The International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

# *Exploring Minority Students' Difficulties: A Case Study in a Chinese Charity School*

**Jing He[1,a,*]**

[1]*The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China, 100000*
*a. jinghjingh@163.com*
**corresponding author*

***Abstract:*** With the urbanization and industrialization, the population of migrant minority people is constantly increasing. In fact, there are 1.12million migrant minority children in China today, but they do not receive enough publicity. This qualitative research adopts interviews and thematic analysis to explore further to the current situation of migrant minority children in the full-care charity organization in Beijing, China. The researcher conducted interviews and follow-up interviews with ten migrant minority students from Yi ethnical minority group aged between ten years old to seventeen years old, and finally employs the transcriptions of two children and two teachers. The research concludes that these students encounter obstacles in bilingual language learning, lack sufficient parental involvement, and harbor inner conflicts of identities. Based on these discoveries, the researcher attempts to raise possible solutions in terms of policies and business to address these problems.

***Keywords:*** migrant minority children, parental involvement, language learning, identity issues, charity school

## 1. Introduction

The Reform and Open Policy contributes to urbanization in China, resulting in an increase in the number of migrants. According to the seventh national population census of China, the number of migrants has reached 336 million, a 70% increase over the previous decade. Chinese society consists of many different ethnic groups, which takes up 8.89% of the total population. In the past decade, the number of ethnic people has raised by 10.26% [1]. ,As the number of migrant parents rises, their kids' education has become an important issue in the field of education. Migrant children from minority ethnic groups receive relatively less attention than other migrant populations, despite constituting a large proportion of the migrant population. More than 90% of the 8.44 million migrant ethnic minority children who do not live with their parents are children affected by population migration, including 7.08 million children left behind and 1.12 million migrant children [2].

In recent years, minority children's education has consistently received increased focus. According to the Education department of Guanxi Normal University "Although we come from different regions and have different cultural and social norms, we always need to assist each other, comprehend, and tolerate one another. We should simultaneously foster a sense of community within the Chinese nation and unite as one" [3]. Based on the author's own experience, the author concurred with this sentiment. The author endured three school transfers, witnessed the transformation of educational resources and opportunities, and encountered adaptations and incorporations. The author made every

© 2023 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

effort to learn a new dialect, live independently at school without parental supervision, and establish a new identity in each new city and school. The author currently resides in Beijing and recently discovered that there is a public welfare charity organization that houses the majority of Yi minority migrant children. It is believed that their dual identity will present them with more challenges, so the author attempts to ascertain their status quo and the issues they encounter to assist them in establishing plural identities, having better language-learning conditions, and fostering cooperation between their parents and schools.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the current state of their problems and to propose potential solutions. Listed below are the research questions:

First, migrant minority students must learn Mandarin at the full-care charity school, but all of the teachers are all from majority group and cannot understand the students' native tongue. Therefore, will they encounter numerous difficulties during the language learning process?

Second, migrant minority students attending a charity school are unable to see their parents for an extended period of time, especially during the global pandemic. Consequently, will the insufficient parental involvement lead to problems?

Third, migrant minority students attending a charity school had to endure a move from the suburbs to the city, as well as from minority-gathering sites to majority-gathering sites. Consequently, would they have identity issues?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is a concern in every family. It is a crucial responsibility for parents. Huang discovered that there are four distinct types of parental involvement: supportive, normal, strict, and free [4]. Parent involvement has positive effects on the bilingual language learning of migrant minority children according to Guo[5], because the family language cultural environment influences both the mother tongue and the second language [6].

According to Cui, migrant minority children with insufficient parent involvement are unable to socialize [7]. In addition, the material and spiritual lives of migrant minority children without parental accompaniment are problematic.

### 2.2. Language Learning

Another important adaptation for migrant minority students is learning Mandarin. Wang observed that the majority of teachers would provide minority students with various forms of language learning support [8]. Although the teachers attempt to assist students in learning Mandarin, the quality of their assistance must be enhanced. Wang reported that language barriers prevented social workers from helping minority children [9].

### 2.3. Identity Issue

Yang and Shi clarified that identity is the process by which an individual identifies a cultural group and develops a sense of belonging [10]. Migrant minority children can reconstruct the concept of identity and establish pluralistic concepts of identity in order to accomplish this.

