

# Bridging Divides: Educational Challenges Faced by Rural-Urban Migrant Children in China

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**Abstract.** The rapid pace of urbanization, coupled with economic development in China, has precipitated a massive migration from rural to urban areas. This transition brings to the fore significant challenges that affect the educational journey of migrant workers' children. These children confront a myriad of barriers, spanning systemic policy restrictions that limit their access to high-quality education, to more personal issues such as a lack of emotional support and psychological well-being. This paper delves into the multifaceted hurdles faced by these children across various dimensions—policy, family and individual—highlighting the intricate web of constraints that hinder their educational progress. Within this context, the study proposes a series of targeted strategies and interventions designed to mitigate these barriers, aiming to level the educational playing field, boost social mobility, and cultivate a supportive and nurturing environment for this particularly vulnerable demographic. Through an in-depth analysis of the obstacles at play, this research endeavors to shed light on the underlying issues and offer actionable insights and recommendations. The goal is to significantly enhance the educational experiences and future prospects of migrant workers' children, thereby contributing to a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape in China.

## 1 Introduction

China's rapid urbanization and economic development have resulted in a significant influx of rural migrant workers seeking better job opportunities in cities. However, the children of these migrant workers face a myriad of challenges at the policy, family, and individual levels. At the policy level, the household registration system and other enrollment policies impose significant constraints on the education of migrant children, making it difficult for them to access high-quality schools, benefit from adequate educational resources, and, in some cases, undergo secondary migration back to rural areas. At the family level, due to factors such as work commitments and their own cognitive abilities and skill levels, migrant workers exhibit a relatively weak awareness of family education, resulting in inadequate emotional support for their children, a lack of scientific and educational methods, and excessively high expectations for their offspring. At the individual level, as newcomers to the city, migrant children lack sufficient emotional support and confidence, leading to psychological issues and an overall timid demeanor, which subsequently impacts their academic performance and character development. Collectively, these factors impede educational equity, thereby constraining social mobility.

This paper will delve into the obstacles faced by the children of migrant workers at the policy, family, and individual levels to overcome these challenges. It will

implement corresponding strategies and interventions to promote educational equity, bolster social mobility, and cultivate a more inclusive and supportive environment for this demographic. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the issues at various levels, this paper aims to offer valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing the educational conditions and prospects of migrant workers' children.

## 2 Policy barriers and educational access for migrant children

Education is crucial for social mobility, offering opportunities to change one's socioeconomic status and promote equity. However, systemic inequities and regional disparities have led to uneven educational development, creating a vicious cycle that slows social mobility and exacerbates disparities. Education is influenced by status, capital, and geography, among others. Moreover, migrant children are always on the weaker side of this fierce game.

With the development of China's economy, industrialization, and urbanization, many rural-to-urban migrant children are moving to the cities, and many rural to urban migrant workers who have reached the age of compulsory schooling are accompanying their parents to the cities. These migrant children's schooling has almost become a drag on China's social development. From unequal access to education to the unfair

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distribution of educational resources, many problems have arisen, one after another, putting tremendous pressure on education departments, schools, and the migrant laborers' families. It is intimately associated with the existing system, educational policies, the differences in the distribution of educational resources and so on. Due to the Hukou system, a household register system established in China that uses a duality system to control the population in both rural and urban regions, social assistance programs, including healthcare, housing, and education, are unavailable to peasant workers [1]. Therefore, rural-to-urban migrant children do not enjoy the same privileges as citizens' children. [2], which means they lack equal access to education of comparable quality to their counterparts in public schools. In the book *Migration and Educational Policy Making in China*, Yu divided the education rural-to-urban migrant children received in the city into three types: the local majority state school, migrant student majority state school, and Inaccessibility to public schools [3].

Students who want to attend state schools must meet the "five documents" requirement, a series of documents stipulated by the local government. These documents serve as the key for migrant children to gain entry into urban public schools. However, when school places are limited, their priority falls behind urban children's. The luckiest rural-to-urban migrant students will enroll in the first type of school, which is equal to that of urban children. It embodies educational excellence, endowed with abundant resources and opportunities [3]. Beyond those students, a significant number of migrant children find themselves unable to meet the stringent "five documents" requirement and thus are precluded from accessing urban public schools. Consequently, these children are often funneled into unlicensed informal private (UIP) schools that cater specifically to migrants [4]. While providing an educational alternative, these institutions frequently need more comprehensive resources and high-quality teaching staff in the premier public schools designated for urban residents [5]. As the former study about the impact of individual characteristics and school quality in some schools in Beijing and Shaanxi shows, those migrant schools are often in a resource-constrained predicament, with insufficient classroom seating and teaching equipment and far behind in books and technological support.

In addition, the high mobility of the teaching force in these schools further impacts students' academic achievement and school adjustment [6]. Moreover, A significant number of migrant laborers who have been firmly entrenched in the urban area must do secondary migration to guarantee that their children's education is unaffected. This back flow has had a detrimental impact on the offspring of migrant laborers who are being raised in urban areas [7]. Children of migrant laborers, uprooted from their childhood cities, face enhanced challenges due to differences in education policies, textbooks, and learning speeds across regions. Navigating secondary migration, they must adjust to new curriculum and changing social settings, reducing their enthusiasm for learning and underlining the negative impact of their relocation.

