

Unequal Classrooms: Exploring the Educational Struggles of Migrant Children in China's Migrant Children's Schools

Shijia Mao^{1,a,*}

¹Brandeis University, Waltham, 02453, US

a. Maoshijia2006@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: As more families migrate from rural cities to urban areas in China, the education of migrant children who follow their families has become a significant issue of educational inequality. Migrant children often face systemic barriers, such as restricted access to quality education and exams, exacerbated by inadequate facilities and underqualified teachers in migrant schools. This paper investigates the educational experiences and outcomes of migrant children in schools for migrant children, focusing on facilities, teachers, academic achievement, long-term educational outcomes, and the structural challenges they face. Drawing on interviews with migrant children in Shanghai and literature reviews of case studies from migrant children's schools in Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang regions, the study highlights that the low educational quality in migrant children's schools, combined with systemic barriers such as limited access to secondary and high school exams, significantly impact their learning experiences and academic achievement. By examining these challenges, the research highlights the need for policy reforms to ensure equitable education, improve learning environment, and provide pathways for migrant children to achieve their academic and career aspirations. This study contributes to the broader discourse on urbanization and its implications for social and educational justice in China.

Keywords: China's Migrant Children, Educational Inequality, Migrant Children's School, Shanghai, Jiangsu

1. Introduction

The education of migrant children in China has always been an issue as urbanization accelerates and more rural families move to large cities for work. Due to a lack of local household registration (hukou), migrant children face significant barriers to accessing quality education in urban areas. For instance, many street offices may assign nonlocal children to some resource-poor public schools. Of these schools, some public schools may charge temporary schooling fees. Other public schools may not even admit nonlocal children. Due to these systemic school barriers and restrictions imposed by the hukou system, some migrant children choose to rely on migrant children's schools, which are schools especially built for migrant children. Yet, despite the government's efforts and intentions to provide the chance to education for migrant children, these migrant children's schools have substantial gaps in facilities, teaching quality, and student outcomes.

Existing research highlights the challenges faced by migrant children's schools. Nevertheless, most focus on a particular school's single aspect and do not focus on students' learning experiences.

This paper seeks to address these gaps by integrating the case studies of different migrant children's schools along with interviews with migrant children in Shanghai done by the author, focusing on facilities, teacher quality, students' academic performance, and long-term educational outcomes and continuity. This paper aims to provide insights for policymakers and educators about the educational inequity migrant children face, ultimately advocating for reforms to ensure equitable, high-quality education for all migrant students.

2. Status Analysis

2.1. Facilities in Migrant Schools

Teaching facilities are crucial for shaping students' learning experiences and academic outcomes. This is particularly true for migrant workers' children's schools, where noteworthy resource disparities compared to the public schools hinder academic performance and development.

2.1.1. Challenges in Infrastructure and Facilities

One of the most concerning issues is inadequate space and basic infrastructure, caused by insufficient government funding and unstable land allocation policies. For example, Liangshan Migrant Workers' Children's School in Yuhang District, Hangzhou, accommodates 1,600 students on just 11.2-acres [1]. In Yangzhou City, X Elementary School had a chance to expand its campus due to the significant increase in student population. Due to the government's decision to expand a main road in front of the school, the school was forced to shrink its campus by 600 square meters due to road expansion, resulting in the loss of key facilities such as sports, music, and game rooms [2].

Limited campus land results in overcrowded classrooms and a lack of essential facilities like clinics, playgrounds, and libraries. According to the interview this paper's author conducted, out of 25 migrant children interviewed, 40% reported libraries in their schools, while others mentioned poor-quality furniture and insufficient sports facilities. Fourteen have only basketball courts instead of an entire track field, four report shaking chairs and tables, and nine report using only whiteboards and chalkboards as their teaching materials. Another case study of migrant children's schools in Jiaying discovers that more than half of the studied migrant children's schools lack libraries. Libraries, when present, are often poorly equipped or inaccessible to students [1]. Another study conducted about Shanghai's migrant children's schools indicates the same problems in limited campus and inadequate facilities for students. Similarly, in Shanghai, of the 41 legal migrant children's schools, four use rented warehouses and factories, and one uses troop barracks. Only one of these 41 schools has an entire track field, and only 50 percent has a basketball court. Most of these schools do not have adequate sports equipment for the students. There are same issues with the clinics. Some elementary schools lack school clinics. Even if some have, they share offices with others, lacking basic medicines and medical supplies [3]. Meanwhile, another case study from H city indicates the lack of laboratories in the school. Even if the schools build the labs and purchase the experimental equipment, study finds that most equipment is still sealed and unused [4]. Some schools are still lacking multimedia facilities such as projectors [1, 4].

