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Stalled Social Mobility: Educational Challenges Faced by Rural Migrant Children in China

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Abstract. This article investigates how rural migrant children in China have a stagnated upward social mobility compared to their urban peers on account of the cross-dimensional educational obstacles in mainly three aspects: institutional policies, harsh family conditions, and social stereotypes. The author will first unfold and analyze the current issue based on the previous research. Subsequently, this study will dive deeper into this topic by looking at several consequences of these educational deficits to diagnose the underlying issues and address the outcomes. Building on top of all the established information, this research aims to provide workable and sustainable one-to-one solutions that can help to close the educational gap from all aspects in order to enable all the children to have the chance to obtain a higher social status and a better standard of living for themselves and the their descendants; furthermore, it strives to boost the country's economy by empowering the human capital in the long run.

Keywords: Social mobility, rural migrant children, education

1. Introduction

Great improvement of a person's standard of living is often led by the upward social mobility of the person. The most effective and long-lasting way to achieve a higher degree of upward social mobility is through education [1]. Under Chinese government's household registration system, the quality fo education is spread out unevenly due to the difference in allocation of resources among rural and urban areas [2]. Most of the time, rural areas are left far behind in both school equipment and the experience of educators. Recently, millions of rural children can live in the cities with their parents, having the opportunity to see and to get high quality education, which indicates a decline in the number of left-behind children who are far away from their parents and often neglected [3]. An increase in the number of kids who study in the city their parents work in has cultivated family unity in a certain degree. However, for these kids, their educational journey is specifically challenging and difficult. A series of shortcomes, from individuals' family financial conditions, government policies that brought in differences in resources and opportunities, and to conventional stereotypes created by the HouKou system, has been holding them back from moving to a higher social level through the opportunity of being educated equally. For kids, the limitations have a profound impact on their lives. Their access to upward social mobility is merely determined by their HouKou but not their hard work and dedication.

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For their families, the HouKou system reinforces a class divide in the cities. The human tendency to favor those within one's own social group can foster prejudice toward outsiders. A salient example in Chinese society is the systemic and interpersonal discrimination faced by individuals holding rural HouKou, who are often perceived as a distinct out-group. The idea of class division undermines social cohesion and contradicts the wish of just and fair opportunity. For the nation, the consequences are severe and existential. Sustainable economic growth cannot be manufactured; it is only driven by a well-educated, innovative, and passionate workforce. Young people are the essential source of fresh energy and new ideas that constantly revitalize the economy.

By neglecting a huge portion of the generation's potential, the rural youth, people transform personal obstacles into a collective national threat: a loss of human capital, and a weakened foundation for long-term prosperity. The author seeks not only to highlight this urgent problem but to advocate for practical solutions. Addressing the HouKou system's inequalities is not simply a personal well-being or social justice issue, it is a critical investment in the nation's valuable resources, its young people. The problem is deeply rooted in China's institutional system during the process of quick modernization and urbanization. Since the publishment of the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978, China has made a great progress in modernization and urbanization, catching up with Western countries and even taking the lead in many areas. During the process of urbanization, large cities demand more workers to develop the city and extend the population size; rural people, on the other hand, desire a job opportunity that provides a stable income to cover daily expenses and family needs. As a result, millions of rural people, collectively known as the floating population, have moved to cities with their children in seeking better living conditions [4]. However, those kids face three barriers that impede them from getting a better education in the cities where their parents work in. Based on this, this paper discusses the educational challenges faced by migrant children in rural areas of China.

2. Challenges

In 1958, China established the household registration system (HouKou), dividing people into two groups: urban people and rural people. This system serves as a tool to manage and allocate money and resources, aiming to develop the cities and reach urbanization. Even though the system has been revised and loosened since the Reform and Opening-up policy in the late 70s to encourage more working-age population to enter and develop the cities, it still remains as an educational obstacle for rural migrant children who now can live in the cities. The HouKou system allows migrant children to receive nine years of free compulsory education which includes elementary and middle school outside their HouKou places. However, they have to return to their hometown for both high school and college entrance exams (zhongkao and gaokao) [5]. For students, they have to adapt a totally new environment, new teaching style, and new curriculum design, because China's educational system varies from place to place, province to province. Studies have shown that the switch between different regions greatly weakens students' competitiveness. The HouKou system has laid the first challenge for rural migrant students.

