

Improving the Education for Migrant Children in Shanghai, China: Issues and Challenges

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Introduction

Since Reform and Open-up Policy was initiated in the end of 1970s, China has undergone rapid economic development and dramatic social changes. Explosive industrialization, coupled with urbanization, created conditions that encouraged the large-scale migrants from rural to urban, from the western inland to the eastern coastal areas for the purpose of seeking better jobs.

The mass migration has dislocated families and deeply affected the children moving with their parents. The children of migrant workers have to experience the risk of school failure and go through various hardships. The longtime Residence Registration System (the Hukou system), combined with fragmented educational administration among governments have prevented the migrant children from enjoying the same rights, as local non-migrant children held, for example, the right to receive equal education. Additionally, their parents often work long hours as low skilled laborers and, therefore, possess little time or energy for parental responsibilities. Consequently, the children of migrant workers are given limited opportunities for acceptance, integration, and education.

With the increase of the rural migrants settling down in host cities, how to ensure their children's education has evoked a great social concern. In response, local governments began to assume the responsibilities to provide a fair education for migrant children, and to implement needed reforms that support the education of migrant children.

However, educational inequalities between migrant children and non-migrant children still remain. A certain number of migrant children are enrolled in unlicensed and poorly equipped schools specially set up for them.

Under such circumstances, non-governmental organization sector (NGO) may help to serve

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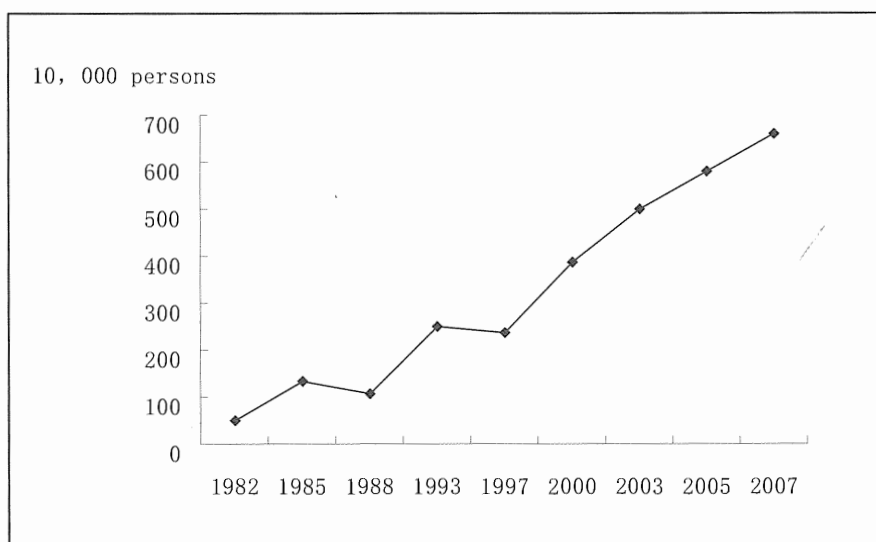
these vulnerable populations.

This article describes general situation of education for children of migrant workers, and highlights the role of NGO in reducing educational inequalities through a case of one exemplary NGO in Shanghai, the Jiuquian Teen Center. The author hopes that the study will lead to better understanding of education for migrant children and emerging NGO sector in China.

Trends of Shanghai's Migrant Population

Shanghai, as China's leading center of economy, trade and culture, is also one of the most populated cities in the world. On 11th July 2008, the 19th World Population Day, the over-all population of Shanghai Municipality leaped to 18.58 million. To put that number into perspective, the population in 1990 was only 13.34 million. In other words, Shanghai's population has been increasing, an average, approximately 0.3 million residents per year over the last 18 years (China News Net., 2008). Such tremendous growth of Shanghai population generates, for the most part, from the continuous inflow of migrants from other regions within China. The number of Shanghai migrants jumped from 0.5 million in the early of 1980s to 6.6 million in 2007 and keeps rising continuously (see figure 1).

Figure 1 : Changes in migrant population in Shanghai 1982-2007



Sources: Statistics Bureau of Shanghai, Shanghai 2000 Population Census

Characteristics of Shanghai's Migrant Workers

Most of these migrants are rural labors, often called "Mingong" in Chinese, accounting for more than 60% of the total Shanghai migrant population in 2007 (Shanghai Municipal Statistic

Bureau, 2008).

