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Comparison of Immigrant Children in China and the United States

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Abstract: This paper will focus on comparing the situation of immigrant children in China and the United States (the U.S.). This paper will also explore the experiences of immigrant children in China and the U.S., comparing the challenges the two countries face and the support systems available. This paper will introduce China's Hukou system and the U.S.'s English as Second Language (ESL) system. While China's migrant Children will have a rough time dealing with new situations in urban areas, the U.S. has an ESL system that helps immigrant children adapt to a new environment. Defining what method that the government will have towards immigrant children are a key discussion point in this paper. By examining these systems, this paper highlights the differing approaches and outcomes for immigrant children in both countries. This paper will highlight some sort of opportunities for improving policies to better address the needs of this vulnerable population.

Keywords: ESL, Hukou, Immigrant children.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Nowadays, lots of families are moving, which means kids are growing up in places that feel totally different than the place they live. In countries like China and the United States (the U.S.), kids from migrant families often have a tough time with school. They might struggle with language, feel out of place because of cultural differences, or not have access to the same school resources as other kids.

Education should be a common right, but for a lot of migrant kids, it's not that easy. They have to jump over all kinds of difficulties just to keep up with their classmates. Not speaking the local language makes schoolwork harder than local students, and cultural differences can make them feel out of place or lonely. Plus, they usually don't have access to good teachers, good schools, or proper learning materials, so they're at a disadvantage from the start.

In China, it's especially hard for kids who have families to move from the countryside to cities for work. The hukou system ties public services like schooling to where a family is originally from, so it's not easy for these kids to get into regular city schools. Instead, many of them end up in poorly funded private schools just for migrant kids, which is not good for them. Some even get left behind in rural areas while their parents work in the city, which brings another problem to their education.

In the U.S., immigrant kids have a different set of struggles. Language is a big one—many don't speak English, and while there are English as Second Language (ESL) programs to help, the quality

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really depends on where people live. Because of that, kids from low-income or non-recorded families deal with discrimination and a lack of resources, which makes school even harder for them.

In general, migrant and immigrant kids have a lot stacked against them when it comes to getting a decent education.

1.2. Research Question

This paper looks at how different countries deal with education for migrant kids, especially comparing China and the U.S. The author will check out the policies in both places and how they affect these kids' access to education, with the hope of sharing some ideas on how to make things better. This research aims to answer the central question: How do different countries, specifically China and the U.S., approach education for migrant children, and what can people learn from comparing their policies? Those two countries have large numbers of migrant children, but the nature of migration in each country is different. China mainly deals with internal migration—people moving within the country—while the U.S. faces international immigration. This paper will explore how these differences lead to different policy approaches.

1.3. Objectives and Significance

This study's main goal is to find the differences in educational policies between China and the U.S. and how policies affect migrant children. By looking at how countries approaches their education for migrant kids, this paper aims to explore useful insights and suggest better ways to support these children in achieving success.

An important focus is on educational equity. It's not just about letting migrant children attend school, the government should focus on making sure they have the tools and support to study. This includes access to language programs, culturally sensitive teaching, and good resources to keep up with their peers. By comparing policies in China and the U.S., this research hopes to highlight areas where improvements can make a real difference.

This research also focuses on how language and culture relate in how well migrant kids do in school. Language barriers are a big challenge in both China and the U.S., but each country resolves them differently.

2. Language Barriers in Education for Migrant Children: Challenges in China and US

2.1. Language Barriers in China's Education System

Cultural assimilation determines how well migrants adapt themselves to a new environment. Language plays an important role in affecting the speed of the acculturation process. However, according to Lilian: "An important aspect of the experiences of immigrant children is that they do not always migrate as part of a family unit; they also migrate on their own volition" [1]. This means some migrant children are moving as their own wish, yet they still facing education problems. China has seen an increasing population of migrants. During the period of acculturation, dialect has been maintained as the bridge to deeply impact migrants' health status [2]. In China, there's a huge migration of people moving from rural areas to the cities, and they always come with their children, who need to fit into a whole new environment. A person or household has either "agricultural/rural" or "non-agricultural/urban" HuKou specific to a locality [3]. Educational decentralization is essential to China's major (educational) policies as well [4]. Also, according to Jialing: "After the 2014 reform of the hukou system, most cities became more open, while the megacities have tightened enrollment for migrant children" [5]. This means that kids in the rural area have problems adapting to the urban environment. One big issue for these kids is that they often don't speak Mandarin well. A lot of them

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grow up speaking local dialects, which can be different from Mandarin, the official language used in schools. So, when these kids attend urban schools, they struggle to understand their lessons or communicate with others.