While education theoretically offers a pathway to overcome socioeconomic barriers, a family's socioeconomic status profoundly influences children's educational outcomes and future social mobility. For rural-to-urban migrant children, in particular, their academic and interpersonal adaptation challenges further limit their opportunities for upward social mobility. These challenges include the inequitable allocation of educational resources and barriers related to the household registration system and enrolment policies, which together constitute the main challenges faced by migrant children in cities. These systemic barriers not only exacerbate social stratification but also create an impassable barrier for children of migrant families, making social mobility through education more difficult. Given these circumstances, providing equitable educational opportunities for migrant children and breaking down the barriers posed by the Hukou system and enrolment policies have become vital to achieving social justice and promoting social mobility.

### **3 The impact of family environment on migrant children's education**

Migrant children and left-behind children represent distinct subgroups within the broader community of children from migrant backgrounds, and in the course of their growth, they will constantly switch between being migrant and left-behind. According to Hui Yu, the migrant parents are unwilling to let their kids grow up as left-behind kids in their rural hometown [3]. From the perspective of the healthy development of children, parental accompaniment and support are crucial, and for these children to grow up healthily and happily, they must be able to live together with their parents. However, living together with parents does not simply mean living with them in space; it also means receiving a sound and warm family education. In China, the pivotal role of family education in shaping the educational trajectory of rural migrant children cannot be overstated.

Nevertheless, migrant worker families encounter a myriad of challenges in this aspect, intricately linked with conventional educational paradigms, including emotional deprivation, inappropriate disciplinary methods, and excessive academic expectations. These challenges not only hinder the psychological well-being and social development of children but also exacerbate educational disparities. Therefore, it is imperative to delve deeper into these issues and implement corresponding measures to foster a more equitable and conducive educational environment for the comprehensive development of rural migrant children.

Firstly, the demanding nature of their occupations coupled with time constraints often renders migrant worker parents unable to provide their children with the necessary emotional nurturing and support. Most rural migrant workers work long hours in unreliable, low-paying occupations [8]. To provide a better education for their children, some migrants increase their working hours or take on the "hardest jobs," which pay well but require much dedication and long hours to increase their

income [9]. It reflects the fact that most migrant parents are subject to the traditional feudal education ideology, that they focus only on the child's material life but ignore the spiritual construction, and are unable to undertake their children's academic counseling and character development in their capacity, leaving family education in a vacuum. Consequently, a deficiency in emotional bonding hampers effective communication within the family unit, leaving children emotionally adrift and lacking essential social interaction skills. This emotional disconnect impedes their psychological well-being and stunts their social development. In the course of their education, they have found that many children of migrant workers often display anxiety, fear, depression, irritability, easy anger, cynicism, and social interaction disorders [10].

Moreover, the disciplinary methods employed by migrant worker parents may prove to be inappropriate. Annette Lareau mentioned two parenting styles in her book [11]. Parents from working-class and low-income families always care for nutrition and everyday existence of their children. In contrast, parents of middle-class and elite families plan carefully and participate in every step of their children's development with care and attention. When children make mistakes, middle-class parents are inclined to guide their children's behavior through reasoning, encouraging them to express their thoughts and ideas, and nurturing their capacity for equal dialogue. This form of training instills confidence in children when interacting with adults and reinforces their belief that they deserve attention and respect. However, parents from working-class and low-income families focus more on giving instructions to their children than on guiding them to express ideas and opinions, insisting on clear demarcation between adults and children. This discipline style fosters respect for adults but may limit the language development and critical thinking skills of children from these families [11]. While migrant children are in a close relationship to their parents, their communication mostly revolves around routine activities, with little regard for their children's spiritual requirements and emotional shortcomings. Family education for migrant workers is mainly of the authoritarian and permissive types. Authoritarian parents correct mistakes roughly, leading to reduced communication and deteriorating relationships, and children are prone to rebellion; permissive parents neglect their children's education and find it difficult to detect problems in time, making children prone to deviant behavior and hidden psychological security risks [12].

Furthermore, migrant worker parents often harbor exceedingly lofty expectations concerning their children's educational attainment, predominantly emphasizing academic accomplishments as the sole benchmark of success. As a form of social consciousness, family education reflects society's presence in education during a particular historical period. Migrant workers living in relatively underdeveloped areas for a long time with low education levels have their education concepts deeply imprinted with the mark of the times, often lagging. Influenced by exam-oriented education, traditional family education concepts have suppressed

students' ability for comprehensive personal development. According to the survey report on Migrant laborers in 2022, only 13.7% of migrant laborers possess college degrees or above, with junior high school education accounting for the largest number, surpassing half of them. Due to the limited education they receive themselves, migrant workers often place all their hopes on their children [12]. This undue emphasis on scholastic achievements exerts immense psychological pressure on children, precipitating academic anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and a diminished sense of self-worth. In summary, the family education methodologies within migrant worker households intersect with conventional educational frameworks, collectively shaping the upbringing milieu of rural migrant children while concurrently exacerbating educational disparities.

