

EXPLORING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY OF SHUNYI, BEIJING

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ABSTRACT

Amid China's urbanization, large influx of workers to big cities created a greater demand for education for the migrant children. However, there are stringent requirements for them to enroll in the public education system, especially post elementary school. Many migrant children in Beijing leave to go to middle schools elsewhere, which is a big challenge for teenager students to live and study away from their parents. We surveyed on their educational choices post primary school and explored the factors leading to such decisions. We found that while certain factors such as family income affect education choices to some extent, its limited effect is undermined by the overwhelming public policies implemented, shunning most families away from pursuing public education in Beijing. Therefore, changes in the government educational policies are necessary, and support from social organizations to migrant parents and children are important, to fundamentally provide them better access to education.

I Introduction

Since the 1990s, China has been experiencing a rapid wave of development and urbanization, and together with it started the relocation of the workforce from the rural farmlands into the growing cities. According to the 2020th Population Census, China's migrant population exceeded 375 million people, which is a 69.73% increase from the 6th Population Census of 2010(China National Bureau of Statistic, 2021). Children who migrate into the cities along with their parents are formally referred to as "Migrant Children", and up to 2015, the group exceeded 34.6 million, which meant that one out of every five children were considered a migrant child(UNICEF China, 2015).

However, these children are denied many basic welfare rights, one of which is the right to equal education. This issue rooted in China's unique household registration system (HRS, also called *Hukou*), and its public service system. The *Hukou* System was introduced by the Chinese government in 1958 to register for residents by residential location, which allowed the authorities

to identify individuals by where they were originally from despite their relocation.(Gov.cn 2014) This system is coupled with other policies and regulations to identify the migrant population which subsequently limits their access to welfare.

In April 2015, Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei Provinces adopted the ‘*Cooperative Development Plan in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region*’ which aimed to limit Beijing’s population to under 23 million people by 2020(Outline of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Plan Committee, 2016).Under the command of such policies, Beijing government has increasingly raised the threshold for public school enrollment of migrant children. Families were required to provide 5 forms of identification: *Employment Certificate, Residence Identification, Hukou, Beijing City’s Temporary Living Identification, and No Family Guardian in Hukou Region Certificate*. These requirements were extremely difficult to meet for most migrants as it required them to either get legal housing which was very expensive or to consistently contribute to the Social Security program which charged between around RMB 900-1,500 per month per parent.

These stringent requirements deterred many parents away from attempting public schools. The alternative was private migrant schools, which typically suffered from the severe lack of funding, overpriced school fees and lower quality of education. These schools charged on average 8,000-15,000 RMB per year compared to 700RMB for public schools(Ministry of Education of PRC, 2003). While the fortunate ones may be able to attend public elementary schools, almost none are able to attend a public high school. Migrant students are permitted to take the Beijing’s high school entrance examination, however, they are ineligible to attend high school within the city, but are only allowed to attend vocational high schools which greatly limits their chances of attending college. Additionally, students can only attend the National College Entrance Examination from where their *Hukou* were registered, which means that migrant students must leave Beijing and return to their *Hukou*’s province for the exam. This presents a huge challenge if the migrant children stay in Beijing for high school. The question then becomes when the migrant students should return to their home province, more specifically, right after elementary school, or after finishing junior high?

This paper uses a case study of migrant children in Shunyi, Beijing to explore their educational choices post elementary school and the factors that affected these decisions. In the end, this research hopes to find ways to better support the migrant workers when it comes to education of their children.

II Literature review

Studies on migrant children education focus mainly on two subjects, 1) the effect of migration on a child’s social and academic performance, and 2) alternative approaches to migrant education.

Most researchers acknowledged the negative social and academic impacts that relocation brought to these children, which typically were demonstrated through low self-esteem, low academic expectation, and lower academic and occupational performance. Compared to their peers, migrant children suffered from loneliness which translated to a poor adaptation to their social environment (Zhou, 2006). Similarly, their self-esteem and academic performance fell behind (Lan, Wang, Zhang, Zhou, 2009). This resulted in migrant children attending school for fewer years and achieving a lower degree of education (Zhang, Gong, Yao, 2011).

