How can rural migrant children’s adaptation to urban school environments be facilitated?

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**Introduction**

Education has been an engine of social mobility, especially in modern market-oriented economies. Education allows the development of human capital and the socialization and integration of children into society. Education during the 1950s to 1960s up to the Cultural Revolution in May 1966 was oriented towards providing social mobility for the working class peasants and workers to consolidate support and political loyalty amongst the working class (Deng and Treiman, 1997).

An expansion of educational opportunities catered to the large numbers of working class peasants and workers while a compressed high school education which emphasized the internalization of Marxist ideas and the works of Mao Zedong took in peasants and workers to enable them to earn a high school diploma (Deng and Treiman, 1997). Hence, intent on reducing education inequality, the state produced a stratifying pressure of its own, according to political loyalty and family class origin, and this culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

**The Hukou System and Migrant Children**

The Hukou system was created in 1958 under the socialist regime as a tool to differentiate between the rural and urban population, as the government gave them different benefits.

The centralized state, with its monopoly on almost all resources, was able to transfer resources among different economic sectors, localities and social groups on a much larger scale and at a much faster pace than market economies would. This implies that the state has the capacity to create inequality as well as equality if needed for the
running of the redistributive system. More benefits in terms of welfare provision were given to holders of an urban hukou, and this phenomenon from early on contributed to the socioeconomic and geographic inequality between the rural and urban residents. Children in higher-level cities had better access to educational resources and life opportunities and enjoyed many more advantages in education attainment than did their counterparts in small cities and towns (Young, 2013; Wu, 2012, Chen and Sun, 2006, 2015).

Prior to 1984, the main function of the Hukou system was to control rural-to-urban migration. The lack of social support and protection not only applies to migrant workers but also to their children, creating social stratification by limiting privileges and opportunities. "Migrant children" here refers to children between the ages of zero and seventeen who live with their parents in a place different from their original place of birth or official residence. In 1984 one of the Hukou reforms allowed peasants to move to cities in search of employment and commercial opportunities, leading to the influx of millions of rural laborers into cities, which mounted severe pressure on the authorities to implement other policies to cater to the social needs of these rural migrants.

China's one-child policy and the declining birth rates in urban areas have contributed to the smaller number of school-age children (Chen and Sun, 2015). The population composition now may set up a potential decrease in the size of the urban workforce in the near future, and thus migrant workers’ children would be able to make up for the loss in workforce labor in China's economic development.
Local governments

Despite the relaxation of the Hukou regulations to allow rural-to-urban migration, location-related Hukou status was still used as a mechanism to differentiate the privileges resources the rural and urban residents had access to, so it was difficult for migrant families to send their children to local urban schools due to the high enrollment fees (Dong, 2010; Chen and Sun, 2015).

For example, when the 1986 Compulsory Education Law required local governments to implement compulsory education for all school-age children in their region, including migrant children, local governments were reluctant to extend provision of education to migrant children since the central government only gave subsidies to the local governments considering the number of school-age children registered with an official Hukou status in that geographical region, and this excluded migrant children and their families from receiving such subsidies (Dong, 2010; Wu, 2012, Tan, 2010).

The discourse that there is limited space in urban schools did not stand as the one-child policy and the decreasing birth rates in cities had contributed to the decreasing number of children in the population of China, and thus the under-registration or urban schools. Local governments were focused on protecting the interests of the local urban residents and improving its economic performance and were reluctant to spend more resources on resolving the issue of education of the rural migrant children.

The 2006 New Compulsory Education Act stated that local governments would assume financial responsibility for enrolling migrant children instead of the central
government. Although the central government had now placed priority on migrant children's right to education, the implementation of this new policy at the provincial levels have been slow, and many schools still require a local Hukou registration status to attend, and public schools available to the migrant children are often of poorer quality.

**Social exclusion of migrant children**

Migrant children often face social discrimination and prejudice at urban schools by their teachers, peers and the parents of peers. Loneliness was closely related to their relationship with their parents, peers and teachers. 70% of migrant children experience academic anxiety and attributed this anxiety to peer relationships and teacher-student relationships. Hence, discrimination and prejudice is a significant risk factor in affecting the psychological well-being of migrant children and their ability to perform academically at school (Dong, 2010; Lu and Zhou, 2012).

