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Under the Same Blue Sky? Inequity in Migrant Children's Education in China

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It is estimated that more than 10% of China's population has left their villages and hometowns as millions of farmers have descended upon cities and urban centers in response to a huge demand for labor since the economic reform launched in the late 1970s (Li, 2006). Approximately 19.8 million children are believed to have accompanied their parents in this mass internal migration, with the result that many lack adequate access to health care, education, and other basic services (Chan, 2009). This article discusses migrant children's schooling experiences in China in the context of massive migration from rural areas to the cities and trends toward reverse migration induced by the recent global economic crisis. It further explores the responses from the migrant communities to their children's educational needs in the face of financial cutbacks and economic insecurity.

Since the economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s, China has undergone rapid modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. As urbanization expanded, so did the discrepancy between urban and rural incomes and living standards (China Labour Bulletin [CLB], 2009). In 2009, the annual per capita income of urban households was 12,973 yuan¹ compared with only 4,307 yuan in rural households (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2009). Considering the fact that rural residents have no social security or welfare benefits, the urban-rural income gap in real terms was probably six-fold (Zhu, 2006). Living conditions in the rural areas are austere and poor. As recently as late 2006, more than half of rural households did not have tap water, 87% did not have flush toilets, and 60% were still using wood-burning stoves (Chan, 2009). As a result of the discrepancy in income and living conditions between urban and rural areas, millions of farmers have left their homes and migrated to the cities in search of work and a better life.

Large-scale internal migration has thus become one of the most prominent by-products of the socioeconomic development of China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of China (2009), there are 225.42 million migrant workers in China—more than the populations of the United Kingdom, France, and Australia combined (Hamey, 2008). When deciding to move in search of a better life, migrant workers either leave their children behind in the countryside or take them to the city. An estimated 58 million children have been left behind, and another 19 million children have accompanied their migrant parents to the cities (Chan, 2009). Together, children of migrant workers account for about one quarter of all children in China (Chan, 2009).

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the plight of both groups of children—the left-behind children and the migrant children. Therefore, the objective of this review is to describe and critically analyze the schooling experiences of migrant children in the context of massive migration from rural areas to the cities and the reverse migration caused by the recent global economic crisis. Furthermore, based on an analysis of media accounts, this article explores the responses from the migrant communities to their children's educational needs in the face of financial cutbacks and economic insecurity. The inequity in migrant children's education in China is an issue of social justice, and, therefore, the purpose of this article is to raise awareness of the issue, calling educators to pay special attention to the needs of migrant children and their families.

Social Context Of Migration

Before the implementation of China's economic reform initiated in the late 1970s, internal migration was strictly prohibited by the central government. The government instituted a permanent and rigorous system of household registration or *hu kou* in 1955 to control migration (Han, 2004). Each Chinese citizen was assigned to a rural or urban household based on his or her mother's residence. Local governments were responsible for providing the residents whose *hu kou* were registered in its jurisdiction with welfare and social services, including education, housing, and health care (CLB, 2009). Residents were not allowed to work or live outside the administrative boundaries of their *hu kou* without permission of the authorities. The household system became so rigid in the 1970s that any violation of the system could lead to imprisonment (Young, 2002). China's household registration system evolved out of unique historical conditions, and in its historical context, the system maintained social stability, balancing urban-rural development, controlling the population, and adjusting the distribution of social resources (Han, 2004, p. 30).

However, since the 1980s the increasing market-oriented structure of the economy has generated a need for cheap labor in the cities. The central government loosened its internal migration control regulations, and by 1989, there were about 30 million migrant workers in China. In 1993, the number doubled, and by 2009, the migrant population had increased to over 200 million (CLB, 2009; NBS, 2009). UNESCO and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated that migrant workers have contributed 16% of gross domestic product (GDP) growth over the past two decades (Hamey, 2008). Because of their great contributions to China's economic development, the migrant workers are known as China's "factories without smoke" (Hamey, 2008).

Although migrant workers can move "freely" from city to city, the *hu kou* system continues to have a restrictive effect on their social status, employment opportunity, children's education, social welfare, and living conditions. Without an urban *hu kou*, migrant workers have no access to urban social services, and are subject to daily exploitation and institutional discrimination. Being on the lowest rung of the social ladder, migrant workers are usually given labor-intensive and low-skill jobs (CLB, 2009). According to Hamey (2008), migrant workers account for 68% of employees in the manufacturing sector, 70% in construction, and 80% of coal miners. Migrant workers are required to work long hours (11 hours per day on average, and 26 days per month); however, they are paid only half as much as urban residents. According to the China Labor Bulletin, in 2004 the average monthly income for migrant workers was 780 yuan, just over half the national urban average of 1,350 yuan (CLB, 2009). It is common that migrant workers do not get paid on time, and in some cases they are owed seven months or more in unpaid wages (State Council, 2006).