Some countries solve the problem of migrant children's education by establishing laws to provide free K-12 public schooling, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in the United State of America. Similarly, In the United Kingdoms, any child aged between 5 to 16 (18 in England) have free and equal access to education. Additionally, schools mustn't ask for the migrant status of the child, which ensures a quality education for the student regardless of legal status. (Swann Report, 1985)

However, it requires a lot of resources to provided full access to K-12 education to migrant kids. While working with constrained resources, in recent years, China has made efforts to strengthen the education system and lessen the education plight faced by migrants who make up 40% of some major cities populations. Before 1996, the education budget of one student was allocated to his/her respective Hukou based education ministry, which means that a student was only allowed to access schooling in his/her Hukou. In 1996, the central government promulgated several decrees, which aimed to allow students to receive education outside of their hometown. Unfortunately, it took time to increase schools and the team of teachers, and significant educational advancements are yet to be seen especially in major cities as most migrant children have still do not have access to public schooling.

III Methodology

This research uses a combination of scholarly advice, survey questionnaires and parent interviews to collect data in order to better understand the middle school educational needs of migrant families and the difficulties that influence their decisions.

Before drafting the survey, we interviewed several renowned scholars in the field of migrant education policy to better understand the policies that make up migrant education and their impacts on the migrant children. These experts also expressed their opinions on how to mitigate the migrant education crisis.

The survey was designed with three main sections: 1) family background; 2) migrant children's academic performance and background 3) parents' understanding of their kids' educational opportunities. This survey was distributed via the survey program (APP) called *Wenjuanxing* and

reached its targets via the most popular social media in China, WeChat. Additionally, we interviewed 6 migrant families on their experiences of living in Beijing. Topics discussed include, government policy and its effect on education, the expectations they have on their children and, the quality of education they currently have at their schools.

IV Results

The survey focused on families with children in 5th or 6th grade, which are the last two years of the primary school education system of China (grade 7 to 9 are in middle school, while grade 10 to 12 in high school). Overall, it was completed by a total of 200 participants, of whom 146 were female and 54 male, mostly between 31-35 years old. Amongst the families surveyed, the majority (85%,170 out of 200) do not own property around Beijing. This finding is largely consistent with the lack of *Hukou* in Beijing. At the same time an interesting discovery is that there are 30 families who have property on the outskirts of Beijing or nearby satellite cities located in Hebei Province. This will likely impact their migrant children’s education choice in the future.

Migrant Parents Have Relatively Lower Education Levels

About half of the respondents (54.5%) only attained a middle school degree or below, which is likely due to insufficient resources at a younger age and contribute to their status as migrant workers(Figure 1).Furthermore, couples tend to have similar levels of education, as indicated in Table 1.