Unfair treatment and prejudice cause much stress to migrant children, and thus, considering the potential prejudice and discrimination their children may face, many migrant parents do not send their children to public schools (G. Chen and Yang, 2010, Chen et.al, 2014; Lu and Zhou, 2012). The drop-out rate amongst migrant children is high, as found in a survey conducted on the Heilongjiang province showed that the enrollment rate of migrant children in middle school was only about 20% (Dong, 2010). High drop-out rates amongst migrant children inhibit their opportunities to continue on to secondary and higher education, limiting their development of knowledge and skills, which restricts their employment choices and income levels, and their quality of life.
Migrant enclaves as a source of social support for rural migrant families

Migrant parents have longer working hours than urban employees, and they do not have the time to communicate with their children, nor do they have time to talk to teachers about their children's academic performance (Sun and Chen, 2015; Dong, 2010; Wu, 2012, Tan, 2010). They are also limited by their lower levels of education to help their children in their schoolwork, and their finances to enroll their children in enrichment classes outside of school. Parental aspirations are critical determinants of children's educational outcomes (Lu and Zhou, 2012; Fan 2014).

Migration often intersect with elements of race, ethnicity and citizenship status. While legal exclusion due to Hukou restrictions has relaxed, Zhan (2011) argues that rural migrants still face social exclusion in the form of differential treatment from employers and service providers, local government officials and urban residents in everyday life in large cities such as Beijing.

However, Chen and Sun (2006) have found that migrants' place-based identity and social networks in helping them gain social capital when they shift to urban areas sometimes due to the existence of urban migrant enclaves consisting of migrants from the same geographical region. Those who share the same geographical origin often feel close to one another and can more easily develop social relations.

Hence, there may be some methods of integration through the deployment of social capital for the rural migrants, which may possibly lead to an easier integration process for their families as well, and open up avenues for accumulation of social, cultural and economic capital.
Cultural Capital

There are class differences in the acquisition of cultural capital at home, since family cultural capital depends substantially upon parental education and parental occupation and family cultural capital has been shown to strongly affect education attainment. Children of wealthy parents have greater access to educational resources and have higher educational aspirations and more opportunities to receive higher education (Fan, 2014).

Children inherit their parents’ cultural capital through unconscious imitation and eventually come to embody it. Parents’ education may affect the educational views, modes and choices of their children and may also affect children’s learning attitudes and academic goals. Parents who have received higher degrees and systematic education and training can usually reproduce the cultural capital need to create a good cultural atmosphere and cultural environment for their children to excel academically (Wu, 2008).

Psychological Capital?

The accumulation of cultural capital as a latent path towards social mobility may not always be functional for poor rural migrant families who have low amounts of social capital and economic capital to invest in cultural capital accumulation. Instead, adaptation processes play a large role in determining how far migrants would go once they have settled down in a urban city. It would be important, thus, to look at the type of coping strategies used to deal with the social and economic exclusion.
Resilience refers to positive adaptation despite exposure to significant risk or adversity (Luthar, 2003). Given the prevalence of the influences brought about by one’s social environment, family and friends, attention must be paid to the quality of the environment as a component of resiliency. Thus, resilience is better understood as cultivated through a process of repeated interactions between an individual and his or her social environment (Luthar, et. al., 2000). Following the above conceptualization of resilience, factors that inhibit or promote the growth of the ability to adapt to adverse situations embedded in the social and learning environments of school-age migrant children which might impede or promote their various developmental outcomes can be identified. The role of family social support and neighbourhood social capital can also be investigated for its importance in cultivating resilience amongst migrant children, which can translate into determination to complete education within urban schools as much as possible despite incidents of prejudice and discrimination from teachers and peers.

**Suggestion for further research**

With China’s burgeoning migrant children population in urban cities as a result of the large influx of rural-to-urban migrants and the decreasing birth rate in urban cities, it is imperative for local governments to cater to their developmental needs. Hence, to promote the educational outcomes of migrant children and to increase their chances of academic success, it is important to explore what factors—individual, familial or contextual—may prevent migrant children from losing the opportunity to receive quality education in such an adverse situation.
After obtaining a better understanding of the social context and familial factors that migrant children are in, it may be possible to study more about adaptation strategies that migrant children use in order to integrate better into the urban education system.

Although there is a correlation between resilience and improved educational attainment, the specific strategies used to counter the psychological distress that migrant children face in urban schools are still not clearly delineated within the literature.

It would be useful to find out such adaptation strategies, if any, and the extend to which they aid in overcoming high-adversity situations as they can be transmitted as an important form of social capital amongst migrant communities in large urban cities and perhaps contribute positively towards the vertical social mobility of migrant children through the education system.
References