Zhao suggests that the identity formation and recognition of Chinese minority students have negative impacts on their social integration such as school integration, social interaction, identity management, and self-evaluation [11]. In addition, parent involvement plays an essential role in their social integration. Sa illustrates that the identity of ethnical minority children plays an important role in the formation of healthy mental states and self-confidence. In addition, they have already

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

established their identities during adolescence [12]. However, when interviewed, minority migrant children demonstrated unclear identities, such as in the classroom.

Numerous researchers have investigated the identity issues of minority children[13-17]. Yang Li and Chun Yong conducted scale research and discovered that the identity of migrant children is marginal and vague, which contradicts the finding of Sa [12]. Changhui Shi illustrated that environmental change would have an effect on the identity of children [18]. The culture of the city and the culture of the countryside confuse the identities of children, causing their identities to be in a state of limbo, Built on this, Peng Lei demonstrated that there are four types of children's identities: achieving, confounding, marginalized, and immersive [19].

## 3. Methodology

This qualitative study interprets the author's understanding of natural phenomena through first-hand observation and interviews. Considering children from minority ethnic groups have limited reading comprehension and writing skills, face-to-face interviews are the most effective way to collect primary data. First, the author conducted interviews with the unheard voices of the migrant minority children from the Yi ethnic group in a full-care charity organization, recorded and transcribed the conversation, and then analyzed the data using grounded theory.

Participants are two teachers and two students. The teachers are from the organization aged between 25 and 35. The students' age ranges from 10 to 18. The teachers are from the Han group (majority group), while the students are from the Yi ethnical minority group. Ms. Zhan teaches math classes, and Ms. Yuan teaches Mandarin classes.

The author collected all the data from a full-care charity organization in Beijing, China. Most students studying in this organization are from the minority disadvantaged families that provide limited support for the students. Even worse, some students are from single family. Data includes the interviews with 2 migrant children from Yi minority group (Ming and Zhu, pseudonym) and 2 teachers from majority group (Zhang and Yuan, pseudonym). This research adopts thematic method to analyze the data. To draw deductive conclusions, the transcription of the interviews is coded and divided into different themes to analyze.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Language Learning

When attempting to learn Mandarin, students from ethnic minorities in Chinese contexts face a variety of obstacles. Ming is a fifth-grade migrant minority student who has attended the charity school for three years. In the interview, Ming stated, "I do not know how to describe it [a Yi ethnic tradition]" when asked to describe a traditional festival of the Yi ethnic group [20]. When Zhu was asked about her proficiency in Mandarin, she responded, "I do not know what is the meaning of 'proficiency'. Due to Zhu's limited proficiency in Mandarin, the researcher sought clarification from the homeroom teacher, Ms. Zhang. She explained, "They simply do not understand Mandarin in general. They struggle to comprehend the meaning while listening, as it is difficult for them to do so. It is the hardest part." In academic learning, language learning hinders their academic performance, as Ms. Yuan, a Mandarin teacher, said that "a few days ago they [students] wrote an essay about scenery, and the majority of them wrote about the scenery in their hometowns. Most of their essays have good topics, but the only problem is that the essay is not coherent in mandarin."

Because the students' families are economically disadvantaged, they suffered greatly from inadequate learning materials, unqualified teachers, and an unpleasant learning environment prior to receiving education from this charity. During an interview with Ms. Yuan when the researcher visited

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

the charity organization, she said that "accurately speaking, these children in Mount Da Liang are not well educated in terms of their ability to read and write."

Moreover, students have a vague understanding of the requirements of language learning. Ms. Yuan stated that "They [the students] informed me that they only need to talk in mandarin" [21]. As a result, students focus more on communicating through Mandarin and less on reading and writing skills. When Ms. Yuan inquired about the students' reading attitudes, she contends that their reading skill consists of skipping unfamiliar words and only reading the familiar ones. They will not make the effort to consult a dictionary and read. For example, there are numerous books present, and students read very good books. However, the students are unable to judge and evaluate whether the book is good nor not and instead rely on the opinions of others. Therefore, no students are willing to seek out other books that they would enjoy. They did not take the initiative to discover these books, despite having access to them for free.

Students should always perform extensive reading and writing drills in order to pass the junior and senior high school as well as college entrance exams. However, their misconception is an obstacle to language learning. Because some students do not fully understand the written instructions of questions in the exercise book, they frequently seek clarification from their teachers, as Yuan said: "they are very active in asking questions, but they often express that they cannot do it, so I often ask them to read the question again".