2.1.2. Impact on Students and Teachers

The absence of facilities significantly limits students' academic and personal growth. Without libraries, students miss opportunities for independent learning and exploration. Inadequate sports facilities and clinics compromise their physical and mental health. Studies confirm that well-equipped schools further emphasize the neglect of education that extends beyond the classroom. In contrast, schools with resources provide environments where students can thrive academically and

psychologically. Academic studies underline the psychological and educational impact of facilities on learning experiences. Well-planned facilities and infrastructure can enhance student engagement and learning activeness [5]. Meanwhile, there is a positive correlation between school facilities and students' academic achievement and learning motivation. The better the campus facilities and infrastructures, the better the academic performance and motivation of students [6, 7]. Resource-rich environments stimulate children's curiosity and foster creativity, while inadequate facilities often reduce motivation. Resource-poor environments send implicit messages to students about their place within the education system. When students see their schools lacking basic amenities or operating in poor conditions, it may negatively impact their self-esteem; on the other hand, resource-rich environments can further form a sense of belonging within the learning environment, which can lead to positive educational and developmental results [8]. For example, science labs allow students to engage in hands-on activities, which not only deepen their learning of scientific concepts and foundational skills but also build their confidence in complex subjects like physics and chemistry. This sense of empowerment is crucial for fostering a long-term interest in education and encouraging students to pursue higher academic goals. Conversely, the absence of such resources reinforces feelings of inadequacy among students, limiting their perceptions of what they can achieve academically and their actual capability.

Teachers also face challenges due to inadequate teaching facilities. In H city, only 65.3% of the teachers can use the wireless network in schools, and many schools provide only outdated or malfunctioning computers. Meanwhile, there are still 20% of the schools lack support for computers [4]. This severely hinders teachers' ability to create engaging lessons, further widening the gap in educational quality between migrant and public schools.

To address these challenges, policymakers should prioritize funding for the infrastructure of migrant children's schools. This includes funding for stable and adequate lands, such as offering preferential policies for land use, equipping classrooms with basic technologies, and ensuring access to clinics and libraries. In addition, there should also be policies addressing systemic barriers, such as funding allocation and urban planning policies, which always neglect migrant children's schools. Funding in facilities not only creates equitable educational opportunities for migrant children but also empowers them with confidence in learning.

2.2. Faculty in Migrant Schools

2.2.1. Teacher Professionalism

Teacher professionalism in migrant children's schools is significantly lower compared to public schools, directly impacting educational quality. The primary problems include teacher inexperience, inadequate training, and a lack of qualifications. Many teachers in migrant children's schools are young and inexperienced. For instance, a study in Ningbo City shows that 60% of teachers are under 35, and 88% are under 45 [9]. While younger teachers bring energy and potential creativity, their lack of teaching experience and unstable teaching styles often lead to challenges in teaching and maintaining classroom discipline. This can result in a less structured and engaging learning environment for students.

In addition, many teachers lack formal training and adequate qualifications. In Ningbo, 1.95% of teachers have only an associate degree or lower. There are also teachers who lack teaching licenses and Mandarin Certificates, which are indispensable certificates for being a formal teacher [9]. In H City's W and N districts, 66.3% of teachers hold associate diplomas or lower, with some having only secondary vocational or high school diplomas [4]. The absence of teaching licenses for 30% of teachers further widens the gap in foundational pedagogical skills for teachers in migrant children's schools. This lack of training leads teachers to rely on pre-made lesson plans found online, limiting

their ability to adapt content to the needs of migrant children. Consequently, lessons often lack structure and creativity, discouraging student engagement and critical thinking development.