Migrant workers have faced a myriad of issues, including harsh working conditions, low wages, congested living conditions, and lack of access to social services. Nevertheless, the most pressing issue for migrant parents is their children's education (CLB, 2009). Many migrant parents move to the cities in search of a better life for their children. However, due to their low family income and the restrictive *hu kou* system, migrant children are marginalized and deprived of equal access to education, social and medical welfare, and the right to participate in urban life.

Migrant Children: The City's "Invisible Population"

When Premier Wen Jiabao visited a school for migrant children in Beijing in 2003, he wrote, "Under the Same Blue Sky, Grow Up and Progress Together" (Ren & Zhang, 2006). However, living under the same blue sky, migrant children do not have the same rights as urban children. Despite being long-term residents in the city, migrant children without an urban *hu kou* are marginalized and treated as "outsiders" or second-class citizens. Although the *Compulsory Education Law of*

the People's Republic of China mandates a free compulsory nine-year education for all children regardless of sex, nationality, or race, it delegates the responsibilities for compulsory education to local authorities (China Education and Research Network, 2005).

Furthermore, central government funding for education is based on the number of school age children with local *hu kuo*. Therefore, urban governments are only responsible for the education of children with an urban *hu kuo*, and they have no obligations to educate migrant children. In fact, prior to the mid-1990s, migrant children were not allowed to enroll in state-run schools in the city (Rural Education Action Project [REAP], 2009). As the governments of the host cities do not have a responsibility to provide social welfare and services to migrants and their children, migrant children's basic rights to health care, education, and socialization are denied, leading to a higher rate of emotional, behavioral, and psychological problems (Chan, 2009). Ignored, migrant children have become the city's "invisible population."

As migration became more and more an inescapable fact of China's economic life, the central government began to recognize the important contributions of migrant workers in boosting economic development and increasing productivity. The regulations on household systems gradually loosened. The most important policy shift came on March 2, 1998, when the Ministry of Education and the Public Security Bureau issued the "*Provisional Measures for the Schooling of Migrant Children and Youths*."² This regulation opened the door for migrant children to attend schools in their place of domicile, stating, "Municipalities should allow migrant children aged between 6 and 14 to study full time in the state-run and private schools with the status of temporary students" (CLB, 2009, p. 72).

Despite these policy changes, there are still many obstacles that impede the achievement of equity in migrant children's education in China today. First, there are many rules set up by the urban governments that make it difficult to establish and prove local domicile. Migrant parents are required to submit numerous documents, such as a temporary residence permit, a work permit, proof of residence (e.g. property deed or a rental agreement), household registration certificate from the place of origin, and vaccination certificates (REAP, 2009). Many migrant families are unable to obtain all of the required documentation because of the complicated procedure and high cost of the process (CLB, 2009).

Moreover, even when some migrant families manage to prove their local domicile, they still have to pay exorbitant fees for their children to go to a state-run school. The city of Beijing serves as a pertinent example. In 2008, in addition to the 500 yuan per semester in miscellaneous fees, migrant parents had to pay an average registration fee of 1,226 yuan (People's Daily Online, 2008), a 500 to 1,000 yuan temporary schooling fee, a 2,000 yuan education compensation payment, a one-off 1,000 yuan school selection fee, and a 1,000 to 30,000 yuan sponsorship fee or so-called donation (CLB, 2009; Human Rights in China [HRIC], 2002; REAP, 2009). Therefore, education in a state-run school is out of reach for many migrant families, considering the average monthly income of a migrant worker is 966 yuan ("Chinese migrant workers earn," 2006).

Finally, in addition to financial constraints, migrant children also face institutional discrimination in the state school system. Eckholm (1999) suggested, "One of the biggest obstacles of educational progress may be a less tangible one, resulting from the pervasive ostracism and ridicule of poor, rural migrants in the big city" (p. 2). Social and economic segregation have created and reinforced the stereotypes among urban and migrant children. There is a dividing line between "us" and "them" among the two groups of children. According to a study on migrant children in Beijing,

40% of the migrant children did not have local friends, and 33.7% did not want to make friends with urban children because urban children were believed to be arrogant, snobbish, spoiled, and wasteful (Lei, 2004). Migrant children often complain about being mocked and bullied by local peers in urban public schools (Lei, 2004). Migrant students are also perceived as academically inferior, and usually shunned by teachers and school administrators. A higher percentage of migrant children than non-migrant children feel that the teachers do not understand them nor care about them and are not satisfied with the teacher-student relationship (CLB, 2009). In schools, migrant children cannot afford to participate in extracurricular activities or to join social organizations. Nor can they be nominated for an “outstanding student award” (CLB, 2009, p. 42).

