Under the Equity Discourse: Divergent School Practices for Rural Migrant Children in Chinese Urban Schools

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This paper examines how Chinese urban schools respond to the unprecedentedly large number of rural migrant children under the emerging discourse of educational equity. Drawing upon longitudinal field research in two Beijing public schools, this study finds two contrasting school practices with regards to the migrant children, one emphasizing tailored education ("differentiation") and the other acting school-wide upon the same curriculum and pedagogy ("mainstreaming"). While the two schools both claim to serve the best interest of their migrant intakes and promote educational equity, they have not been able to meet the migrant students' true educational needs. Student-oriented, inclusive education is advocated as an alternative concept of equity for Chinese schools at the end of the paper.

Introduction

With China's rapid modernization and urbanization in the past three decades, a group of "rural migrant children" have emerged in Chinese cities. These rural migrant children largely come from villages to join their parents who work as manual labor in big cities along China's east coast. According to the latest census data, the total estimated number of Chinese migrant children (aged 0-17) had reached 35.81 million, 80% of which (28.77 million) were of rural origin (All-China Women's Federation Report, 2013).

For a long time, these migrant children were not entitled to public social welfare programs in the host cities due to their official household registration (*Hukou* in Chinese) as rural, out-of-state residents. Disadvantaged in socioeconomic status and academic performance, the majority of them were excluded from the urban school system and could only resort to low-quality makeshift schools (*dagong zidi xuexiao*) established by migrant workers or parents in city outskirts (Han, 2004). The growing visibility of rural migrant children and their lack of equal educational opportunities prompted the Chinese government to issue an important policy in 2001, popularly known as the "Two Mainlies" (*liangweizhu*) policy, which stipulated that education of migrant children are the main responsibilities of host cities and of public schools. Under this policy, migrant children who satisfy eligibility conditions[ii] are legally ensured to access urban schools up to Grade 9 and enjoy "equal treatment" as the local children (Ministry of Education, 2010). The "Two Mainlies" policy reflects the determination of the Chinese central government in promoting educational equity and advancing social justice.

In spite of the increasing complexity and stringency of the school enrollment paperwork required by individual cities (such as Beijing, Shanghai, etc.) and schools (such as elite schools) in recent years, migrant students have constituted about 30% of the total student population in urban public schools (Grades 1-9) nationally (Ministry

of Education, 2017). Moreover, as more and more urban middle-class students manage to get into "good" public schools, weak schools with less favorable reputation in Chinese cities tend to have a predominant proportion of migrant students, some as high as 80% (Luo, Zhong & Tsang, 2015). With such an unprecedentedly large number of students from rural family backgrounds, those urban schools sitting at the lower end of the school hierarchy face an unfamiliar student body. How do these urban schools respond? In what ways do they perceive the migrant children as different from local children? To what extent do they differentiate them and accommodate to their special needs in the school curriculum and daily activities? This paper seeks to investigate the divergent school practices towards the migrant children in urban China and what impact these practices may have on this disadvantaged group.

In the following sections, I will first draw upon international scholarship on educational equity and equal treatment as the conceptual framework within which the schooling of Chinese migrant children will be discussed. Data for the study comes from prolonged ethnographic fieldwork in two Beijing public schools. The findings for the study hope to contribute to a better understanding of migrant children's experiences in the Chinese urban school settings and call for a reconsideration of equity in actual school practice for disadvantaged students.

Equity in Theory and School Practice

The concepts of equity and equal opportunity of education have a long tradition as key terms in sociology of education and educational policymaking (Nash, 2004; Coleman, 1966). A review of the literature indicates that educational equity consists of two basic dimensions. The first is fairness, referring to a uniform standard that applies to everyone in a certain education system. The second is inclusion, implying that one's ascriptive traits such as race, gender, class or family background, etc. should not interfere with their potential for academic success. School finance scholars tend to use the terms "horizontal equity" and "vertical equity" to distinguish between the two (Berne & Stiefel, 1999). While horizontal equity embraces uniform distribution of resources and opportunities regardless of people's different initial status or capabilities to use these resources, vertical equity recognizes that some are at a greater disadvantage than others and aims to compensate for these people's initial misfortunes so that everyone is capable of attaining the same level of access to goods and resources. In succinct terms, horizontal equity emphasizes "equal treatment of equals", whereas vertical equity entails "different treatment to different people" (Berne & Stiefel, 1999). The Chinese ancient educator Confucius was famous for two aphorisms that bore similar meanings: Instruction knows no class distinction (youjiaowulei 有教无类); Teach students in accordance with their aptitude (yincaishijiao 因材施教) (Sun & Du, 2008).