Extracurricular activities are also limited in scope and effectiveness. According to the interview, one student reported that his teacher only took them out to the playground to see the leaves they learned in the science class, while the other two students said that their teachers allowed them to pick flowers and leaves in the school to make a collage. Six students reported that they mainly study in the classroom, and the only chance for extracurricular activities is during field trips. Some activities that teachers in migrant children's schools hold are not effective activities that can deepen students' learning. Though other activities might promote students' understanding of the knowledge, these activities are limited in frequency, time, and place (mainly on campus). The lack of extracurricular activities limits students' overall development. Hands-on activities, such as science experiments, art projects, and outdoor activities, which are crucial for developing curiosity, creativity, and observational skills, are rarely organized. This restricts students' holistic development and inhibits their ability to connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications.

Subject-specific professionalism is notably lacking in science, music, and physical education. For instance, only 40% of teachers in H city's W and N districts have science-related majors [4]. Many schools assign untrained teachers, such as administrative staff or language teachers, to teach science. These teachers, often unenthusiastic and unconfident, struggle to deliver effective lessons, diminishing students' interest in the subject. Similar issues exist in other subjects like music, art, and physical education, where teachers frequently lack expertise and face overwhelming workloads. In Wenzhou City, teachers are often required to teach more than 20 classes per week, including subjects outside their subject area, such as art, music, and PE [1]. This heavy workload overwhelms teachers, lowering their teaching enthusiasm and reducing the quality of education. In Wenling City, there are twice as many nonprofessional music teachers as professional ones, resulting in unprofessional teaching of the subjects. This lack of professional guidance stifles students' exploration of their interests and development of essential skills. For instance, science education requires not only theoretical knowledge in the textbook but also hands-on experimentation, which untrained teachers are often hard to facilitate properly. As a result, students miss opportunities to develop inquiry-based learning and problem-solving. Research emphasizes that teachers' professional attitudes highly influence students' interest in learning. Positive attitudes toward the subject areas can enhance student engagement and academic achievement [10]. Furthermore, studies show that teachers demonstrating enthusiasm and confidence in a subject can significantly impact students' attitudes and performance [11]. In contrast, when teachers express disinterest in the subject or ignore its importance, they send the same negative message to students, implying the devaluation of the subject and the needlessness of enthusiasm. This cycles migrant students' long-term interest in science subjects, potentially limiting their career opportunities in STEM fields.

2.2.2. Teacher Mobility

High teacher turnover further undermines the quality of education in migrant children's schools. Many teachers work on temporary contracts or as substitutes, resulting in a tenuous employment relationship [9]. These schools often become stepping stones for new graduates seeking experience before transitioning to more prestigious positions. This transient nature of employment negatively influences students' learning experiences. Teachers who view their roles as temporary are less likely to invest in innovative teaching methods to foster strong student-teacher relationships. This lack of engagement can diminish students' motivation and enthusiasm toward studying, exacerbating the educational disadvantages migrant children face.

Moreover, assigning teachers to teach subjects outside their expertise also exacerbates job dissatisfaction. For example, when Chinese language teachers are forced to teach science,

dissatisfaction grows because they do not feel prepared and lack a sense of achievement and self-actualization. This imposed responsibility to teach beyond teachers' areas of expertise not only overwhelms teachers but also increases their intention to leave these positions. The high turnover rate is detrimental to students' learning, especially in primary schools [12].

To mitigate the negative impact of high teacher mobility in migrant children's schools, it is crucial to implement targeted strategies to improve the willingness of teachers to stay. One way is to transition from temporary contracts to more stable, long-term employment agreements. Via providing competitive salaries determined by government funding, the commitment to stable jobs would encourage teachers to stay longer in their positions. Another effective strategy is to provide regular, professional training programs to equip teachers with the skills and confidence to teach effectively. For instance, organizing teachers in migrant children's schools to observe the lessons taught by prestigious, experienced teachers and promote discussions among teachers can help teachers feel more prepared and less overwhelmed, reducing dissatisfaction.