Although the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* mandates a free, nine-year education for all children, migrant children do not have equal access to a high quality public education. Education is not free but incurs significant financial costs that are beyond the reach of many migrant families. Even when migrant children are enrolled in public schools, they are subject to institutional discrimination. Because of the barriers that migrant families have faced, many parents turn to private schools set up by migrants as an alternative for their children's education.

Migrant Schools: A Renewed Sense Of Hope

In the process of migration, the social networks and social relationships that were in place in the migrants' villages of origin are ripped apart. Migrant communities are trying to rebuild such social networks and renew the sense of hope among the children through migrant schools. Unlike public state-run schools, where students are predominantly from the same city, migrant schools bring together children from all over the country (Han, 2004). There is no institutional discrimination based on the household system in the migrant schools. Migrant schools provide a place where migrant children feel they belong. When asked about their relationship with other students both in a migrant school and in a public school, 62% of migrant children reported that they like to play with their peers in the migrant schools, whereas 53% dislike Beijing children because the latter bully and look down on them (Han, 2004).

Furthermore, the migrant schools are set up as a collective response by the community to the inability of the current educational system to adapt to the rapid social reconfigurations and changes in society. These schools have played a supplementary and self-help function in the present educational system (Han, 2004). Migrant schools were first started in the early to mid-1990s as self-help and “solve-it-yourself” endeavors. The first migrant school in Beijing was set up in 1993, and it was the only private school for migrant children at the time. However, migrant schools developed rapidly after 1998 due to the enactment of *Provisional Measures for the Schooling of Migrant Children and Youths*. By 2001, there were about 200 to 300 migrant schools in Beijing attended by about 30,000 children; in Shanghai, there were 250 migrant schools with a total of 41,274 students (HRIC, 2002).

The emergence and expansion of migrant schools has basically filled the gap in compulsory education for migrant children. In 1997, a survey conducted by the Beijing Municipal Office for Migrant Affairs indicated the drop-out rate among migrant children in Beijing was 13.9%. By 2004, based on a survey among 3,864 migrant children and 2,157 migrant families in Beijing, Han (2004) suggested that the nonattendance rate among migrant children had dropped to 2.8%. However, many of the migrant schools are still plagued by high mobility of students, high rates of teacher turnover, less qualified teachers, poor school conditions, and substandard curriculum. Migrant workers are constantly moving from place to place in search of jobs, and their children

have no choice but to transfer from school to school. Most migrant schools do not have databases of student registration and records, making it difficult to track students' displacement (Han, 2004).

In addition to high student mobility, migrant schools face the problem of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. The teacher turnover rate is high due to low wages and heavy teaching loads. For example, according to a 2002 survey of 59 migrant schools in Shanghai, Ding (2004) reported that 78.3% of the teachers made a monthly income of 700 yuan or less. The average monthly income for local office workers, however, was 2,815 yuan in 2004 (City of Shanghai, 2005). Many teachers use migrant schools as a stepping stone. Once they find a better job, they quit teaching, leaving the migrant children behind. For those teachers who choose to stay, they may not have the necessary teaching experience or qualifications. Among those surveyed, 66% had a senior high school or a secondary normal school education, and 7% had only a middle school education. Only 30% had a two-year college or higher education (Ding, 2004).

Moreover, the operating conditions in migrant schools vary greatly because these schools are set up with private funds and rely mainly on student tuition as revenue. Many migrant schools have not been approved and thus not inspected by the local educational department. Without official approval and inspection, these schools are operating illegally, and subject to closure. Some better operated migrant schools lease empty public school buildings, whereas others have classes in civilian homes, dilapidated warehouses, or primitive jerrybuilt houses (Ding, 2004; Han, 2004). Classrooms are overcrowded with as many as 93 students (Ding, 2004). Lighting, heating, and ventilation are poor; some schools lack fire exits, drinking water, sanitary facilities, health clinics, and playgrounds. Among the 55 surveyed migrant schools in Beijing, 11 do not have bathrooms, so students have to use public toilets outside the schools (Han, 2004). Because most migrant schools do not have playgrounds, physical education classes are held either on the street or on the margins of farmland. Migrant children are found to play on vegetable patches, trash piles, or narrow alleys and lanes. Such operating conditions and lack of facilities seriously impact the physical, psychological, and academic development of migrant children (Han, 2004).