Students can make steady progress when exposed to an environment conducive to language learning. Ming explained, for instance, that "As the students grow up, their mandarin proficiency gradually improves. In the primary level, students can simply understand the instructions and cannot read the entire article; however, in Grade 5 and 6, they are able to fully understand the article and answer some questions related to article's main idea. Regarding academic language learning, however, the students fall far short of expectations".

The charity organization takes a number of steps to address the language-learning problem. For example, Zhang outlined how the charity organization would set up a transition lesson for language improvement at the pre-school level so that minority students would have more opportunities to get ready for the primary school. In addition, Yuan pointed that the Chinese language teachers in their lesson often pay special attention to students' basic language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening [21].

### 4.2. Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is an essential part in the minority students' academic success. In terms of parent involvement , Ms. Zhang and Ms. Yuan have different thoughts. Ms. Zhang believes that "most of them [the parents] are quite concerned about [the child's learning situation]." However, Ms. Yuan argues that only when the students gain progress, would the parents pay more attention to their academic study.

Ms. Zhang went to Da Liang Shan Mount for voluntary teaching in 2019, and she recalled her teaching experiences in Da Liang Shan Mount:

One of the teachers in the school told me that he noticed that a student in his class did not finish homework. The teacher notified the student's parents hoping they could remind and monitor their children to complete the homework on time. Unexpectedly, the parents took this notification seriously and attached their children to a tree as punishment.

Moreover, Ms. Zhang added that the extent of parent involvement in students' learning varies in different families.

On the contrary, Ms. Yuan expounded that the parents sent their children to the charity organization mainly for economic reasons. Ms. Yuan said: "the children have already come here, so their parents' financial burden can be slightly reduced". However, only under certain conditions

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

would the parents paid attention to students' academic learning situations. To be more specific, Ms. Yuan clarified that:

For parents, if their children gained good grades in exams or if the parents can see that their children made progress in their exam marks, they would be very attentive to their children. But if they know their children obtained low grades in their exams such as 20 or 30 points out of 100, they would not care about their children's studies. Education needs cooperation between parents and school, but if I talk to their parents about these situations that parents and teachers should work together to make sure students can learn efficiently, they will feel it is the teacher's problem. But if their children suddenly make huge progress (e.g., from 30 points to 70 points, out of 100 points), the parents think that their children can learn well, so they must take care of their children.

Ms. Yuan also mentioned that some children even do not have a complete family, so the grandparents had no choice but to send them to the organization. Ms. Yuan said:

Some families just have a grandma there, and she has to take care of several children. If one child can be sent here, the children can learn baseball and academic knowledge at the same time so that the family can manage fewer children there.

As for the children, they desire the companionship of their parents. Zhu said that "sometimes I feel very homesick." The only way they can contact their families is by making video calls every week during the allotted time period [20].

The teachers revealed the children's vague concepts and impressions of their families. When the students had an opportunity to make money, they first wanted to reciprocate their teachers in the charity organization, but they only thought of their families with the hint of their teachers [21]. In fact, this situation is understandable, because "They call their families every week, and sometimes it's impossible to say that there will be bouts of depression or something after the call, but they can understand because the children are indeed so far away from home now that they are about 10 years old" [21].

### 4.3. Identity

Students of migrant racial and ethnic minorities experience identity confusion in dual ways. All interviewees showed a willingness to learn about the culture and language of the Yi ethnic group. They are genuinely interested in the current state of their family and hometown. As Ms. Yuan mentioned before, "a few days ago they wrote an essay about scenery, and most of them wrote about the scenery in their hometown" [21]. However, due to the loss of connection, the students do not have this part in their minds. To better illustrate, Ms. Yuan elaborated that " Their family, for example, they do not know now, they do not know anything about, nor do they know what changes will occur in the family. For some children, they may have almost forgotten part of the Yi dialect" [21]. Although students demonstrated a desire to study Yi group's language, their behavior changed when the teacher actually incorporated this into her course design.. Ms. Yuan described that, "In fact, I felt for a while that they should pay more attention to the language of their own nation, right? I found some paragraphs online for them. The above is written in the Yi dialect, and the following is the translation into Mandarin. 'It is too difficult to define the word teacher. We need not write this word, as we can simply say it.' He said that he did not know what the word for Yi nationality meant, so I did not put all the characters of Yi nationality on it for them, and below that is Chinese. The results of an Internet search consist of a few pages with simple sentences about home, family, and life. As a result, they were unwilling to learn, and actually felt discouraged, and that was it" [21].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

## 5. Discussion

In this section, the researcher discusses the three learning challenges faced by minority students in a society dominated by the majority: 1) language issues; 2) identity formation and recognition, 3) parental involvement.

