

# EDUCATION PROBLEMS WITH URBAN MIGRATORY CHILDREN IN CHINA

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*In China, due to the Residence Registration System and Segmented Governmental Management of Education, the educational problems with urban migratory children have been overlooked for a long time. The results are, on one hand, these children have no access to Public-Funded School because they are not categorized as local residents; on the other hand the illegal Schools for Migrant Workers' Children exist in many cities. The satisfactory solution to the problem will be a win-win process: the promotion of migratory children's education will not only benefit this minority group and the communities in which they live, but also contribute to the healthy development of the society and country.*

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In China, as the economy develops, there is an ever-increasing migratory urban population. It includes a considerable proportion of children. Of the approximately 120 million migratory individuals, 2.4–3.6 million are school-age children. Because this floating population is large, highly mobile, and difficult to control, educating migrant children is becoming a prominent problem. How to improve these children's educational environment and integrate them into mainstream education within the context of China's nine-year compulsory education policy is a challenge.

I made contact with these children for about half a year as a social worker. During this period I experienced their hardships and happiness, realized their agonies and expectations. I hope this article can conduct a meaningful exploration of the educational problems facing migratory children. When the problem is recognized and emphasized by more organizations, the solution will be closer.

All citizens of the People's Republic of China are required to complete nine years of education. However, migrant children are usually excluded from both the rural and urban education systems. This damages the principles of obligation, equality, and comprehensiveness of primary education (Hui Qin, 2001).

According to Article 2 of the *Interim Measures on Schooling for Children Among the Floating Population* (Chinese National Education Committee, 1998), migratory children are defined as follows: children between the ages of 6 and 14 living with parents or guardians in a temporary location for more than half a year, who have the ability to study. Migrant workers cluster in both rural and urban areas. They live in simple houses and tents, densely packed, with poor sanitary conditions, and often lacking basic safety. More important, the children have different expectations from their parents. Forced to live in the fringe of society, they may feel treated unequally. This could generate resistance to society.

Migratory families frequently have more than one child. The traditional belief in the superiority of boys over girls is deep-rooted, and awareness of birth-control is limited. This leads to larger families. I found that when a family has two or more children, one is usually a boy. Parents will spend most of their money on him and place high expectations on him. Girls will have less attention and opportunity to go to school.

Because compulsory education in China is carried out by local governments and follows a system of top-down administration, the distribution and scale of schools are based on the distribution of permanent residents in the locality. The influx of large numbers of migrant children exerts great pressure on local primary education. The number of planned admissions is greatly exceeded, thus increasing the local financial burden.

Currently, migrant children are admitted into schools in two ways. They either pay normal school fees and enter public schools or they study in unlicensed schools set up for migrant children (Ke Deng, 2001). According to Article 7 of *Interim Measures on Schooling for Children among the Floating Population* ((Chinese National Education Committee, 1998) migrant children should enter public primary or secondary schools. The *Decision of the State Council on Reform and Development of Basic Education* (Chinese State Council, 2001) says: "The solution about the reception of compulsory ed-

ucation for migrant children must be emphasized. It should be mainly under the control of local government, in mainly public primary or secondary schools so as to protect, through different ways, the rights of migratory children in receiving compulsory education."

From the above documents, it can be seen that the education of migrant children is mainly carried out in local schools. However, the reality is, when receiving these children, the schools require many levels of checking and verification, requiring varieties of credentials (e.g. the Three Certificates: employment, health, and temporary residence certification). This potentially raises admission requirements and denies entry for most migrant children.

When migrant children go to public schools, their parents have to pay 500 RMB (60.2 US dollars) in tuition fees each term, plus 1,000 RMB (120.5 US dollars) for selection of the school, and 1,000–30,000 RMB (3614.5 US dollars) as sponsorship. According to statistics from Dr. Han Jailing of the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, the monthly income of the 31,000 migrant families in Beijing averages around 1,000 RMB. About 20 percent of these families get less than 500 RMB per month, while the income of about 43 percent varies between 500 to 1000 RMB. For the majority of migrant families, these fees are impossibly high.

Schools for Migrant Workers' Children are a response to this situation. They have lower fees (normally 350–500 RMB per term), simple admissions requirements, and are located near migrant communities. However, they have many problems which will be discussed later

It is more difficult from migrant children to enter secondary than primary schools. Local government regulations require them to return to their hometowns when they reach this level. They would thus have to leave their parents. Furthermore, the local ministries of education do not have the power to set up secondary schools. In many places, therefore, the nine-year compulsory education is really only six years or less.

Migrant workers are mostly engaged in building or trading in markets and are paid very little for their labor. They cannot provide their children with the same educational benefits that normal city residents can. They are often poorly educated themselves. Therefore, while they may wish their children to pursue a

different life from theirs and enjoy a better social status, they are, in my experience, often short-sighted regarding their children's need for education. They are also likely to use physical violence against their children.

The Schools for Migrant Workers' Children are not integrated into the compulsory education system of the country. The fact that they exist in large numbers proves that they are meeting a need. However, this cannot conceal their problems.

Setting up such a school requires limited investment. Simple houses or tents in a field are sufficient. A legal title is not required. They are not subject to the laws and regulations of local government and cannot rely on the control or support of local social service organizations. There are no common standards they must follow.

