central government has already released the issue and endeavored to solve the problem. While balancing social warfare, many provinces have provided more financial input to ensure that migrant and left-behind children can receive high-quality compulsory education, and a sound supervision mechanism of policy implementation has also been built.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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