However, debates on the meaning and provisions of equity have endured since the 1960s, given scarce resources and unequal starting chances in any given society (Jencks, 1988; Rawls, 1971; Wilson, 1991). Hemelsoet (2012), quoting Dubet (2005), distinguished three dominant conceptions of equality that are relevant to education: meritocratic, distributive, and social equality. Each of these forms of equality refers to a different underlying idea of what is (most) "just" for all, i.e., a particular theory of justice and a notion of what is "good". Meritocratic equality of opportunities offers

equal starting chances for all and allows individuals to compete with their talents and capacities. Within this view, "the only inequalities that can be tolerated are those that result from merit" (Hemelsoet, 2012, p. 525). The introduction of compulsory education, free primary education, open access to higher education and many other initiatives, certainly induce more chances for participation among pupils from different ethnic groups and social classes. The distributive equality deals with the difference principle which states that inequalities can be just as long as they are to the benefit of the least well off (Rawls, 1971). A well-known example is the politics of affirmative action achieved through favorable recruitment of applicants from socio-politically disadvantaged groups. Social equality of opportunities emphasizes equal outcomes rather than equal starting chances and focuses on what schools should warrant for all. Here equal opportunities are weighted on the basis of what the weakest can achieve. A broad common curriculum, or "*minimum in common*" (Hemelsoet, 2012, p. 525), is advocated on its behalf.

Although equity in the abstract sense has been accepted as one of the most desirable principles by educators and policymakers worldwide, it is nonetheless difficult to enact it in school practice and there is no "one-size-fits-all" model to achieve equity for all students. With an increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds, today's schools are facing tremendous challenges in their attempt to provide equal educational opportunity for all. Segregation had been one of the common practices in the past to deal with students of different color on the pretext of "separate but equal". With the 1954 Brown vs. Board Act, the US Supreme Court ruled that separate schools were not equal given the huge disparity in funding and resources between white schools and black schools (Clotfelter, 2004). However, desegregation itself could not guarantee equity as the 1974 *Lau vs. Nichols* demonstrated. Immigrant and language minority students' needs were highlighted when the US Supreme court ruled that just providing the students with the same textbooks, desks and teachers, the so-called mainstreaming or "equal treatment" was not sufficient to ensure equal educational opportunity (McPherson, 2000). Vertical equity of "different treatment to different people" was called for.

Another school practice that has become controversial due to equity concerns is tracking (Oakes, 2005). Due to students' differences in natural intelligence and abilities, tracking and its various modifications have been among the predominant organizing practices of modern schools in many countries, a widely accepted practice that seemed to satisfy the "vertical equity" principle to treat gifted students differently from average/slow students. Unfortunately, tracking is inclined to create internal segregation and ethnocentric social Darwinism. According to Oakes (2005), the disproportionate placement of poor and minority students into low tracks does not reflect their actual learning abilities. Moreover, students initially placed in low-track classes are often taught in watered-down curriculum and lack the motivation to study, eventually leading to stigmatization and school failure. For these reasons, while some educators and policymakers continued to support tracking as appropriate, other scholars denounced it as a contributor to inequality in the school system (Oakes, 2005).

As a response to the above criticisms, inclusive education was advocated by western education scholars and practitioners in recent years (Huang, 2004; Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Porter & Smith, 2011). It was first put forward by UNESCO in 1994 on

the World conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality in Spain (UNESCO, 1994). In a narrow sense, inclusive education refers to the placement of students with disabilities in regular classrooms or schools. However, as used by UNESCO (2005), it may incorporate any marginalized groups, such as religious, racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, immigrants, girls, the poor, students with disabilities, HIV/AIDS patients, remote populations and more, in the attempt to provide equal educational opportunity for all. Moreover, the concept of inclusion differs from previously held notions of integration or mainstreaming. While the latter two imply that learners with special educational needs should try to catch up and assimilate into the mainstream, inclusion places premium on their social, civil and educational rights to participate in the regular school system along with others (UNESCO, 2005). Proponents argue that inclusive education is good for all students because it builds a caring community where everyone's experiences and abilities are valued (Huang, 2004).