The inequity of migrant children's education is further exacerbated by the substandard curriculum in migrant schools. Due to a lack of funding, qualified teachers, and facilities, many migrant schools can only offer basic Chinese language and math classes, whereas urban students in public schools have an opportunity to learn English, computer skills, music, arts, social studies, science, and so forth. The discrepancies in curriculum and teaching materials result in difficulties for migrant children with adjusting when they transfer to different schools (Han, 2004).

Because the current public educational system is incapable of meeting the needs of schooling of migrant children in China, private schools set up by migrants have developed and expanded to fill the gap. However, due to their lack of funding, qualified teachers, facilities, and standardized curriculum, migrant schools are not the silver bullet to resolve the problem of compulsory education for migrant children. Most migrant parents consider such schools as "merely temporary venues for education, providing their children with a basic knowledge of mathematics, reading and writing" (Han, 2004, p. 44). Moreover, even this hope of a temporary education has been shattered by the recent global financial turmoil.

The Global Economic Crisis And A Trend Of Reverse Migration

The recent global financial and economic crisis has had a significant, negative impact on the Chinese economy. In 2008, China's fourth-quarter gross domestic product (GDP) growth reached a seven-year low of 6.8%, dragging the 2008 GDP growth rate down from 13% in 2007 to 9%

(Huang, 2009). Exports in November 2008 were down 2.2% year-on-year in the first monthly decline since June 2001; meanwhile, low-end commodity exports such as garment enterprises are seeing an export decline as much as 60% compared to 2007 ("China's RMB," 2009). The global recession is shuttering factories, halting construction projects, and even closing multinational companies, pushing millions out of their jobs or into salary cuts or freezes. China's official unemployment rate hit a 30-year high of 9% in 2008 (Tschang, 2009). Fast growing unemployment has ignited resentment from urban citizens toward migrant workers, who are being blamed for taking city jobs (Li, B., 2005). Urban residents abusing or mocking migrant workers in public is not uncommon (Li, Y., 2003). Migrant workers are not welcomed or even forbidden to be present in many public places or to use public services. For example, in the city of Qingdao, some citizens suggested having separate seats for migrant workers on buses, and in Beijing, some public toilets collected fines if migrant workers were found using them (Cai, 2002; Yang, 2002).

Under pressure from local constituents and residents, urban governments have passed legislation and regulations to discourage employment of migrant workers. For instance, the Shanghai Bureau of Labor and Social Security issued *The Regulation on Categorized Usage and Employment of Labor from Outside Shanghai by Local Employers*, which divides jobs into three categories: outside labor allowed; limited usage of outside labor; and outside labor forbidden (Li, B., 2005, p.60). Similarly, Beijing issued regulations that were guided by the principle of "Urban First, Rural Second; Beijingers First, Outsiders Second" (Jiang, 2002). Such regulations effectively prevent migrant workers from entering the desirable sections of the urban labor market (Chen & Qiao, 2002).

In the sector of heavy labor, including manufacturing, construction, and mining, migrant workers suffered the worst from layoffs due to the global economic downturn. As of February 2009, it is estimated that over 20 million migrant workers have lost their jobs (Macartney, 2009; Tschang, 2009). Urban employees are typically eligible for social insurance and protections covering pensions, unemployment, health, work injuries, and maternity leave. However, migrant workers are excluded from the social welfare system. Government policy, social exclusion, and the global economic crisis have put migrant workers in a vulnerable, powerless and voiceless position (Li, B., 2005), which makes it harder for migrant workers and their children to gain a permanent foothold in the city. Thus, many have had no choice but to return to their rural hometown, leading to a trend of reverse migration. According to Macartney (2009), 15.3% or about one in seven migrants have returned to their places of origins.

Migrant children are facing many challenges as they move back to their rural area of origin (CLB, 2009). First, many migrant children, who were born and raised in the city, must adjust to a new lifestyle and living conditions when they return to rural areas. As long-term city dwellers, migrant children have become used to the conveniences that city life offers, such as electricity, tap water, and flush toilets. In rural areas, however, these conveniences may not exist. Moreover, although the central government requires the rural schools to admit returned migrant children unconditionally, these schools are often unable to provide the resources needed to comply with this mandate. Even when migrant students are accepted in the local rural schools, they have difficulties in their studies due to the discrepancies in curriculum, textbooks, and teaching methods. These challenges put migrant children at higher risk for low school performance, high dropout rate, and serious psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem (Chan, 2009).

