

Educational Inequality in Urban China: The Challenges of Migrant Children in Shanghai

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Abstract. Serious educational disparities can be clearly observed through the learning experiences of migrant children living in Shanghai. Even though this top-tier metropolis owns a mature and well-developed education system and has continuously popularized compulsory basic education, obvious gaps still exist between local registered students and migrant students without local hukou. Such unfair gaps are largely caused by China's household registration system, which ties most public welfare resources strictly to official residential status. Migrant children have to face many fixed obstacles when applying for public schools, including complicated extra document checks and insufficient available vacancies. A large number of them can only attend less qualified private schools or special migrant schools with weaker conditions. Inequality becomes even worse during secondary education, as strict exam participation rules break students' continuous study plans and force plenty of teenagers to move back to their hometowns unwillingly. These long-term institutional obstacles lead to unfair resource allocation, frequently interrupted school life, and blocked chances of upward social development for migrant young people. Major deep-rooted reasons include tight local government financial budgets and unreasonable unequal distribution of high-quality school resources. Several effective improvement ideas are discussed in this paper, including residence-related admission policies, looser exam thresholds, extra financial support, and stricter supervision on private migrant schools. Overall, slow, steady and continuous institutional adjustment is the most reliable way to build a fairer and more open urban education system.

Keywords: hukou system, migrant education, educational inequality, urban China, social mobility

1. Introduction

Even as one of the most modern international cities worldwide, Shanghai still cannot provide completely equal educational opportunities for all young learners. The region is famous for its outstanding teaching quality and excellent academic performance, yet migrant children from other provinces constantly face hidden difficulties in local schooling. Millions of rural laborers choose to move into big cities like Shanghai for better jobs and higher income, but their kids are often separated from equal high-quality education due to fixed institutional limits.

The core factor behind all these unequal treatments is still the hukou registration mechanism, which creates a clear invisible boundary between local citizens and floating migrant groups [1]. Under such rules, most migrant children only have narrow school choices, easily interrupted studying progress, and unpredictable future development. This paper mainly analyzes various structural restrictions inside Shanghai's current education system, long-term negative influences brought by educational inequality, and feasible policy changes that can help create a more balanced and inclusive studying environment for every student [2].

2. Background — education challenges for migrant workers' children (Shanghai)

Over the past few decades of China's rapid urbanization, metropolises like Shanghai have drawn a huge number of migrant workers from inland and less developed provincial regions. Most of these migrants relocate to urban areas in pursuit of higher salaries, more diverse job prospects, and an improved quality of life that their rural hometowns cannot offer. A considerable number of these workers bring their children along, leading to a large migrant family population residing in major cities. Even though migrant workers have made irreplaceable contributions to Shanghai's economic development through their hard work in construction, manufacturing, logistics, retail and various service sectors, their children still struggle to gain equal access to core public services, with education being the most prominent issue.

One of the root causes of this educational inequity lies in the hukou (household registration) system, which connects the entitlement to most public resources directly to an individual's official registered residential location [3, 4]. Historically, this system classified citizens into rural and urban groups, and all social welfare benefits were strictly tied to local household registration. Even though China has rolled out a series of reforms to adjust this system over the years, hukou status still plays a decisive role in determining access to public schools, medical care, housing subsidies and other social welfare services [5]. In practice, this sets up tangible barriers for migrant children who wish to enroll in Shanghai's public schools. Unlike local students, who can automatically get placed in nearby neighborhood schools based on their local hukou, migrant children are often required to submit extra paperwork, including temporary residence permits, formal labor contracts, tax payment records or proof of parents' social insurance contributions [2, 6].

These documentary requirements pose great difficulties for low-income migrant families, especially those whose parents work in informal, unstable jobs or switch employment frequently [7]. Even if migrant families manage to meet all the official application requirements, they still face huge uncertainty about their children's school placement. As a result, migrant children have far less stable access to compulsory education compared to their local peers.

While national education policies have gradually expanded access to compulsory education and lifted some of the previous restrictive rules, obvious educational inequities still persist. Migrant children in Shanghai continue to suffer from disadvantages in school admission, access to high-quality teaching resources and long-term academic development opportunities. For this reason, Shanghai serves as a crucial case study to reveal how institutional frameworks can perpetuate educational inequality, even in one of China's most economically prosperous and internationally developed cities.

3. Inequality in access to public education resources — data, policies, and impacts

3.1. Scale of the issue (data)

The scale of educational inequality facing migrant children in Shanghai is striking, as this group makes up a considerable share of the city's total student body. By 2023, non-local hukou students accounted for more than 40% of the city's compulsory education student population, with earlier estimates placing the number of school-age migrant children at roughly 320,000 [1, 3]. These statistics reflect that migrant children are not a peripheral minority, but a core component of Shanghai's education system.