Education in family, school, and society should coordinate and be indispensable, but family education is the most basic among these three. The family serves as a child's initial educational institution, with parents assuming the role of primary educators. The impact of home education on school education and social education is significant. Family education level is related to various factors, such as parents' cultural quality and behavioral habits. Family education level directly affects the starting point of a child's growth.

#### **4 The individual adaptability in migrant children**

With China's urbanization, many rural populations are migrating towards cities where more resources are pooled. During rural-urban migration, they face multiple changes in lifestyle, social roles, and values, such as the necessity to adjust in the unfamiliar urban, educational, and residential environments, which may affect their physical and mental health. Epidemiological studies have shown that migration and urbanization increase an individual's risk of mental illness [13]. Several studies about Chinese rural-to-urban migrant children have shown that they tend to have more behavioral issues and academic challenges, such as experiencing abuse from peers and experiencing emotions of social isolation and loneliness than indigenous urban children [14-17].

Migrant children have a lower sense of identity, which affects their acculturation in the city. According to Berry et al., acculturation is a phenomenon that pertains to the transformation of individual attitudes and actions as a result of exposure to novel social and cultural environments. [18]. Studies have demonstrated that several elements of acculturation, including social interactions and relationships, engagement in cultural customs, lifestyle preferences, and language usage, are linked to adaptation [19-20]. Koudier et al. illustrated that finding personal identity in adolescence is generally a great challenge; if an immigrant background and both parents are foreigners, it is even more difficult for them to recognize their identity [21]. It also worked in the Chinese context. Although migrant children in China are not subject to the same shocks of jet lag and language as immigrant children in foreign countries, they usually

come from another less-developed area and another rural culture, facing the same dilemmas of cultural adaptation and disorientation. So, even though they live in the material well-being of the city, migrant children are subjectively aware of their rural identity [22]. Research has shown that the lack of a positive social identity for migrant children can hurt their psychological well-being and social adaptation and even lead to antisocial behavior.

Moreover, as urban outsiders, obstacles to pursuing educational equity for rural-to-urban migrant children often stem from their exclusion from the society to which they have moved [23]. Some scholars have categorized such exclusion as cultural exclusion, institutional exclusion, economic exclusion, resource exclusion, and self-exclusion [24]. The absence of urban status and school registration for confident migrant children in public schools results in their academic performance being undervalued and leads to differential treatment compared to local students, further reinforcing their outsider status within schools. Although migrant laborers' children, some of whom attend public schools, have greater access to educational resources than migrant children in informal private schools, their perspectives are also more limited than those of children of urban inhabitants already residing there. Simultaneously, as they enroll in public schools, they frequently struggle to integrate fully into the community. They are often labeled as "poor students", a stigma that seems to have become ingrained. Furthermore, even more concerning is that they may also be subject to peer pressure. During the first generation of migrant children's interviews, the scholars discovered that a large number of returnee children had experienced a decline in their academic performance as a result of their inability to adapt to their new surroundings and their bullying at school by the indigenous people [25]. The previous research findings demonstrated a distinct relationship between unsociability in Chinese teenagers and preschoolers and social difficulties (such as peer victimization and exclusion), internalizing problems (such as sadness and loneliness), and academic challenges.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper explores the challenges faced by children of migrant workers, analyzing them in depth at three levels - policy, family, and individual. At the macro level, the Hukou system and other enrolment policies restrict these children's access to quality education, sometimes forcing them to return to the countryside and face the dilemma of "secondary migration," which not only deprives them of their right to equal education but also exacerbates the disparity in the allocation of educational resources between urban and rural regions. The family level reveals that migrant workers, due to the nature of their work, their education level, and the limitations of their education knowledge, are often unable to provide their children with adequate emotional support and scientific education guidance, resulting in a lack of

education concepts and methods. This family environment not only affects the children's mental health but also restricts their possibilities of realizing their potential. At the individual level, migrant children, as urban outsiders, often lack sufficient emotional support and self-confidence, face challenges in integrating into their new environment, and commonly suffer from psychological problems that affect their academic performance and personality development.

The issue of migrant children is not a problem that migrant families, vulnerable or marginalized groups have to face alone. Regardless of household registration, occupation, income or social status, families need to face the challenges and choices of further education brought about by restrictions on household registration at all stages of their children's development, from the time they are born until they reach the university entrance examination. These challenges not only undermine the educational opportunities of migrant children but also exacerbate social inequalities and impede increased social mobility. To address these issues, collaborative action from policymakers, families, and society is essential. In the policy level, reforms in education and Hukou policies are necessary to ensure the fair distribution of educational resources. At the family level, the educational awareness and ability of migrant workers should be enhanced to create a more conducive family environment for their children to grow up in. At the individual level, more psychological support and assistance should be provided to help migrant children build up their self-confidence and smoothly integrate into the At the individual level, more psychological support and assistance should be provided to help migrant children build self-confidence and integrate smoothly into society. Through these comprehensive measures, it can move towards the goal of achieving equity in education and promoting overall social progress.

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