Equity entails multidimensional considerations and complex solutions in school practice. However, it has not been a prominent social value in Chinese schools until the beginning of the 21st century, although there have always been moralities and practices of "helping the weak" (fuzhu ruoxiao 扶助弱小). On the one hand, China's Confucian traditions emphasize a hierarchical social order based on meritocracy. On the other hand, the early attempts of socialist China under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1949-1976) to achieve radical equalitarianism failed, leading to the pursuit of efficiency and excellence during the reform and opening-up era since 1978. It was not until the Hu-Wen administration (2002-2012) and their "people-oriented" (yirenweiben 以人为本) concept that equity became a dominant discourse in Chinese education and society. The western notions of equity, as mentioned above, were imported and have been largely adopted by Chinese education scholars and policymakers, along with certain indigenous values such as harmony, fairness, impartialness etc. (Liu, 2002; Wang, 2006). Yet in terms of school practice, there has not been a consensus about what educational equity involves. It is the local school contexts, school leaders' philosophy as well as the school agendas and strategies that together shape school practitioners' interpretations of equity.

This article explored how equity was viewed and acted upon in two Beijing schools with a large proportion of migrant students. In the following sections, I use two terms: differentiation and assimilation, in the discussion of school practices and educational equity. Differentiation corresponds to the idea of vertical equity and in this study refers specifically to the school's attempts to differentiate migrant students in teaching and learning based on their "migrant" status. Assimilation is presumed on horizontal equity and refers to the school practice of incorporating all students, regardless of their family background or academic preparation, into mainstream (urban) school activities and providing them with an undifferentiated curriculum and pedagogy.

Rural Migrant Children and Their Schooling in Chinese Cities

The emergence of migrant children in Chinese urban cities has drawn increasing attention from scholars across different disciplines, both domestic and outside China. The initial scholarly interest focused on discussions of the *Hukou* system in China and the institutional constraints that deprived migrant children of legal access to urban

public schools (Li, 2004; Chen, 2005). With the establishment of the "Two Mainlies" policy in 2001 and its enforcement in the following years, more migrant children were able to enroll in public schools in urban areas. However, school access continued to be a serious concern due to the local unwillingness to implement the policy, especially in light of the recent population control pressures in big metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai (Yang, 2017).

In addition to school access, increasing studies sought to examine migrant children's schooling experiences and psycho-social adaptations in urban schools (Luo, 2011; Wang & Gao, 2010; Shi, 2017; Lu & Zhou, 2013). Unanimously, these studies revealed the educational difficulties migrant children faced in public schools as well as the social and cultural barriers that prevented them from successfully integrating into the urban society. Due to the disconnect between the rural and urban school systems, including different quality of instruction, textbooks, learning styles and tests, the majority of migrant children possessed insufficient academic foundations and lag behind their urban peers in school performance (Lin et al., 2009; Liu, Holmes & Albright, 2015). At the same time, migrant children with rural origin and low test scores tended to be stigmatized in urban schools and experience loneliness, anxiety and a sense of inferiority (Kwong, 2011; Mu & Jia, 2016). In general, these studies attributed the many challenges faced by migrant children to the lack of financial capital and cultural capital in the migrant families and to the inequitable rural-urban divide in the Chinese society, without paying due attention to the impact of micro-level schooling processes.

In recent years, school type has been found to be an important contributor to migrant children's school failure and social reproduction. Scholars conducted in-depth ethnographies within migrant private schools or engaged in comparative studies between students in these schools and in public schools (Ming, 2014; Li, 2015; Xiong, 2015). These studies highlighted the chaos, tensions and the "counter-school culture" prevalent in migrant schools facing legitimacy issues and with no government support, yet few ventured to examine the divergent school practices and their underlying rationales with regards to the education of migrant children within public schools. This study aims to fill in the gap and explore, with an in-depth comparative lens of two public schools in Beijing, (1) how different public schools in urban China try to accommodate their intake of migrant children and (2) what are the societal, political and cultural factors leading to divergent school practices towards this disadvantaged group of students?