On the other hand, according to Article 16 in *Regulation on Running Schools by Private Persons and Organizations* issued in October, 1997 by the National Ministry of Education, those applying to run educational institutes should submit documents to auditing and approving government departments including: 1) an application declaration; 2) the qualifications of applicants; 3) the qualifications of principals, teachers, and other personnel; 4) amount and sources of funding; and 5) regulations and future plans for the institute. Assembling these documents is a complex process, therefore school administrators usually ignore these procedures.

Furthermore, these schools have mediocre equipment, poor faculty, and weak management. Their students usually lack the Three Certificates. Many are in the area illegally. All of these factors make it impossible for schools to obtain legal status.

Because initial investment in the schools is small and little administration is required, a profit can be made even from the modest school fees (350–500 RMB or 36.1 US dollars per term). Fees are sometimes collected monthly and parents can sometimes bargain over the amount. Payment in arrears is generally allowed. This is one reason for their popularity among the migrant population.

Since schools are concerned primarily with profit, they rarely communicate with other schools with which they may be in competition. They are also driven to keep costs low. Housed in aban-

doned storehouses or residences, they have no reading rooms or libraries, no sports facilities, and no laboratories. Even basic equipment such as compasses and protractors is often lacking. The normal conduct of classes is adversely affected.

School administrators are provincial people. The majority have no more than intermediate education and little teaching experience. Some principals are even illiterate. They are far from meeting the standards set out in the *Regulation on Running of Schools by Private Persons* (Chinese National Education Committee, 1997) which requires that principals be of high moral standards, have more than five years teaching experience, and special training in administration.

Administrators select teachers who will be reliable, usually relatives or people from their hometowns. Most have only senior high school or polytechnic backgrounds and no teaching experience. Therefore, they lack teaching certificates. Teachers usually regard this as a temporary job and frequently move on when they find other opportunities. An exception to this pattern is the hiring of retired local teachers. They have skill, knowledge, and experience but are extremely rare.

Teachers in migrant schools do not have access to further training in the city's Teachers' Schools, so they cannot improve their knowledge and skills. They have no supervision and their performance is not evaluated by anyone. Thus, the education they can provide is minimal. They focus on Chinese and mathematics. Music, physical education, art, and vocational subjects are taught in a slapdash manner or completely ignored. Moral education and extra-curricular activities can be totally absent.

The ultimate cause of the problem is the Resident Registration System and the malfunctioning of Segmented Governmental Management of Education. Resident Registration gives citizens different social statuses. Children who do not have a local registered residence cannot enjoy the right to education even if they were born there. Even if they can qualify for local public schools, they will have to pay higher tuition fees because they have no registered local residence.

In the current state of compulsory education, the policy of Segmented Management of Education makes primary education the responsibility of county and village financial departments.

Nine years of education is compulsory and local government must pay for it. But local governments are not required to take any responsibility for migrant children. Since migrant children have no registered residence anywhere, they exist in a vacuum. They are no one's responsibility.

There are both short-term and long-term solutions to this problem. In the short term, public schools could open their doors to migrant children without charging extra fees. Migrant workers have paid taxes and are entitled to equal education for their children. Public schools often have under-utilized facilities and resources, so this should not be a hardship.

The government should become involved in the regulation and management of Schools for Migrant Workers' Children. They should provide support for substandard schools and give better ones legal status. Registration standards may have to be lowered a bit. The overall goal is to improve education for all the nation's children; well-educated citizens are the builders of a promising nation.

Because Segmented Governmental Management of Education encourages local governments to ignore migrants, a funding system should be devised which requires cooperation among units. The hometown of migrant families should contribute to the funding of schools in the migrant centers. Common standards should be established. Student records should be shared. Private donations can be solicited to support migrant schools and provide training for teachers in these schools. Volunteer teaching assistants could also be sought.

Providing migrant children the opportunity to receive compulsory education cannot be done by any Ministry of Education in one region alone. Therefore, a long term goal is establish cooperation and coordination among government departments concerned with public security, planning, finance, personnel, and social security. Laws, policies, and regulations must be made consistent.

The current Residence Registration System must be changed. Fair and equal competition between urban and rural regions should be guaranteed. The interests of the minority groups of farmers in the migratory population must be given special attention. The importance of registered residence should be weakened

and a new registration system giving equal status to urban and rural residents should be established (Depeng Yu, 2002). This will allow the current schooling conditions of migrant children to be improved and their legal rights to education guaranteed.

The Chinese government should take active responsibility for the education of the entire population. Education should not be affected by geographical differences and social hierarchy.

Humans are selfish in nature, and what is known as kindness and wickedness does not exist. To solve the education problems of migrant children we can rely neither on human kindness—merely expecting support from kind people and organizations—nor on the government alone. The key point is to change selfishness into a system benefitting everyone. “If only mutual fighting and elimination can lead to benefits of self, then humans are worse than monsters; if only mutual helping and support can lead to benefits of self, than humans are better than angels” (Xiaoming Liang, 2002). We cannot allow migrant children to sacrifice their education just for the convenience of controlling the cities. Not just social workers but every person with a sense of responsibility and conscience should play his or her part. Nobody can be just an on-looker.

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