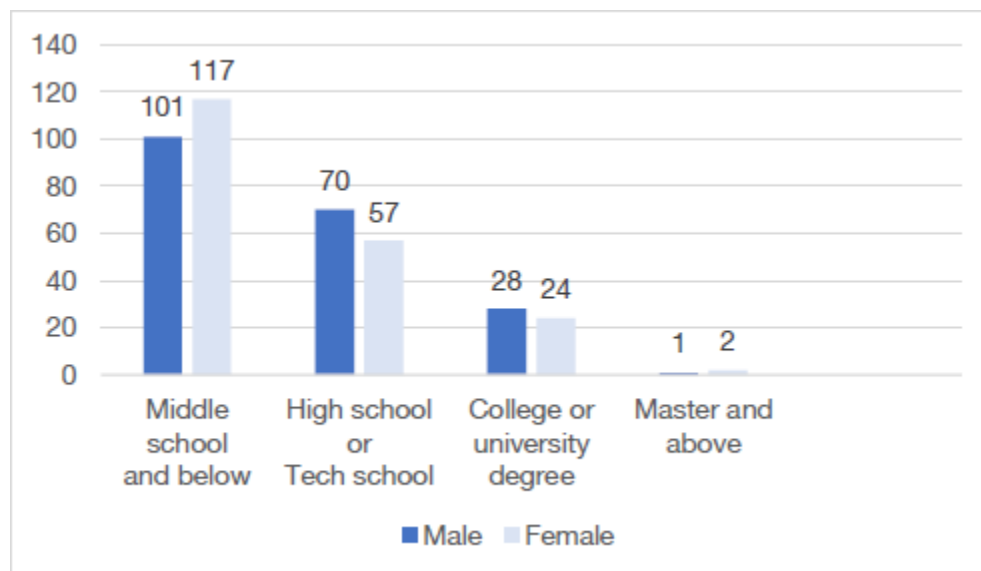


Figure 1 Parent’s education level

Table 1: Education Levels of Migrant Parents

Interviewer's Education Level	Spouse's Education Level				Total
	Middle school and below	High school and Tech school	College and bachelor degree	Master and above	
Middle school and below	95	12	3		110
High school and Tech school	11	45	7		63
College and bachelor degree	2	7	15	2	26
Master and above			1		1
Total	108	64	26	2	200

Higher Education Attainments Correlate with Higher Income

As shown in Figure 2, almost 30% of the families have an income level close or below Beijing’s minimum individual wage, which is USD 363 per month (RMB2320 per person, RMB4640 per couple, Beijing Human Resources and Social Security Department, 2021. This may suggest the importance of public welfare and free education as a majority of the population rely on these programs to survive.), while 40% of them work over 10 hours a day, which is higher than the Beijing average of 8.6 hours. (Nation Bureau of statistics, 2018)The relatively longer workdays may result in the lack of time parents have for their kids. Especially for migrant children, the presence of supporting parents is important for their self-esteem.

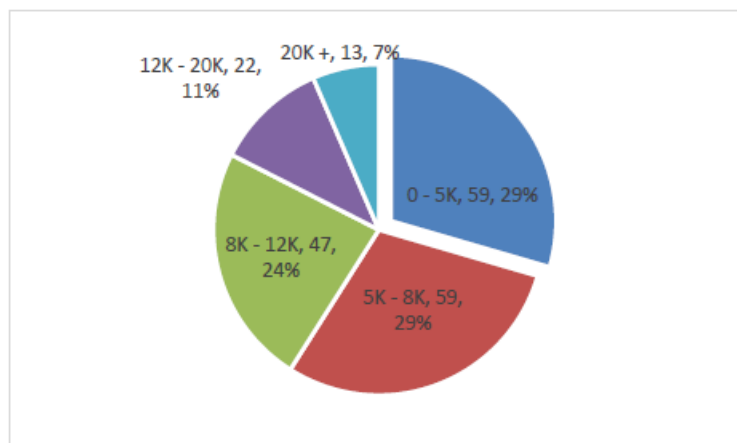


Figure 2 Family income level

Table 2: Percent of Migrant Parents by Income Levels and Education Levels

Education Level	% 0-5K	% 5-12k	% 12k+	Overall
Middle school and below	38.2%	55.5%	6.4%	100%
High school and Tech school	22.2%	55.6%	22.2%	100%
College and above	11.1%	37.0%	51.9%	100%
Overall	29.5%	53.0%	17.5%	100%

Higher Family Income, Higher Educational Expectations

While the majority of parent comes from lower education backgrounds, their expectations for their children’s education attainment are quite high. The vast majority of 92% intended for their children to attain higher education, including pursuing a college degree, a bachelor’s degree, and a master’s degree and above, as shown in Figure3. This is especially true for families with higher income. For families with income of 12K and above, above 50% expect their children to attain a high education degree of masters and above. For families with income of 0-12K per month, this number is only 29%.

Table 3: Expectation of Children’s Education Attainment

Family Income	Average			Total	% High
	Low (High school and below)	(College Level)	High (Master and above level)		
0 - 5K	11	31	17	59	29%
5 - 8K	1	41	17	59	29%
8 - 12K	4	30	13	47	28%
12 - 20K	1	10	11	22	50%
20K +	0	4	9	13	69%
Total	17	116	67	200	34%

Most Children Leave Beijing but Prefer to Go to Cities over Towns in Home Province

Beijing has a much higher admission rate for college than other places. In 2019, 36.29% of college entrance exam takers in Beijing were admitted to colleges. This number was 21.07% in

Shandong province, 19.1% in Hebei province, 18.85% in Anhui province, and just 12.92% in Henan province, while these were the 4 popular provinces from where the migrant families came from in our survey(Sohu, 2019). Even though parents have high expectation for their future education, most migrant children have to leave Beijing to go to middle and high school. Of the 200 families surveyed, 79% of the interviewed families indicated that their children would leave Beijing. Of those who decided to leave, many leave because they don't have enough documents to qualify for Beijing middle schools (38%). Others decided to leave because eventually they are able to take the college entrance exams due to the Hukou policy or worried that they would fall behind if returning in later years (59%).