### 5.1. Language Issues

According to student and teacher responses, Yi students' Mandarin language skills are limited in the current study. Due to students' limited language skills, they sometimes cannot fully understand the instructions in their exercise books. The issue of language has become one of the barriers to their integration into the dominant society. Such results have been reported in the studies of Wang [20]. In addition, Yi students' comprehension of language learning acquisition is limited to speaking skills. They believe that learning mandarin is only about speaking; therefore, when given written and/or reading assignments, they frequently need assistance from teachers. Such misunderstandings may be due to the lack of Mandarin reading books in schools, as indicated by Wang: Minority children are emotionally attached to their mother language, and have positive attitudes toward using Mandarin[21]. Such a sentiment enriches the discourse regarding minority students' language acquisition. In addition, this study reveals that the education stakeholders such as school leaders, and teachers make a strong effort to aid Yi students' language acquisition. They provided opportunities for language instruction. When instructing the students, the teachers took the students' language skills into account in every way. Therefore, teachers frequently spent a great deal of time in class teaching students fundamental language skills. Furthermore, not only Chinese teachers of literacy, but also teachers of other subjects often adjust their teaching pace to ensure that their students fully understand what they teach. Although Yi students are enrolled in Mandarin classes at the charity organization, their proficiency is falls far short of the required level due to a lack of learning materials in early times. Besides, the Yi students forget significant portion of their native language and are unaware of recent events in their hometown.

During interviews, Yi students frequently remained silent because they did not understand the meaning of the interviewer's words or how to express their own ideas. Sometimes Ms. Zhang helped paraphrase interviewer's words to them and later explained that the students could not understand such expressions, indicating that the majority of teachers are aware of their students' language learning situation, which is in agreement with the existing findings in the literature review.

Students' perspectives on language-learning objectives influence their learning behavior and directly affect their learning situation, according to a recent discovery. Some students believe they do not need to learn how to write and read, and only need to learn how to communicate. Therefore, they may deliberately disregard certain parts of language learning practice.

The establishment of a whole industry is a solution to this language learning problem. For example, in the 1980s, the Netherlands government employed the outsourcing strategy to deal with the Muslims. The outsourcing companies provide services in terms of religious, language learning, and cultural adaptation. This successful experience might be a solution to the language learning difficulties of migrant minority students.

### 5.2. Social Identity Formation and Recognition

Contrary to what Sa asserted, Yi minority migrant students in adolescence demonstrate multiple conflicts regarding their social identity[12]. Sa asserted that adolescents have built their identity, but the results contradict this claim.

Teachers do not realize that the students are suffering from identity confusion, since they tend to view all students as Chinese rather than as members of minority ethnic groups. Also, the teachers are

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

unaware that these students encounter social integration issues. Teachers believe that since most students are from a minority ethnic group, they will be able to successfully and easily adjust to the change in environment from Mount Liang to the full-care charity organization.

It would be preferable if teachers took the identity issue seriously. Teachers can explain the relationship between the suburbs and the city, as well as minority and majority ethnic groups, by stating that students can establish a plural identity rather than a binary one.

### 5.3. Parent Involvement

Although the teachers do their best to ensure that students maintain contact with their families, parental involvement remains insufficient. Because of economic or school disciplines, students are only able to speak with their families once per week, let alone see them in person. Especially during the global pandemic, it is harder for either the children or the parents to travel a long way to gather together.

The teachers assume the parental responsibilities and roles to some extent. Teachers are not only responsible for imparting knowledge from the textbook, but also serve as life guides and parents. Even sometimes students place the teachers prior to their parents. It is simply because the students are more acquainted with their teachers than with their parents.

It is essential for the students to have sufficient parental involvement in order to acquire language skills more efficiently, interact with peers effectively, and enrich their spiritual lives. It might be difficult to change the parents' and children's material life overnight, but it is practical to enrich their spiritual life through regular and frequent volunteer instruction or industrialized services.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, the migrant minority students have a number of difficulties learning both Mandarin and their native language due to a lack of materials and a tardy start. In addition, In addition, the children reside in a charity organization where they are cared for by teachers and coaches without parental involvement. Moreover, they suffer from identity-related inner conflicts that no existing guidance could help them address.