Research Sites and Methods

The study was part of a longitudinal research project (from 2011 till now) on the schooling experiences of migrant children in Beijing public schools, sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Education. Beijing, the capital of China and the hub of business enterprises in North China, was one of the top three destination cities attracting the rural migrants, the other two being Shanghai and Guangzhou. More than 8 million migrants resided in Beijing in 2015, making up 37.9% of the total population (21.7 million) in Beijing (Zhao & Wei, 2017). In the past decade, the number of Beijing local children has decreased as a result of the one-child policy. At the same time, the number of school-age migrant children (Grades 1-9) increased dramatically, from 227 thousand in 2004 to 473 thousand in 2015 (Zhao & Wei, 2017), constituting more than one-third

of the total student population during the compulsory education period (Grade 1-9).

In the project, the research team, consisting of two university professors (co-principal investigators) and three graduate students, visited many public schools in Beijing and had talks with a number of principals, teachers, migrant children and parents. Having obtained a general picture of migrant children's schooling in Beijing, the research team selected two public schools to do classroom observations and qualitative interviews. The selection of the two schools, Lotus School and Safety School (pseudonyms), was purposeful for the sake of comparison. They were both primary schools offering grades 1-6 with a large migrant student population and therefore regarded as "weak" schools, yet they embraced different goals, visions and strategies in terms of school development and teaching practice with regards to the migrant children.

Lotus School was situated in the Sijiqing Township in the outskirts of Haidian District, Beijing. Sijiqing Township used to be a rural area with the majority of its residents farmers. As part of Beijing's overall urban planning, Sijiqing underwent a series of infrastructure construction in the 1990s. Most of its residents moved to newly built buildings, while the former villages became home to migrant workers and their families due to the low living expenses. Lotus School started to enroll migrant children since 1996. The school principal thus described their student recruitment in 2010:

> "*Our district education commission allocated 160 students to our school. Only 50 came. That was no good. We were asked to open 4 classes, but with so few students, whom shall our teachers teach? In the end, we enrolled 110 migrant students and got the number up to 160*" (Lotus Principal 4-26-2011).

With the flowing out of local children and the influx of migrant children, about 80% of the student population at Lotus School at the time of our study was migrant children coming from 20 provinces and regions all over the country, with the rest being children of the local farmers. Because of the diverse origins of the students, the school principal nicknamed Lotus School as "*Little China*".

Safety School was located in an old alley at Dongcheng District in the center city of Beijing, surrounded by dilapidated buildings, noisy streets and crowded peddlers. As the school teachers informed us, the school was small with limited room for development. Furthermore, the school leaders hadn't been able to grasp the opportunity to make it grow in the school restructuring reforms. Therefore, Safety School had only about 300 students, 92% of whom were children of the peddlers, cleaners, restaurant workers and attendants who migrated "*from all the different parts of China except Tibet and Xinjiang*" (Safety Principal 9-17-2011) and settled down in the neighborhood. The small number of local children in the school came from working-class families residing nearby. As many of the migrant children were born in Beijing and grew up in the neighborhood, they did not look different from the local children except in terms of *Hukou*.

The research team visited the two schools by turn, usually with one professor and one or two graduate students going to one school at a time. As co-principal investigators, we visited the two schools from March 2011 to October 2012, on an every-two-week basis. During the site visits, we usually spent the whole day in the school, doing

classroom observations in the mornings and interviewing the school principals, selected teachers and students in the afternoons. We observed all the classrooms in Grade 6, the final year of primary school in China, across the two schools. During the classroom observations, we paid special attention to teachers' teaching styles and students' in-class participation in order to identify any learning difficulties and how teachers helped them overcome these difficulties. During recess, we would talk casually with the teachers and students, when they were not engaged, to triangulate with what we observed. Each of us wrote our own observation fieldnotes.

At the same time, we[iii] conducted formal, in-depth interviews with the principal and three head teachers from each school to get more information about the school curriculum, teaching methods and development strategies etc. We also tried to elicit their attitudes towards the migrant children and their opinions on the rationales behind the school practices. With the help of head teachers, we formally interviewed 4 migrant students and 2 parents from each school to learn about their migration history, children's difficulties in the urban school and expectations for the future etc. The interviews were open-ended in a conversation style, typically lasting from one hour to one hour and a half. The interview data were recorded and later transcribed by the three graduate students. Data for the study came from the collectively produced interview transcripts and my own observation fieldnotes. Please refer to Table 1 for the list of the interviewees.