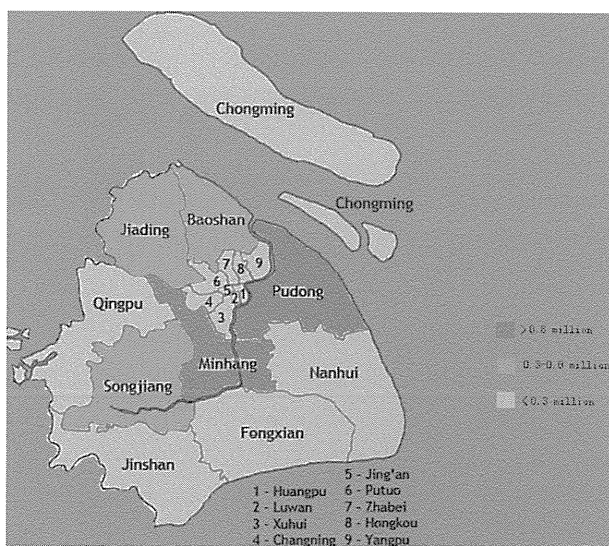
These migrant rural workers come mainly from the rural areas of provinces of Anhui, Jiangsu, Sichuan and Jiangxi that lie comparatively close to Shanghai. Data published by Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau indicates that Shanghai rural migrant workers typically possess three characteristics.

First, migrant workers possess low levels of educational attainment. Although limited data exists, research suggests that the majority of migrant workers have not continued their studies beyond middle school. The average number of years of schooling for these migrant workers in 2003 was 8.48, only a minor increase of 0.28 years when compared with 2000 (Shanghai Municipal Committee of China Association for Promoting Democracy, 2006). Such poor educational background denies them access to good pay jobs which usually demand high levels of education or skills. Instead, they are predominantly working in low skill occupations such as manufacturing, baby sitter, sanitation and vending.

Second, Shanghai migrant workers, similar to those in other large urban centers, tend to reside in the outskirts of the city. Shanghai's districts of Pudong, Minhang, Jianding, Songjiang, and Baoshan surrounding the center of city contain the five densest populations of rural migrant workers (see figure 2).

Third, family-based migration is keeping rising. More and more married migrant workers tend to travel with their families. In 2003, 68.2 percent of migrants settled down in Shanghai with their spouses and children (Shanghai Statistics Bureau, 2004). Consequently, as of September 2007, a total of 0.38 million migrant children in Shanghai reached the age of compulsory education (Shanghai Statistics Bureau, 2008).

Figure 2 : Shanghai's administrative districts



Migration poses both opportunities and challenges for Chinese society. On one hand, migration helps to decrease the number of surplus rural laborers and promotes economic and cultural exchanges between Shanghai and other areas. However, with the overwhelming tide of migrant rural workers over the last two decades, the Shanghai municipal government faces mounting problems. To ensure every migrant worker's child to accede compulsory education is one of the pressing concerns.

Policies to Improve Education for Migrant Children

Attitude of Shanghai government toward migrant children education has undergone a shift away from negative toward positive involvement. When a swarm of migrant children travelled with their parents to Shanghai in the early 1990s, no local public schools were ready to enroll them. It led to appearance of the so-called "Minggong Zidi Xuexiao", a kind of for-profit school specifically established for migrant children. Initially, the school was the only option for migrant children to receive basic education.

With the continuous growth of migrants and increasing pressures on governments to improve social harmony and stability, Shanghai government began to loosen the restriction of local education against migrant children.

As early as 1995, the government instituted a policy that permitted migrant children to apply for public schooling as long as their parents possess three documents, specifically, the Identification Card, Employment Paper and Temporary Residential Certification. However, at the practical level, it was not been implemented as successfully as it could have been, due to the existing Residence Registration System (Hukou System) and Segmented Governmental Management of Education Law.

Such situation has changed since the year of 2001 when the State Council defined that local government should take the most responsibility for educating migrant children in the document called "The Decision on Reform Development of Basic Education" (The State Council, 2005). As a result of this policy, Shanghai government turned to take positive actions to provide public education for migrant children.

Simultaneously, Shanghai began to strengthen its oversight of for-profit schools that served migrant children. In 2004, the Shanghai Education Commission started regulating the operation of migrant children education by concentrating on aspects including: the qualification of school principals and teachers, the condition of school facilities, budgets, enrollment, and register management. If for-profit migrant children schools could fulfill these standards, then they would be funded by the city government. If they failed, they would be asked to improve or even forced to close. To implement these regulations, the government gave approval to allocate RMB 30 million yuan, or \$4.14 million U.S., annually (Shanghai Education Commission, 2004).

Nowadays, the government is expanding the enrollment of migrant children in public schools.

In the first part of 2008, the government set two goals by the year of 2010. The government intended to have 70 percent of migrant children enrolled in public schools on the one hand, and planned to complete regulating migrant schools on the other hand (Shanghai Education Committee, 2008).