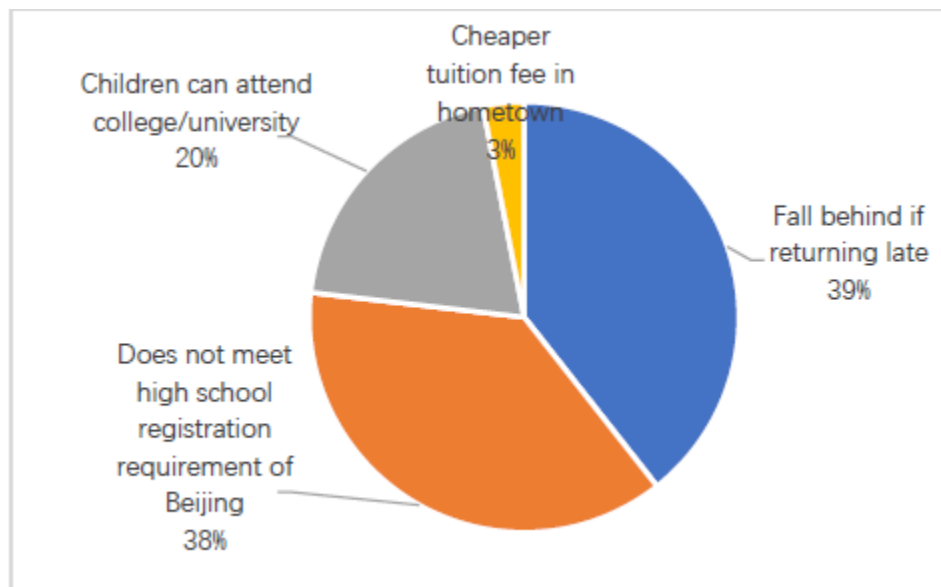


Figure 3. Reasons of Migrant Children Leaving Beijing Post Primary School

The leaving children have the choice of going to the towns of their hukou, to the bigger cities of their province, or to middle schools in surrounding cities of Beijing, such as cities in Hebei. About 44% of them choose to go to a bigger city instead of their hometown. This confirms the general belief that bigger cities have better educational resources, thus it's very understandable that 24% choose to go surrounding cities of Beijing (Figure 4).The "Others" category includes Uncertain or attending school wherever the family is based. These responses imply the unstable nature of migrant families.