Table 1: The List of Interviewees

School	Name	Gender	School	Name	Gender
Lotus School	Principal Li	M	Safety School	Principal Meng	F
	Teacher Li	F		Teacher Qin	F
	Teacher Luo	F		Teacher Chen	F
	Teacher Zhu	F		Teacher Pang	F
	Parent Ma	F		Parent Wang	M
	Parent Wang	F		Parent Xu	F
	Student Ma	F		Student Wang	F

	Student Liu	M		Student Xu	M
	Student Han	F		Student Zhang	F
	Student Gao	M		Student Zhao	M

Throughout the field visits, we wrote memos and discussed preliminary findings with the research team to facilitate subsequent data collection and analysis. We applied a "constant comparing and contrasting" method rooted in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maxwell, 1996) for thematic analysis of the data. Similar school routines, events, and activities across the two schools were grouped together under one category, while contrasting beliefs, practices and attitudes were highlighted at the same time to permit the drawing of possible conclusions about the differences between the two schools. The tentative conclusions were then triangulated, checked and supported with more evidence from the ongoing participant observations and informal talks.

Discussion

The two schools in the study both advocated "equity" and put migrant students in the same classrooms as local students. However, they preached opposite principles of equity, adopted contrasting educational strategies and created vastly different learning environments for the migrant students. Their conceptions of equity were best illustrated by their divergent attitudes towards "differences".

Lotus School: Targeted Education for Migrant Students

Throughout the fieldwork, the school leaders at Lotus School proudly emphasized their differences from other schools in Beijing: "*Because most of our students are migrant children, we should adjust our school curriculum according to their special characteristics and provide a different kind of education*" (Lotus Principal 4-26-2012). The "special characteristics" of the migrant students, according to the school principal and teachers, included high mobility, weak knowledge foundations, and a strong sense of inferiority attached to their non-local status and disadvantaged family backgrounds. Although local Beijing students constituted about 20% of its student population, Lotus School seemed to position itself as a predominantly "migrant children's school" and paid particular attention to their special needs.

First of all, Lotus School made good use of decoration of its physical environment to make the migrant children feel at home. A huge poster stood on the top of the school building, with a well-known Chinese statement on behalf of migrant children in comparison with urban children: "*You compete with me for what your parents have today, but I will compete with you for who I am tomorrow (ni he wo lai bi fu mu, wo he ni lai bi mingtian.*" On the display board in front of the school building, pictures and calligraphies of the Chinese government officials and celebrities who had visited the school and showed care for the migrant children, as well as pictures of migrant children's life and study in the school, were posted. In addition, Lotus school adopted

"Happiness away from Depression, Confidence away from Diffidence" as its motto and had a school song written entitled, "*I am responsible, I am able and I am happy*", both in the attempt to instill such positive dispositions that were perceived to be lacking among the migrant children. Similarly inspiring words and slogans targeted towards migrant children could be found throughout the campus, from the school walls to each classroom wall. Together, such a configuration of words and pictures aimed to help the migrant students stay strong and persistent in hard work, but at the same time they conveyed a clear message about the non-local identity of the students, exposing and reiterating their inferior social status.

Secondly, Lotus School deliberately adjusted its curriculum and teaching methods to meet migrant students' needs. Although the migrant students were taught from the same textbooks as local students, the teachers at Lotus School commonly expressed their difficulty in teaching the former and reported needing to put more time and efforts into it, compared with teaching the local children. "*We have to start from the very basics so the low-achievers and newcomers do not get frustrated. We have to see to it that they do not lag behind and we encourage them to learn*" (Lotus School Teacher Li 3-14-2012). While other public schools in Beijing were undergoing curriculum reforms in the name of "quality education" and experimenting with innovative teaching methods, Lotus School resorted to traditional teacher-dominated lectures for the most part since the advanced teaching methods often required more student input, as well as parent input. "*We do our best to make them grasp the fundamentals in textbooks. The children cannot understand if you expand knowledge beyond the textbooks. Besides, the parents have no time to help or cannot help at all.*" (Lotus Teacher Luo 4-6-2012) In designing school-based curricula and extracurricular activities, Lotus School also tended to take migrant students' limited family resources into consideration and offered courses that did not require too much material input on the family's part, such as paper-cutting, knitting, calligraphy and recitations, etc. In this way, the curriculum at Lotus School was made more relevant and practical for migrant students to be active participants.