Through reducing barriers to public school enrollment, improving conditions at migrant children schools, and closing substandard schools, Shanghai government has made a great effort to address the educational inequalities. Consequently, the number of migrant children enrolled in public schools is increasing yearly. However, educational equality between migrant and non-migrant children is still so far to be accomplished.

The migrant children do have opportunity to enter public schools, but not all of the public schools are available to them. The schools of quality are usually open to children from local elite families.

Migrant children are able to get basic education in two ways. They either pay extra school fees to enter public schools or they study in unqualified, for-profit private schools set up for migrant children. Both options present difficulties for migrant families.

Migrant Children Excluded from Public schools

In Shanghai, the public school system enrolls approximately 0.22 million, or 57.1 percent, of the eligible migrant children. In some districts, the rate has risen dramatically. For example, in Pudong, nearly 60% of migrant children studied in public schools in 2007 compared with 48.7% two years before. However, the over-all growth is not so outstanding. As was pointed out by an official who is in charge of local education, the target 70% of enrollment of migrant children is not easy to achieve.

Various factors have prevented migrant children from enrolling in public schools. Poverty, studying difficulties and concerns about discrimination and unequal treatment are considered to be the major factors.

Regarding poverty, according to the existing Hukou system and education funding system, children with a permanent residential certification, or Hukou, can receive free compulsory education in their registered home. However, the Hukou system excludes the children from schools when they reside with parents engaged in migrant labor. Therefore, if migrant children want to study in Shanghai's public schools, they have to pay for extra "transient schooling fees" and "school-supporting fees". These extra fees create financial hardships for the children of poor migrant families and, subsequently, exclude them from access to public schools.

As far as studying difficulties, different regions of China adopt different versions of textbooks and different curricula. For example, textbooks in Shanghai's public schools vary substantially from textbooks used in other provinces. As a result, migrant children cannot continue their high school education or take the College Entrance Exam in Shanghai.

In addition, some migrant parents worry their children, because of negative attitudes against rural migrants, will be discriminated against and treated unequally in public schools.

Actually, some public school administrators are not willing to accept migrant children because they fear that inclusion of migrant children would result in a heavy financial burden and a corresponding decline in school quality. Undoubtedly, the negative attitudes of administrators, teachers, and other students will affect and hinder the migrant student's level of educational attainment.

For-Profit Schools for Migrant Children

Unlike public schools, for-profit migrant schools attempt to admit every migrant child that comes to the door. This type of school first appeared in Shanghai in 1992, flourished until the end of 1990s, and is now in decline. In 2001, over 500 migrant schools existed in Shanghai. However, by 2006, that number decreased to 277 with a total enrollment of 20,000 students (HOWARD W. FRENCH. 2007).

Although some migrant schools provide effective services, the overall system of migrant schools contains many shortcomings. These shortcomings include substandard school facilities, misappropriation of school funds, insufficient financial resources, poorly qualified principals and teachers, unsanitary conditions, and a lack of security. The education quality of migrant schools can not be assured. Most migrant schools lack the resources to offer electives such as art, physical education, music, and computer science.

Public schools combined with for-profit migrant schools might have secured basic education for most migrant children, but significant educational inequalities between and non-migrant children still remain. This gap suggests that other entities may have a role to play in meeting the social and educational needs of migrant children. Specifically, not-for-profit NGOs, relatively new to China, may be poised to provide effective responses to these pressing social concerns. NGOs provide educational programs that fill the gap between public schools and for-profit schools. The Jiuqian Teen Center is one exemplary NGO providing education to youth from migrant families in Shanghai.

History of the Jiuqian Teen Center

The Jiuqian Teen Center started as a volunteer effort of university students and graduates. Zhang Yichao, a graduate of Fudan University, Shanghai, along with other university students began tutoring youth in for-profit migrant schools. However, the transient nature of the migrant students, often drifting from school to school, frustrated their efforts. Furthermore, the volunteers felt that some for-profit schools exploited their efforts and viewed them simply as assets to compete with other for-profit schools.

In 2006, Zhang's group of volunteers received support from the environmental NGO,

Shanghai Roots and Shoots. Shanghai Roots and Shoots funded Zhang to establish a migrant children choir named “Kids of Shepherd”. Eventually, the program developed into the Jiuqian Teen Center. Today, the Center functions as an after-school program for migrant youth in the Yangpu District.

The Jiuqian Teen Center occupies approximately 200 square meters. The site is equipped with chairs and desks, a television, a video player, a piano and several computers. Zhang supervises two full-time and over ten part-time staff. Like Zhang, the other two full-time staff also graduated from Fudan. Although the number varies daily, approximately 40 students aged 11 to 16, study at the Teen Center.