Unmet family condition is another big setback for migrant kids. Even though parents live with the kids, they are not fully participating in children's lives and therefore do not have thorough knowledge of the children. Consequently, kids are unable to develop to their full potential [6]. First, the families of migrant children are typically at the bottom of the urban socio-economic structure, so many migrant workers are concentrated on low-skilled, low requirement jobs which often come in with less salaries [7-9]. In order to cover all the expenses while saving a portion of money for long term wealth accumulation, their parents usually spend a substantial amount of time in work, so they

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only have a little time for their children, resulting in a lack of companionship, supervision, and emotional support. Second, most migrant workers have low educational level, unable to provide tutoring for schoolwork or future planning skills that help to improve children's performance at school and future-oriented planning skills. Ultimately, weak family economic conditions cannot support the high costs of after school tutoring and club activities, leaving children far behind on the track of diversified development of talents from the start. While families should act as a comforting place against external challenges, for migrant children, families often struggle to meet both their emotional and physical needs. While migrant children have the advantage of growing up with their parents, unlike "left behind" children, their parents' long working hours, economic pressures, and often limited education can make kids feel emotionally insecure and academically unsupported. These challenges create additional barriers to their upward social mobility.

Beyond the family level, migrant children happen to face implicit treatment in school and social interactions. Social Identity Theory states that an individual's cognition of their group membership profoundly affects their behavior and psychology. When the "local-nonlocal" binary division based on HouKou is activated and reinforced in social interactions. They are often labeled as "outsiders" or "migrant workers' children [10-12]. These stereotypes, potentially coming from classmates, teachers, or even public discourse, can lead to differential social exclusion and pressure. When the identity of migrant children is constantly reminded, it can easily lead to insecurity and alienation, affecting their establishment of a positive self-identity and social networks, further limiting their opportunities to gain self-worth, self-esteem, and social support from the environment. The identitarian stereotype further compounds the difficulties on their educational career.

These three deficiencies interact with each other, ultimately damaging rural migrant children's upward social mobility ladder.

3. The consequences of the educational gap

A direct consequence of educational deficits is insufficient human capital accumulation. Migrant students in schools with fewer resources often acquire weaker cognitive training and lower comprehensive qualities, such as critical thinking and a proper worldview, compared to their urban fellows. Furthermore, repetitive and uncertain high school and college entrance exam policies directly harm learning continuity and student motivation. Research confirms that students who clearly know they cannot advance to higher education in the city are more prone to a "uselessness of study" mentality, significantly reducing their academic engagement.

At the workforce level, a lower educational starting point and limited cultural capital formed by early education can become a "glass ceiling" for career advancement. Gaps in personal capabilities are further manifested by the restricted opportunities of receiving higher education, especially quality higher education, are systematically restricted. Their career choices mostly to the secondary labor market or return to where their HouKou is located to participate in an extremely unfair high school entrance competition. At the school level, they are either forced into the labor market or low-level vocational education after middle school, and employment. Even within the same occupation, the gap in the competition for higher level education entrance examinations nearly closes the access for social ascent. Cross-occupational mobility is even more difficult, involving low-skilled, low-paid, and unstable jobs, similar to their parents'.

Education is not only about learning knowledge but also about accumulating social capital and the rules of mainstream culture [6,7]. Due to limitations in their school and family environments, migrant children: First, find it difficult to meet high-quality friends and build high-quality social networks. They have fewer opportunities to meet teachers and kids at their age who can provide key

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information, opportunities, or support for their future development. Second, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to the accumulation of cultural capital. The "silent knowledge" such as manner, taste, and familiarity with formal systems that urban middle and upper-class families transmit to their children regularly and daily is an important factor for adapting to the rules of the upper social class. Migrant children often lack the learning environment for all the knowledge, and maybe the knowledge is never told to them.

Ultimately, these disadvantages are consolidated and reinforced through intergenerational transmission. The lower socio-economic status of parents, coupled with the constrained educational achievement of their children, makes it likely that the next generation will repeat a very similar process. Inequality in educational resources is thus transformed into enduring social status differences, leading to reduced intergenerational mobility and a tendency towards consolidation in the social structure.