Thirdly, moral and character education occupied an important place at Lotus School to boost migrant students' confidence and encourage them to work hard. A typical example was the school-wide annual project of "Becoming a New Beijinger", in which students expressed their intentions to become a "New Beijinger" through forming good study habits and personal hygiene, learning to be polite, and assimilating into urban lifestyles and values, etc. When teachers motivated the students to learn, they explicitly alluded to their migrant status. "*You must study hard and strive to go to college in the future. Only that way will you stay in the city. Otherwise, you have to go back*" (Lotus School Class Observation 6-12-2012).

While Lotus School claimed to serve the "special needs" of its migrant students, it paid far more attention to developing migrant children's confidence and happiness through extracurricular activities and moral scolding rather than through improving their academic performance. For example, it didn't provide supplementary tutoring to the migrant children who had difficulty to catch up. Nor did it offer additional help or orientation programs for the newcomers who had just transferred to the school from rural schools. Instead, the teachers taught a watered-down curriculum in class and demonstrated low academic expectations towards the migrant children in general. One teacher openly expressed her attitudes,

> "*Our school can't expect them too much…So long as the students understand the basic content materials in the textbooks, that would be more than enough! You can't expect to undertake complex tasks*" (Lotus School Teacher Zhu 3-6–2012).

Therefore, Lotus School's approach towards differentiating the migrant children was not one based on the assumption that migrant children were different but capable learners, but rather on the assumption that they have deficits in learning due to their rural origin and migrant status. Such differentiation with its remedial nature, seemingly in line with "vertical equity", nonetheless diverted from the ideal of "distributive justice" as advocated by Rawls (1971), which aims to redistribute opportunities through different treatment in order to benefit the least well-off.

Because of its positioning as "a school for migrant children", Lotus School attracted great attention in the neighborhood and was deemed successful by the upper-level educational administrators. Donations and visits from public celebrities to the school were frequent. The migrant students at Lotus School were often invited to participate in various art contests and perform in festivals or on TV programs. Obviously, Lotus School had successfully publicized the disadvantages of migrant children and made use of the school image to procure more opportunities and resources for the development of the school. However, the publicity Lotus School won was not always conducive to the benefits of migrant students. Many students expressed strong dislike and even disinclination to participate in the performances and rehearsals. "*We have to rehearse again and again! The afternoon classes are all ruined!*" (Student Ma, 5-11-2012) "*It is like a show, you know. Whenever visitors come, we repeat the same thing. It's all fake*" (Student Han, 5-11-2012). Moreover, the slogans and performances, though intended to be inspiring, worked as clear labels and solidified stereotypes to remind the migrant students of their disadvantaged social status. Frequent and explicit references to their migrant status in daily routines and on TV only intensified this awareness.

In the fieldwork, I found the migrant children at Lotus School frequently used the derogatory "waidiren" (meaning non-locals) label on themselves, which implied second-class citizenship and restricted future schooling opportunities in the city. While being asked which middle school to go to, the migrant children usually pointed to S School nearby as their option. *"Many students in my class would go there. Almost everybody going there is a waidiren. Other schools would have looked down upon us waidiren*" (Lotus School Student Liu 3-6–2012). When a small number of migrant students went to apply for better middle schools with the help of their parents, to our surprise, they were teased and jeered at rather than envied by their classmates. To many migrant students, these efforts were in vain. "*Even if these students could be admitted, they must feel no good there. For one thing, they will fall behind in schoolwork; for another, students going to these schools are all rich kids. They will be looked down upon if they go there*" (Lotus School Student Gao 4-6–2012). Clearly, these migrant students, in trying to shame the few "attempters", had self-selected into the lower track of urban schools and were even diffident to apply for "good" schools. As one parent observed: "*Everything at Lotus is good except for test scores*" (Parent Ma, 5-12-2012). Obviously, the differentiation model that Lotus School adopted is similar to the practice of tracking that has long been criticized for stigmatizing students and producing school failures.