In response to the global financial turmoil and to put the tumbling economy back on track, in November of 2008 the Chinese central government announced a massive stimulus package of

4 trillion yuan³ (US \$586 billion; “China’s RMB,” 2009). However, no expenditure on migrant children’s education was specified in the stimulus package. Migrant children fall through the cracks once again, and they remain the “invisible” population in China’s society.

Conclusion

The right to education is a basic human right. As Human Rights in China (2002) stated, “education is recognized as a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights” (p. 32). However, this basic human right of migrant children in China has been constantly denied due to the rigid *hu kou* system. The global economic turmoil further strained government funding and provided a seemingly legitimate excuse for local government to shrug off their responsibility to educate migrant children. Even if their parents manage to send them to local public schools, migrant children still face institutional discrimination that diminishes their life quality and hinders their chances of success.

In response to the acute problem of limited access to urban public education, migrant communities set up schools in which migrant children have a sense of belonging and learn basic reading, writing, and mathematics. But these migrant schools are plagued with their own problems and can only temporarily relieve the problem of migrant children’s education. To ensure that education is available and accessible to all requires all levels of government to be involved in changing the policies and allocating more funding. As Chan (2009) suggested,

What is needed is a wide-ranging and systemic reform to the *hu kou* and social welfare system. . . . The ultimate solution is to reduce the disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of socio-economic development and welfare provisions, and to eventually abolish the *hu kou* system (p. 66).

To make education available to all children, including migrant children, the central government should first develop a comprehensive policy to give migrant children access to formal, state-run education at the place where they are currently residing regardless of their place of *hu kou* registration. In the meantime, human rights advocates recommend all levels of government take strong and enforceable measures to end the institutional discrimination, exclusion, and injustices suffered by migrant children. For example, they call for the discriminatory fees levied only on migrant families to be immediately abolished (HRIC, 2002, p. 39). Integration rather than segregation is encouraged to promote better understanding and communication between locals and migrants. Some grassroots integration initiatives have been promoted by international, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and research institutions, including UNICEF, Rural Women and Migrant Workers’ Home, Compassion for Migrant Children (CMC), and Beijing Academy of Social Sciences. But this article argues that governments should take the major responsibility for welfare provision and the social and economic integration of migrants and their children. Moreover, it suggests that central and local governments allocate substantially increased resources for the education of migrant children.

It is estimated that a total of 1.8 million migrant children between the ages of 6 and 14 do not receive any formal education in today’s China (HRIC, 2002). If the pressing issue of migrant children’s education is not resolved, a new wave of low-skilled workers will appear in the near future. As Han (2004) suggested, “These people will have lived on the margins of the cities since childhood and will grow up as ‘second-class citizens,’ discriminated against and rejected, and as such will constitute a new and serious latent danger in society” (p. 53). Social issues such as growing urban unemployment, mounting tension over the treatment of migrant workers and their

children, poverty, and inequality have become more acute in the global economic crisis. Without top-down social reforms that target the inequality and vulnerability of this disadvantaged group, economic recovery and sustained economic growth will unavoidably suffer, leading to high risk of social instability and crises (Li, B., 2005).

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. The current exchange rate is one US dollar equals 6.8 yuan. The annual per capital income of urban households of 12,973 yuan is equivalent to 1,908 dollars; whereas the rural household income of 4,307 yuan is equivalent to 633 dollars.
2. Provisional Measures for the Schooling of Migrant Children and Young people was passed on March 2, 1998. The key points include: municipalities should allow migrant children aged between 6 and 14 to study in full-time state-run and privately run schools with the status of temporary students; and the main responsibility for education should remain in the out-flowing areas (CLB, 2009, p. 72).
3. The stimulus package includes 10 major steps over the next two years. It provides for RMB280 billion to be spent on housing projects for low-income urban residents; RMB370 billion on improvement of people's livelihood and infrastructure in rural areas; RMB40 billion on medical care, culture and education causes; RMB350 billion on ecological investment; and RMB1 trillion on disaster relief and reconstruction. In terms of spending on education, the stimulus package will accelerate the development of the cultural and education sectors, and constructing junior high schools in rural western and central areas (Retrieved from http://www.mwe.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/publications.nldetail/object_id/d528fcbb-3b1a-4c71-bc8f-ce5dacc20504.cfm).

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