This large migrant student population places substantial operational pressure on public schools, particularly in districts with concentrated migrant communities. Beyond school-level pressures, such inequities carry broad social significance, as they shape long-term life prospects for hundreds of thousands of young people [8]. When a sizable share of the city's youth is denied equal access to quality education, the issue evolves beyond an individual family concern to become a systemic challenge for sustainable urban development and social cohesion.

Yet despite their significant presence in local schools, migrant children continue to face structural barriers to equitable educational resources. Simply residing in Shanghai does not guarantee them equal educational treatment or opportunities. This reality underscores that institutional regulations, rather than population size alone, play a dominant role in determining access to fair and quality education for migrant students.

3.2. Differences in public school admission

3.2.1. Priority of local hukou students

Admission to Shanghai's public primary and middle schools is mainly determined by school district division and local hukou status. Local students with official Shanghai household registration are generally guaranteed a spot in nearby public schools within their residential zone [1]. This policy inherently favors families with local hukou and stable housing in well-resourced school districts.

In sharp contrast, migrant children have to fulfill a series of additional administrative requirements before their school applications are even reviewed. These mandatory documents include valid temporary residence permits, proof of formal legal employment, social insurance payment records, and certificates proving long-term residency in Shanghai [2, 6]. For many low-income migrant families, the process of collecting, updating and maintaining all these documents is time-consuming, costly and extremely burdensome.

This creates an unequal starting line in public school admission from the very beginning. Local children have a clear, protected path to enter the public education system, while migrant children have to navigate complicated and uncertain bureaucratic procedures. This reflects that educational inequity is often rooted in administrative rules, rather than overt discriminatory policies.

3.2.2. Limited public school seats

Even when migrant families complete all formal application procedures and meet every requirement, their children are not guaranteed admission to public schools. Places in public schools—especially those in high-demand districts with top-ranked schools—are extremely limited. Since local hukou students are given absolute priority, migrant children can only be admitted if there are leftover vacancies after all eligible local students are placed.

This shortage of school seats intensifies competition among families and deepens residential educational inequity. Wealthier families can afford apartments in coveted school districts, while low-income migrant households have almost no such options. As a result, many migrant families have no choice but to send their children to low-quality private schools, underfunded schools specifically for migrant children, or send their kids back to their rural hometowns, leading to long-term family separation.

In short, the scarcity of public school seats amplifies the inequity caused by hukou-based priority policies. Even if formal inclusive policies are put in place, true educational equality cannot be achieved if public school capacity remains insufficient to meet the demand.

3.3. Inequality in secondary education

3.3.1. Examination eligibility requirements

Systemic educational inequity becomes even more pronounced at the secondary education level, largely due to the high-stakes high school entrance examination (Zhongkao). Since 2014, migrant students have only been allowed to take the Zhongkao in Shanghai if they meet strict eligibility criteria, including valid temporary residence permits, a minimum points-based residency score, stable parental employment in Shanghai, and several consecutive years of local residency [9].

Students who fail to meet these strict criteria have no option but to return to their rural hometowns where their hukou is registered to take the exam [10]. This policy puts migrant students at a severe disadvantage. Those who have completed their compulsory education in Shanghai must suddenly adapt to a completely different curriculum, teaching methods and examination format in their hometowns. Many also suffer from emotional distress caused by family separation and sudden relocation.

Since the Zhongkao directly determines admission to senior high schools and future university access, unequal exam eligibility can have long-lasting negative impacts on students' academic paths, far beyond the middle school stage.

3.3.2. Educational disruption

These restrictive policies frequently break the continuity of migrant children's education. A large number of migrant students transfer schools repeatedly during their adolescent years, or leave Shanghai before finishing middle school to prepare for the Zhongkao in their hometowns. Relevant research shows that roughly 79.8% of migrant families eventually choose to send their children back to their rural hometowns due to these policy constraints [11].

Such frequent educational disruptions take a toll on students' academic performance, peer relationships and mental health. Frequent school transfers disrupt the consistency of teaching and weaken students' social support networks. Adolescence is a critical and vulnerable developmental period, and forced relocation only adds to their psychological stress and sense of instability.

This means that educational inequity is not just about admission quotas or exam eligibility—it also undermines students' daily learning experiences, emotional well-being and sense of belonging in the city where their parents work and live.

3.4. Differences in school types and quality

Due to the barriers to public school enrollment, local and migrant students are largely segregated into different types of schools with vastly different quality. Most local students attend well-funded

public schools equipped with experienced teachers, good academic reputations, diverse extracurricular programs and clear pathways to higher education.