Curriculum of the Jiuqian Teen Center

As previously mentioned, the roots of the Teen Center originate in music. Zhang believes strongly in the power of music to develop an individual’s intellect and confidence. Along with music, the Teen Center offers diverse courses in language, information technology, humanities, hands-on science, and service learning. The Center places a priority on service learning; consequently, service learning is the only required course. All other courses remain electives (see table 1).

Table 1 . The Jiuqian Teen Center’s course schedule for the spring term of 2008

Discipline	Activities
Music & Art	Chorus, Flute, Guitar, Chinese Zither, Harmonica, Dance, Painting
Language	English (“New Concept English”)
Information Technology	Basic Knowledge for Computer Science
Humanities	French Culture, History, Geography
Science	Hands-on Investigations
Social Investigation & Service Learning	Engaging to routine work for the Center like room cleaning, data input, book arrangement, teaching supports; Visiting and performing for the elderly in a nursing home once a week; Participating the rural community needs assessment during the summer vacation; Reporting the results of the community needs assessment.

Source: the data is based on the survey by author in the summer of 2008.

Zhang’s ideology influences the scope and sequence of the curriculum. When interviewed, Zhang said, “Based on our extensive knowledge of migrant children, our program aims to provide them with a rich and supportive learning environment. Through this environment, we hope to cultivate their identity and consciousness as civil citizens”. His ideology is also reflected in the Teen Center’s goals as follows.

- a) To offer compensatory educational resources free of charge.

- b) To reduce the risks of identity crisis and disengagement through involvement in social activities and community service.
- c) To increase educational access to impoverished migrant youth through scholarship awards.

Among the practices of Jiuqian Teen Center, the most noteworthy activities might reside outside the formal curriculum. For example, “Choirs & Kids Hometown Road Show” started in 2007, offers the center pupils ages 12-16 the opportunity to perform in their hometowns of Anhui, Jiangxi and Jiangsu provinces. During the road show, they conduct performances for local farmers and country fellows. In addition, they conduct basic surveys of social needs in countryside. When they return to Shanghai, they write reports about their experiences. According to Zhang, these activities help the children to better understand their hometowns and to increase their sense of social responsibility.

Challenges Faced by the Jiuqian Teen Center

Zhang and his group’s efforts have earned recognition in Shanghai because of increased media coverage. This recognition has resulted in much needed financial support. Nevertheless, many challenges remain.

The primary challenge involves student enrollment. The transient nature of migrant families creates an unstable student population. One staff member reported, “Some students attend only for one term. Other students disappear after receiving free textbooks from the Center.”

The lack of consistency is exacerbated by a high turnover rate among unpaid volunteer staff. These challenges affect the program’s course schedule, classroom management strategies, and financial situation. For Zhang and his colleagues, to stabilize the student body is a matter of great importance. To accomplish this goal, the Center has enhanced links with migrant schools, improved communication with parents, and developed systems to encourage attendance.

The difficulty to acquire stable funds is also an issue. According to Zhang, annual expenditure of RMB 100,000 yuan is the minimum amount to keep the Center operating. Zhang is the only staff in charge of fundraising. Although Zhang keeps developing his local networks so as to collect more money, the funds are not sufficient. Except the donations from private companies, there are very few subsidies of governments.

Although Jiuqian Teen Center faces many problems and challenges, its success exemplifies the ability of NGOs to contribute to positive social change, in this instance, improving education opportunities for migrant children. Their experience also illuminates the importance of dedicated staff, long-term commitment, and a clear vision. In summary, Zhang’s commitment and vision promises to move Chinese society in a positive direction; that is, toward a reduction in educational inequalities between children from migrant and non-migrant families.

Conclusion

Migration by itself is not a development strategy, but is a social and economic phenomenon in a dynamically changing society. It does have a number of direct impacts on the spread of education, social relations and poverty reduction.

In China, the big scale of labor migration from countryside happened in recent two decades. The governments face many problems and challenges posed by migration. The issue which the governments now are focusing to address is the education for children of migrant workers.

Despite governmental efforts, the educational inequality between migrant and non-migrant children has not been changed thoroughly. It requires a long-term commitment by Chinese governments. In addition to pioneering involvement of the governments, social concerns and supports are essential to reduce educational inequalities. Because it is only when a wide range of organizations and individuals involve that government reforms can be conducted effectively, and therefore, migrant population will possibly benefit more from continued reforms that promote educational equality.

From this point of view, the governments should adequately recognize the role of NGOs in improving the education environment for vulnerable migrant children. NGOs that provide effective alternative and supplemental educational programs should be eligible for supports, including financial subsidies from governments.

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