Kids from rural areas usually get less exposure to Mandarin because, in their hometowns, people mainly speak the local dialect. Even when they learn Mandarin in school, the quality of the teaching in rural schools is often better than in city schools. This leaves a big gap between rural and urban students regarding language skills. A lot of rural schools don't have enough good Mandarin teachers or proper learning materials. So, when kids from these areas move to cities and join urban schools, they're often already behind in Mandarin. This makes it tough for them to keep up with their classmates.

In China, the deeply entrenched household registration system (hukou) has been a primary barrier to equitable education for migrant children. For China's policy, Nunzio Narazeno commented "Our findings lead to the conclusion that China's educational system is still highly deficient in providing migrant children with equal opportunities to achieve their educational goals and to strive for a better life", which refers that China's policies are not friendly to migrant children [6]. For this situation, Xiaoming suggests that the "Chinese government should increase support and provide necessary regulatory oversight to the MCS" [7]. Indeed, the government should give those kinds of support. This system effectively restricts access to urban schools for children from rural areas, forcing them either to attend under-resourced schools in their registered hometowns or to contend with policies like the gaokao (university entrance exam), which often requires them to return to their place of origin for crucial exams. Despite reforms such as the (off-site gaokao policy), these measures have shown limited success due to hidden socioeconomic thresholds, regional restrictions, and political inertia that reinforce the unequal distribution of resources. Systemic inequality exacerbates social stratification, trapping children of migrant families in cycles of limited opportunities and lower socioeconomic mobility.

Language barriers further complicate these educational experiences. In China, the divide between Mandarin and local dialects can hinder rural children's success in urban schools, where Mandarin is often the primary medium of instruction.

Not speaking Mandarin fluently can really interfere with how well migrant kids do in school. Since all the lessons are taught in Mandarin, they struggle to follow along, especially in subjects like math, science, and history. This language gap can seriously hurt their grades and might hold them back for a long time.

Not just the school work. From a sociological perspective, it's tough for these kids to fit in when they can't have a proper conversation with their classmates. Making friends and joining in class activities becomes a challenge. This can leave them feeling left out, knock their confidence, and make their whole school experience harder.

Viewing these challenges on a global level means we need to reconsider policies to make education fairer for everyone. In China, reforming or even getting rid of the hukou system is a key step to ensuring all kids, no matter where they're born or registered, can access quality education. This could include national policies to share resources more evenly across regions and standardizing rules for exams like the gaokao, so every student gets a fair shot. At the same time, boosting investment in rural schools and improving their quality could reduce the pressure on families to move to cities for better schooling.

2.2. ESL Programs in the U.S.

One of the biggest challenges migrant kids face when they move to a new place is dealing with language barriers, especially in school. Whether it's kids moving from rural areas to cities in China or families immigrating to places like the U.S., Canada, or New Zealand, not knowing the main

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language can make school life pretty tough. In the U.S., immigrant children who are non-native English speakers face similar difficulties, with ESL programs offering only partial solutions. The availability and quality of these programs are inconsistent, and many students face significant academic delays. At the same time, they acquire English proficiency, which limits their ability to engage with the curriculum and pursue higher educational opportunities. This topic looks at how language barriers impact education, with a focus on China's situation with Mandarin and local dialects, as well as how ESL programs in countries like the U.S. help immigrant kids settle in.

There's a need for more federal funding and oversight to support immigrant children, especially in underfunded school districts. Stronger ESL programs with proper staffing and resources are essential for breaking down language barriers. On top of that, training teachers and administrators in cultural sensitivity can make schools more welcoming for students from diverse backgrounds. Policies like easier access to scholarships and in-state tuition for undocumented students can also help open doors to higher education and future opportunities.

In the U.S., immigrant kids do have some legal protections, like the right to public education no matter their legal status. But there are still big challenges, like not enough funding and issues with helping them fit in culturally. Schools with lots of immigrant students often don't get enough resources, and those without legal documentation face even more hurdles to getting a good education and proper support. ESL programs can help with language barriers, but they differ depending on the school or district. Plus, many immigrant children have to face cultural identity and assimilation struggles, which can take a toll on their mental health and school performance.