Safety School: Saying No to Differential Treatment

Apparently, Safety School leaders and teachers held different views with regards to what was best education for the migrant students and adopted school practices accordingly. Although they were also clearly aware of the "special characteristics" of the migrant students, they chose to downplay these purposefully and sought to assimilate them in the urban school system. The most prominent words that recurred in our interviews and fieldnotes at Safety School were "equal treatment" and "assimilation".

Unlike Lotus School, the campus of Safety School did not use value-laden slogans or pictures to highlight the disadvantages of the migrant students or demarcate them as a special group in need of help. While Lotus School deliberately created a school image as one that served predominantly migrant children to win publicity, Safety School seemed to position itself as a regular public school. Nowhere could one see anything related to migrant students, even though they made up the majority of the student population. The decorations on the walls and corridors of the school building were mostly Chinese paintings and ancient lyrics. Compared with Lotus School, Safety School was small, quiet and inconspicuous.

In terms of educational goals and school curriculum, Safety School did not create special programs or classes for migrant children. Like the other public schools in Beijing, the teaching activities at Safety School centered around nationally designated textbooks. According to the principal at Safety School,

> "*We run our school wholly under the guidance of Beijing Municipal Education Commission. Our school fulfills every teaching requirement and our facilities are all up to standard. All the courses required by the Commission are offered in our school*" (Safety Principal 9-17-2012).

Student assessments and graduation standards at Safety School were also in accordance with those required by Beijing Municipal Education Commission, even though the migrant students had a low starting point. In the interviews, Safety School teachers justified the strict requirements for student outcomes out of concern for their future schooling options. "*Whether they will enroll in Beijing middle schools or return home, they will take part in examinations and competitions to enter middle school. So the same requirements apply everywhere: academic performance and school behavior*" (Safety School Teacher Qin 9-4-2012). At the same time, they expressed the necessity of equal treatment so as not to damage the self-esteem of the migrant children. "*The migrant students don't like being treated differently. If you consider their special needs, they would believe that you are treating them as outsiders. Some people believe that differential treatment takes their special needs into consideration, but the migrant parents may take it as a discrimination against their children*" (Safety School Teacher Pang 9-27-2012).

In moral education, Safety School used China's past and present and the history of Beijing as educational resources to inculcate patriotism and character building, with little reference to the status of the migrant students themselves. Students' interest in optional classes and extracurricular activities were certainly taken into consideration in designing curriculum for the following year, but in terms of individual aptitude or preference rather than due to group inclination. In daily routines and student

discipline, the teachers at Safety School deliberately avoided mentioning the non-local status of their students. "*It's the same to everybody, no special treatment. Depending on the children's talents, they do what they can do. We won't distinguish who are migrant children and who are not*" (Safety School Teacher Qin 9-4–2012). Thus, unlike Lotus School that tailored their educational programs towards the migrant children, Safety School practiced mainstreaming and acted upon undifferentiated equal treatment. In doing so, it did not advertise itself as a school serving predominantly migrant children, but insisted upon high standards and a rigorous school curriculum as a survival strategy to attract more students, either local or non-local. In fact, Safety School seemed to want to be acknowledged as a "regular" public school in Beijing, as these are often assumed to be of higher quality than schools serving migrant children. *"We can't deteriorate into a migrant children's school. Test scores mean everything. If you don't perform well, the school cannot survive. Many weak schools in Beijing have been closed or taken over these years*" (Safety Principal, 9-17-2012).

Indeed, the migrant students at Safety School were pushed to learn and achieve academic improvement, less burdened by the "colorful" extracurricular activities. At the same time, the practice of mainstreaming helped them avoid constant identity exposure in comparison with their counterparts at Lotus School. The non-local label was inconspicuous. "*They were not that much different from us. We play together. We don't even know who are from outside Beijing*" (Informal talk at Safety School 3-22-2013). To a certain extent, the migrant students at Safety School had a normalized and "pure" school life focused on study.