4. Countermeasures

Giving every child an equal chance of receiving good education is necessary and urgent. For individuals, it provides a path to a higher social status for a person and can possibly improve the standard of living for future generations. Looking at a broader level, the schools will be constantly sending more thoughtful, creative, and educated workers into the workforce, boosting the productivity of the economy in the long run. To achieve this, the educational inequality faced by most rural migrant kids need to be tackled in three steps.

First, progress depends on reforming the systems at the root of the problem. This means gradually separating eligibility for secondary and college entrance exams from a student' s HouKou, moving toward a system based on their actual place of residence or school enrollment. This requires central coordination and a clear, step-by-step approach. Additionally, stronger provincial coordination and funding mechanisms are needed. Financial support should follow migrant students, ensuring that cities receiving them have the resources to provide education. At the same time, teacher allocation must be balanced through a system that encourages experienced teachers to work in schools with more migrant children or in weaker schools.

Schools, especially those receiving migrant children, need direct support. This includes upgrading equipment, introducing quality teaching resources and models, and using digital education to share high-quality courses. Schools should also provide tutoring, counseling, and career guidance, to meet migrant children' s individual needs and overcome gaps in family support. Offering diverse sports, arts, and club activities can broaden students' development paths. Other than the equipment, a complete teacher training program for the teachers who teach in schools with many migrant kids is truly needed for high-quality education through the training, making the teachers to be more creative in their teaching style and class design, and more professional when teaching the contents.

A supportive, inclusive society is essential for equal educational opportunity. Universities and businesses should be encouraged to work directly with schools and communities, offering long-term programs in tutoring, consultation, and family education. Media and community activities can also promote a culture of equality and respect, reducing discrimination against migrant families and their children. Finally, empowering migrant parents through skills training and parenting guidance can improve family stability and create a better family environment where children can find emotional support and feel secure.

The educational issue of migrant children is a equity issues during China's rapid growth of modernization and social transformation. It concerns not only the personal destinies of millions of children but also the overall quality of the nation's human capital, the healthy heartbeat of the social

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structure, and the internal driving force for long-term sustainable development of the economy [5]. Education should be designed to promote social mobility. However, for migrant children, due to multiple institutional, economic, and social barriers, it limits a person's future possibility to climb up and reach a higher social status and intergenerational progress, turning into a tool for class reproduction. Breaking this cycle requires the determination to promote institutional reforms and sustained efforts to build a more inclusive and supportive educational and social environment. True social equality and shared prosperity can only be built on a foundation where every child, through talent and hard work, has an equal chance to succeed in education regardless of their HouKou.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines migrant children obstructed upward social mobility in China by specifically investigating the educational obstacles set by the government, the identitarian stereotype in the society, and the limited family conditions. The established HouKou system limits kids with rural HouKou systematically by separating people into groups and giving out different resources and money. Because of the gap in resource allocation, millions of rural people move to the cities to seek job opportunities. Many times, rural workers are often confined in labor-intensive works that come with minimal compensation. Moreover, the title of " migrant workers" also extends to their children who struggle to integrate into educational and social environments because of their rural HouKou and their parents' marginalized occupations. In addition to that, kids don't get consistent academic and emotional support and feedback at home due to their parents' prolonged working hours and limited educational backgrounds, further widening the educational gap between urban and rural youth. These three factors interact and influence each other in a complex way that migrant kids have less chance to be well-educated and step into higher social level compared to their parents and their past class level. After analyzing the current issue and its negative outcomes, this research finally comes up with practical approaches that help to mitigate rural migrant kids' educational fallacies which have severely impeded their upward social mobilities for obtaining a higher social status and better living conditions for generation after generation. Beyond the individual level, achieving equity in education not only opens doors for more children to discover their talents and build better lives but also enables them to fully deploy those talents within the workforce. As greater numbers of well-prepared and educated individuals enter the labor market, the economy is continuously thriving with new energy, fostering sustainable and robust economic growth over the long term. Overall, this paper is written to call the entire society to fix their gaze on the migrant youth's educational problem, striving to raise our future generations in a way that every child has an equal chance to pursue a better life and is willing to dedicate themselves to the development of the country in the future.

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