In the U.S. and similar places, there are programs called ESL to help immigrant kids who struggle with English. The goal is to teach them how to speak, read, and write in English so they can catch up and do well in school. To introduce to the U.S. education system, education usually starts with one year of kindergarten, followed by six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school and three or four years of senior high school, although considerable regional variations exist [8]. ESL programs are there to help kids catch up with the language so they can join regular classes and stay on track with their classmates. They focus on the basics of English, like grammar and vocabulary, while also building skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Some schools even give extra help in subjects like math and science to make sure ESL students don't fall behind. ESL learners include individuals (a) who were not born in the United States, (b) have native languages other than English, (c) come from environments where English is not dominant, or (d) are American Indians or Alaskan natives from environments where languages other than English impact their English proficiency levels [9].

These programs are super important because they help immigrant kids get past language barriers. Without them, a lot of kids would struggle to keep up in school. They might fall behind or even drop out. ESL programs are definitely a big help, but they're not perfect. One major issue is that the quality of these programs can really depend on where people live. In some places, schools have awesome ESL programs with experienced teachers and great resources. But in other areas, there's hardly any support. For example, in the U.S., the quality of ESL programs can vary a ton—not just from state to state, but even between schools in the same district. Some schools do a fantastic job, but others? Not so much. This means some kids end up with way better chances of success just because of where they live. Another problem is that not all ESL teachers get the right training. Teaching English to non-native speakers is totally different from teaching native speakers—it requires specific skills and strategies. Unfortunately, not every teacher gets the proper prep, which makes it tougher for them to really help their students.

Finally, some ESL programs focus too much on grammar and need more on real-life language skills. Kids might be able to memorize vocabulary words. However, if they don't get enough practice speaking and listening, it can still be hard for them to use English in everyday situations or classroom

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discussions. Thus, although ESL services may initially ensure that students' linguistic needs are prioritized, if ESL placement is continued over time, it may undermine long-term academic achievement [10].

2.3. Comparing China's Language Barriers to ESL Programs

While culturally and politically distinct, both countries demonstrate the fundamental link between social policies and educational inequality. The Chinese household registration system institutionalizes inequality in China through policies limiting mobility and urban education access. In the United States, the decentralized nature of the education system and the disparities in funding between school districts create a similar divide, where immigrant children, particularly those in undocumented or low-income families, find themselves in under-resourced schools with fewer opportunities to succeed.

Cultural adaptation poses a shared challenge in both contexts. In China, rural children migrating to cities face the logistical hurdles of the household registration system and the cultural divide between urban and rural ways of life. These children often find themselves marginalized within urban school environments, where their rural backgrounds mark them as outsiders. Similarly, in the United States, immigrant children often experience a dual identity crisis as they navigate their home cultures and the dominant American culture. The failure to adequately address these cultural and identity challenges in both nations contributes to broader issues of social inequality and limits the effectiveness of educational integration.

By looking at the language challenges migrant kids have in China compared to immigrant kids in the U.S. or Canada, there are pretty big differences between them. In China, rural kids do not receive the same quality of Mandarin education as students in cities. When they move to urban areas, they have trouble keeping up. Meanwhile, in the U.S. and Canada, schools have ESL programs to help immigrant kids learn English and adjust to new environments. One benefit of ESL programs is that they're designed specifically for children who don't speak the main language. These programs have teachers who are trained especially to help students learn English and stay on track with their schoolwork. In China, though, there's no system like that for students who are behind in Mandarin, which leaves many migrant children without the help they need.

3. Conclusion

As all above, this comparative study of the educational challenges faced by China's undocumented migrant children and the undocumented youth in the United States reveals significant disparities in educational access that are driven by complex social, economic, and political factors. Different historical and structural contexts shape the two countries' policies but ultimately share similar challenges related to resource allocation, language barriers, cultural adaptation, and educational inequality.

Sure, there are challenges, but there are also tons of great examples of ESL programs that really work. Take Canada, for example. The government has worked hard to make sure schools offer awesome ESL teaching. They even mix language learning into other subjects, so kids are learning English while keeping up with math, science, and everything else. In New Zealand, some schools have this awesome setup where kids get language lessons and extra help in their regular classes at the same time. It's a win-win—they learn English and stay on track with schoolwork. And in the U.K., some schools are getting super creative with tech. They're using apps and online tools so students can practice English outside of school, giving them even more chances to improve.

Looking ahead, research should study the long-term effects of education policies on the academic success and social mobility of migrant and immigrant children. Comparative studies between

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countries like China and the U.S. could reveal how different systems impact outcomes and guide smarter reforms. By focusing on both the immediate needs of these children and the root causes of educational inequality, we can move closer to creating fairer and more inclusive education systems worldwide.

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