Rarely do they conduct research from the students' and children's perspectives, as the vast majority of existing research is conducted from the educators' point of view. Consequently, students' voices are unheard. Even if some children are unable to articulate due to insufficient Mandarin practice, a low grade, or shyness, they can still express their own perspectives and perceptions in their daily life.

However, these findings may have limitations because interviews with students were conducted under the supervision of their teachers. Thus, in order to protect the school's reputation, it is unlikely that students will express unfavorable views of the institution at the teachers' urging.

## References

[1] *7th National Population census, (2021). http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202105/t20210510_1817192.html*

[2] *Research Report on Basic Education Policy for Ethnic Minorities in China, (2020). www.cssn.cn*

[3] *Guangxi Normal University's Faculty of Education launched a study and exchange meeting for minority students on "promoting unity and progress", 2022http://news.gxnu.edu.cn/2022/0322/c1330a233966/pagem.htm*

[4] *Huang, S. R., & An, G. Q.. (2018). The relationship between types of parental involvement and children's learning outcomes. Preschool Education Research (11), 40-49.*

[5] *Guo Xuan. (2019). Bilingualism and executive functioning of ethnic minority children (Doctoral dissertation, Northeast Normal University).*

[6] *Bitetti, D., & Hammer, C. S. (2016). The home literacy environment and the English narrative development of Spanish–English bilingual children. Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 59(5), 1159-1171.*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220553

[7] Cui Juan. (2010). Study on the socialization of migrant children of ethnic minorities in Guangxi (Doctoral dissertation, Master's thesis, Guangxi Normal University).
[8] Wang, Y. Q.. (2013). A study on the Chinese language proficiency of preschool teachers' interaction with Uyghur children in Xinjiang (Doctoral dissertation, East China Normal University).
[9] Wang Boyi. (2019). A case study on the construction of social support network for migrant children of ethnic minorities (Master's thesis, Huazhong University of Science and Technology).
[10] Yang, Mao-Qing, & Shi, Neng-Xing. (2018). Identity Theory Perspectives on Urban Social Integration and Identity Construction of Ethnic Minority Migrant Children. Ethnic Education Research, (3), 101-107.
[11] Zhao, Jing. (2020). Research on Ethnic Identity and Social Integration of Guangxi Ethnic Minority Migrant Children. China Ethnic Expo.
[12] Sali, Gao, Chenghai, & Wan, Minggang. (2013). The formation and development of children's ethnic identity. Contemporary Education and Culture, 5(6), 18-24.
[13] Byrd, C. M. The Measurement of Racial/Ethnic Identity in Chil- dren A Critical Review [J]. Journal of Black Psychology. 2012， 38(1):3 ~31.
[14] Jordan, P., & Hernandez - Reif，M. Reexamination of young children's racial attitudes and skin tone preferences [J]. Journal of Black Psychology.2009，35(3):388 ~403.
[15] Semaj, L. The development of racial evaluation and preference: A cognitive approach [J]. Journal of Black Psychology. 1980，6 (2):59 ~79.
[16] Clark，K. B. ，& Clark，M. K. The development of conscious- ness of self and the emergence of racial identification in Negro preschool children [J]. The Journal of Social Psychology. 1939， 10(4): 591 ~599.
[17] Guerrero，S. ，Enesco，I. ，Lago，O. ，& Rodríguez，P. Pre- school children 's understanding of racial cues in drawings and photographs[J]. Cognitive Development.2010，25(1):79 ~89.
[18] Shi, Chang-Hui. (2013). Tension between integration orientation and social orientation - A study of social integration of migrant adolescents in Beijing. Sociological Review, (5), 70-80.
[19] Lei Peng. (2012). Identity structure, types and influencing factors of migrant children (Doctoral dissertation, Master's thesis]. Chongqing: Southwest University).
[20] Wang Boyi. (2019). A case study on the construction of social support network for migrant children of ethnic minorities (Master's thesis, Huazhong University of Science and Technology).
[21] Wang, Yuanxin. (1999). On the language attitudes of the Yugus. Language and Translation, (2), 9-14.