Migrant students, on the other hand, often end up in private schools with annual tuition fees ranging from 20,000 to 60,000 RMB, or under-resourced migrant schools that struggle with teacher shortages, high staff turnover, outdated facilities and a lack of long-term operational stability [5, 12].

The gap in school quality is critical, because students' educational outcomes depend not only on their own abilities, but also on their learning environment. Well-funded schools typically offer smaller class sizes, comprehensive student counseling services, modern teaching facilities and highly qualified teachers. Students in under-resourced schools have far fewer opportunities for academic enrichment, personalized mentoring and effective preparation for competitive entrance exams. Thus, even when migrant children are able to stay enrolled in school, they still face deep-seated inequities in the quality of education they receive.

3.5. Educational inequality outcomes

These lasting structural gaps bring about various far-reaching negative outcomes. To begin with, migrant students cannot enjoy equal high-quality schooling, which weakens their competitiveness in future academic pursuit and future job markets. In addition, many of them have to interrupt their study journey due to frequent school changes or forced hometown return [4].

Thirdly, such educational gaps further deepen long-existing social hierarchy. Supported by the hukou system, local urban families keep enjoying steady educational priority, while migrant youngsters struggle to improve their social status through education [13]. Even though migrant parents greatly support Shanghai's economic growth through continuous hard work, most of their children still cannot break away from lower social and economic classes.

Moreover, continuous unfair treatment in education gradually weakens overall social unity. When a huge number of urban residents feel excluded from basic public benefits, public trust in social fairness will drop, together with their sense of belonging to the city. Thus, educational inequality is never only an education-related topic, but a serious social and economic issue influencing overall urban development.

4. Structural causes of educational inequality

A combination of deep structural reasons leads to continuous educational unfairness for migrant children. Most importantly, the hukou system separates public service rights strictly according to household registration status, forming a fixed institutional gap between local citizens and non-local migrants [3, 4]. Besides, local governments face tight budget pressure, because educational financial support mainly depends on registered population instead of real permanent residents living in the city [3, 14]. This makes local authorities lack enough motivation to fully accept migrant children into local public education.

Apart from that, uneven distribution of top public school resources sharpens competition in popular school zones. Families with local hukou and property wealth naturally hold unmatched advantages over ordinary migrant households. All these elements together turn educational inequality into long-term systemic problems, rather than occasional temporary issues.

5. Policy proposals for reducing inequality

Several practical targeted reforms can effectively relieve current educational disparities. First, Shanghai can steadily carry out residence-based enrollment policies, so long-term settled migrant families can apply for local public schools under fairer conditions. Second, related strict Zhongkao application rules can be properly loosened. Lowering residence point requirements and simplifying complex application procedures can avoid unnecessary forced relocation and keep students' learning progress continuous [15]. Third, higher-level government financial subsidies can help Shanghai enlarge public school scale and allocate more resources to migrant students. Since migrant groups greatly promote local economy, educational budget planning should focus on real resident numbers rather than registered hukou population only. Fourth, stricter official supervision and special financial aid can help improve private migrant schools. Relevant plans include better teacher training projects, updated campus equipment and unified curriculum standards for all schools receiving migrant teenagers.

6. Feasibility and limitations

Although these reform plans bring obvious social benefits, they still meet many realistic difficulties during practice. Offering more public school places to migrant children may burden already crowded local education systems, and also cause worries from local parents about tighter school resources. New campus construction, teacher recruitment and stable capital input all need long time and huge financial cost. Local governments are also unwilling to take full reform costs alone without central policy and financial help. Meanwhile, any resource redistribution reform will easily face disagreement from different local social groups. Therefore, slow step-by-step improvement is much more practical than sudden overall change. Steadily enlarging inclusive enrollment chances, together with sufficient funding and flexible management rules, can raise educational fairness without breaking local social stability.

7. Conclusion

The case of migrant children in Shanghai fully shows how fixed institutional rules can maintain long-term educational unfairness, even inside such rich international modern cities. Restricted mainly by hukou limits, migrant students still face systematic disadvantages in school application, important national exams and overall teaching quality. This analysis shows inequality exists in every studying stage, from primary entrance to key secondary education choices, creating unfair chances and unstable learning experience for migrant teenagers. Considering their large proportion in local student groups, such disparities influence not only personal future growth but also Shanghai's long-term social and economic trend. In general, fairer education environment needs steady and slow institutional improvement. Cutting unnecessary administrative limits, raising educational investment and building more inclusive admission systems can stop systematic exclusion of migrant children from high-quality education. In the future, a more equal education system will effectively improve social mobility, lift overall economic efficiency and create stronger urban social harmony.

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