On the other hand, however, in acting upon the principle of "no differential treatment", Safety School neglected the special educational needs of migrant children as a disadvantaged group. Many migrant children had difficulty catching up in academic study with weak academic foundations from their previous rural schools. A large number of migrant children at Safety School lagged behind and were regarded as "backward" students.

> "*English is the most difficult subject to me. I transferred to Safety School in the second grade. Village schools didn't offer English class until the third grade. I had never learned English, but my classmates had learned for two or more years*" (Safety School Student Wang 10-11-2012).

Under the disguise of equal treatment and fair competition, Safety School did not make any efforts in terms of remedial or compensatory curriculum to help migrant students learn. Instead, it attributed the behavior and study of migrant children to their lack of effort or hard work. The "swim or sink" philosophy of mainstreaming without taking initial disadvantages into consideration placed the migrant students in a marginalized position at Safety School and exacerbated their feelings of being neglected and not belonging in urban schools.

At first sight, the mainstreaming model adopted by Safety School reminds us of Confucius' teaching that instruction knows no class distinction, as well as the ideal of "horizontal equity" and "meritocratic equality" that subjects everyone to a uniform standard. A closer examination based on in-depth fieldwork nonetheless indicates that the rationale behind such a model lies in the eagerness of Safety School to get rid of the reputation as a weak school. Through the mainstreaming/assimilation strategy,

Safety School hopes to survive in the urban school system increasingly driven by test score competition and efficiency. Yet in doing so, it neglects the unequal footing and unbalanced power relations embedded in China's Hukou-based political economy that disadvantaged migrant students are situated in.

Conclusion

While providing equal educational opportunity for disadvantaged children is a global concern, actual practice varies from school to school and depends on the specific school context as well as its available resources and educational philosophy upheld by its leaders. The two case schools in the study adopted quite different ways of educating migrant students and both seemed to be justified by their respective conceptions of educational equity. While Lotus School highlighted the "special needs" of the migrant students in the hope to attract public attention, Safety School acted upon "no differential treatment" in its efforts to survive in the competitive urban school system. However, this study demonstrated that both differentiation (vertical equity) and assimilation (horizontal equity) have positive and negative impacts on the migrant students.

The two case schools in the study were deliberately selected for the purpose of comparison and couldn't represent all schools serving migrant students in Beijing, let alone throughout China. However, in our longitudinal study, we found many Chinese urban schools act upon a preconceived or misconceived discourse of equity, either intentionally or unintentionally. While claiming to serve the best interests of the migrant students, their conceptions of equity and school practices seem to be shaped more by the sociopolitical circumstances they are situated in and the needs of school development than by the true educational needs of migrant students. With the increasing influx of rural migrant children in the cities, it is time for the Chinese urban schools to truly care about them, learn about their hardships and maladjustments in the rural-urban transition, and place a premium on their social, civil and educational rights above everything else. Instead of resorting to superficial confidence-building activities and watered-down curriculum or totally ignoring their disadvantaged circumstances in the mainstreaming classes, urban schools should develop a "student-oriented" conception of equity and reconsider what "equal treatment" in school practice implies for migrant children. Future research on school equity in the Chinese context, both theoretical and empirical, can throw lights in this regard.

While absolute equity is hard to achieve in any given society, a more complex, fluid and dynamic conceptualization of equity, i.e., inclusion, has been put forward as an alternative discourse to simplistic or mechanic views of equity. Inclusion is also compatible with China's socialist ideals as well as its vision of building a harmonious society. However, given its long-rooted Hukou regime and rural-urban dualistic social structure, China has a long way to go before institutional barriers confronting migrant children can be removed. Without the macro-level structural reforms, public schools cannot be expected to adhere to the theory and practice of inclusive education in the truest sense.

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Notes

[1] In China, the out-of-state concept is more complicated. It applies to those residing in the same province but outside the particular city/district. The household registration (Hukou) includes two components: one denotes rural/urban status; the other specifies one's locale of jurisdiction from the provincial level down to the street/neighborhood.

[2] The eligibility conditions vary from city to city, but the basic requirements include: parents' employment proof in the host cities, their temporary residence in the neighborhood, social security record, single-child certificate, and the proof of no caregivers in their place of origin etc.

[3] The co-principal investigators took the lead in the interviews, while the graduate student(s) were assistants, asking questions occasionally.

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