3. Outcome Analysis

3.1. Academic Performance

The academic performance of migrant children reflects a contradiction between systematic factors and individual capabilities. A study of migrant children in Shanghai demonstrates that while 24% of migrant children fall into the bottom 30% of their classes, a significant 65.7% are in the top 30%. This suggests that migrant children perform relatively well academically compared to their local peers, primarily because they often come from an exam-oriented system in their hometowns [13]. Years of practice under this system enhance their academic skills, demonstrating that migrant children do not have deficit capabilities in learning.

Nevertheless, children in migrant schools consistently underperform compared to their counterparts in public schools, with a worrying trend of further decline. This disparity illustrates the impact of systematic influences on individual differences. As previously discussed, key contributing factors include inadequate infrastructure and unprofessional teaching staff. The root cause of underachievement in migrant schools lies in their focus on survival rather than teaching quality. For example, Shanghai's population control policies drive many migrant families out of the city, causing high student turnover. To ensure their survival, school administrators need to be primarily concerned about whether schools can survive with high mobility [13]. This lack of oversight and professional supervision leads to a compromised educational experience, preventing students from fully developing their potential.

To solve the problem of underachievement, governments should address the root of the problem, ensuring that school administrators can focus on good education rather than school survival. The government should improve its funding policies and encourage migrant families to stay in the city.

3.2. Long-term Achievement

Educational continuity for migrant children is severely restricted due to systemic barriers. In Shanghai, only students with local household registration (*hukou*) are allowed to participate in the city's high school and college entrance exams. Migrant children without a local *hukou* must return to their place of household registration to take these exams [3, 13]. To be eligible for local exams, parents must obtain at least 120 points under Shanghai's household registration points system, which favors individuals with higher educational qualifications and technical skills. However, most migrant parents, often employed in low-skilled, unstable jobs such as construction labor, lack the qualifications needed to meet this threshold [14]. This economic and educational disadvantage makes it extremely difficult for migrant parents to meet the 120-point threshold, leaving their children

unable to complete twelve-year education in Shanghai. For migrant children who remain in Shanghai, their only alternative is to attend vocational secondary schools, which provide limited academic support and professional pathways [3]. This further restricts their future career and potential wage levels, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Children who return to their hometowns to participate in entrance exams also face the challenges of different educational systems. Having adapted to Shanghai's curriculum and teaching methods, these students often struggle to perform well on exams in their hometown, which are different from those in Shanghai, preventing them from reaching their full academic potential.

Indeed, whether in migrant schools or public schools, the household registration system barriers all migrant children whose parents have not earned 120 points. The poor education quality in migrant children's schools exacerbates these problems. Low teaching standards and inadequate resources contribute to their poor academic performance, leaving them less prepared for their hometown exams.

4. Conclusion

The education of migrant children remains a critical issue in China's urbanization process, revealing severe inequities in access to quality education. This research discusses the challenges migrant children face in migrant children's schools, including inadequate facilities, poor teacher professionalism, and high teacher mobility. These issues not only undermine the academic performance of migrant children but also limit their long-term educational and career opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. Policymakers should reflect on the restriction of the hukou system regarding the educational opportunities in the big cities are abundant or even surplus. The reforms to the hukou systems can further promote educational continuity by not forcing students back to their hometowns. Additionally, investments in teacher training and retention, including increasing wages and enhancing teachers' compensation and benefits, alongside improvements in teaching facilities and infrastructures, are essential for improving the quality of education in migrant children's schools. By addressing these systemic barriers, China can take significant steps toward achieving educational equity and empowering migrant children to realize and achieve their full potential.

While this study sheds light on critical issues of migrant children, it still has limitations in scope. Currently, most of the papers discussing migrant children's schools focus on the schools and systemic barriers schools barred. Nevertheless, it does not focus on students' subjective learning experiences by interviewing or surveying their feelings. Future research could focus on analyzing students' learning experiences and how the current curriculum influences students' deep learning. Future research could also adopt a longitudinal approach to assess the sustainability and effectiveness of the solutions provided to address the issues.

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