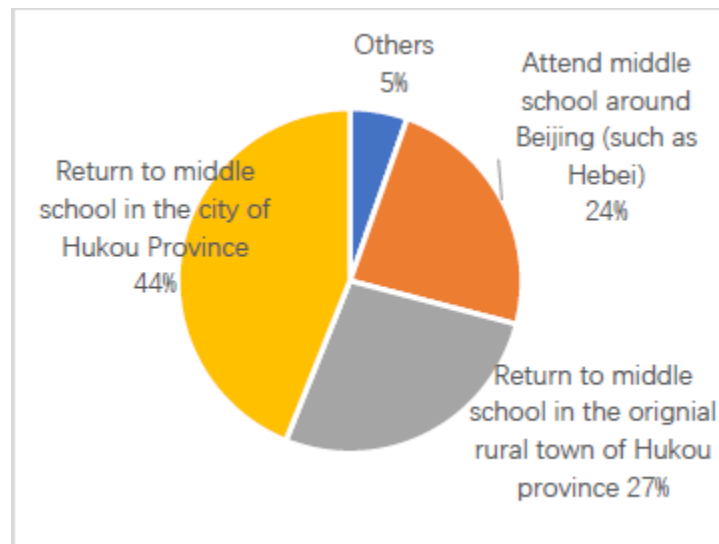


Figure 4. Migrant Children's Choice of Middle School After Leaving Beijing

Parents Need to Improve their Understanding of Education Policies

Majority of the parents have partial or a general level of understanding of the education policies, as indicated in Table4. The percentage of parents with a good understanding of education policies generally increases with rising income level, while on the other hand the proportion of parents with no or partial understanding decrease substantially by as income levels increase. The way of obtaining information on education policies mostly was "word of mouth" or "ownresearch". Unfortunately, the most reliable source is "school or teachers", but it only accounted for a mere 17%. An interesting observation is that amongst parents whose income is above RMB12,000, majority source their information from research. This may possibly be a correlation between higher research ability as a result of higher educational backgrounds. However, this question must be further researched to reach a definitive conclusion.

Table5. Parents' Understanding of Education Policies by Income Level

Family Income	No understanding	Partial understanding	General understanding	Good understanding	Full understanding	Total
0 - 5K	11 (19%)	23 (39%)	16 (27%)	5 (8%)	4 (7%)	59
5K - 8K	9 (15%)	27 (46%)	20 (34%)	3 (5%)		59
8K - 12K	4 (9%)	16 (34%)	16 (34%)	8 (17%)	3 (6%)	47

12K - 20K		10 (45%)	7 (32%)	5 (23%)		22
20K +		2 (15%)	5 (38%)	3 (23%)	3 (23%)	13
Overall	24 (12%)	78 (39%)	64 (32%)	24 (12%)	10 (5%)	200

Table 6. Channels of Obtaining Information on Beijing Educational Policies

Family income	Didn't Seek	Heard from others	Research	School or teachers	Total
0 - 5K	22 (37%)	17 (29%)	10 (17%)	10 (17%)	59 (100%)
5 - 8K	21 (36%)	20 (34%)	10 (17%)	8 (14%)	59 (100%)
8 - 12K	16 (34%)	9 (19%)	12 (26%)	10 (21%)	47 (100%)
12 - 20K	3 (14%)	5 (23%)	10 (45%)	4 (18%)	22 (100%)
20K+	2 (15%)	2 (15%)	7 (54%)	2 (15%)	13 (100%)
Total	64 (32%)	53 (27%)	49 (25%)	34 (17%)	200 (100%)

V Conclusions and Discussions

Combining the expert input and the survey results, we found that migrant children would prefer to stay with their parents in Beijing to pursue education post primary school. However, due to the constraints of policy requirements, children without a Beijing Hukou must return home to take the National College Entrance Examination, their only pathway to higher education. Additionally, migrant students are defined education to public high schools in Beijing, only permitted to enroll into polytechnic high schools instead. As shown previously, these policies coupled result in the majority of migrant children returning home post primary school, creating separations from families.

The implementation of effective policies to address migrant welfare access is pivotal to the long-term sustainable development of China's society. Governments and social movements can be at the forefront of bringing educational opportunities to migrant children. The Chinese Central government must work with local governments to establish a framework for education for migrant children. In particular, legislative changes should be made in regard to the *Hukou* and eligibility requirements for the national college entrance exams., that migrant families should be able to access education in areas of permanent residence outside of their original *Hukou* location.

This may be implemented either by allowing families to transfer *Hukou* or the establishment of a new permanent residence card.

In addition to national policies, local governments must work to redistribute education budget to where students attend schools, rather than to the hometowns of their original *Hukou*. This would broaden the possibilities for students and not restrict their education to their hometown. Moreover, local governments should adopt new education policies to support migrant students. This includes endorsing migrant schools and the establishing charter schools. By doing so, the government can improve the currently not-as-good education received by migrant students while avoiding excessive budget strains.

Supplementary to government actions, social organization may also contribute to uphold the educational rights of migrant children via supports to the families, including the parents, since they are the decision makers of the children's educational choices. Such support includes raising awareness of educational beliefs and standards, promoting better parenting methods, and providing information on educational policies. The parents should try to understand the educational policies to better guide their kids and also try to spend more quality time with their kids.

Barriers to education amongst children may also be overcome through strong supports for migrant children. Their unique identity and lack of resources contribute to lack of confidence and soft skills. Given this, children should be mentored and accompanied via social and emotional support. While governments need to improve their policies on education, the people around a migrant child student are also crucial in the development of the child.

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