Education Equity for Left-behind Children

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Abstract. With huge increases of population migration from rural areas to metropolitan areas in the process of China’s urbanization, the education issue of rural left-behind children (LBC) has become increasingly prominent and severe. Parents’ high mobility causes large numbers of rural children being left-behind, which has resulted in a series of problems in nurturing LBC, such as poor guardianship and supervision, low academic performance, and so on. Taking into consideration the urban-rural disparities of Chinese education development, the increasing inequality in LBC education has particularly started to plague Chinese compulsory education and society. This paper mainly presents current education conditions of LBC, using empirical data related to children who have been left-behind and examples of education inequity towards LBC. Solutions to some of the problems that surround the issue of LBC’s education equity, including measures that must be carried out by governments, schools, parents and local communities in order to promote LBC education equity are offered. Specific initiatives for the establishment of education support projects particularly tailored to the needs of LBC are proposed.

Introduction

The left-behind children (shortened as LBC) emerged in public view in China since 2002. Since then, the LBC education problem has started to plague Chinese compulsory education and society for decades. Left-behind children (LBC) as a new disadvantaged group are defined in different terms by different researchers, particularly with major variance on the age range or the parents’ minimum migration time span. This paper tends to define LBC as children under the age of 18 who are left behind home in rural areas by one or both parents who go out to work as migrant workers for more than 4 months and who are therefore raised by their grandparents, another guardian or a single parent. In accordance with this definition, this paper mainly focus on the education status of rural LBC.

The migration of a large population from rural areas to cities has left only children, women, the elderly, vacant houses, uncultivated land and their related problems, among which the harsh education condition of the left-behind children becomes prominent and severe. The major problems found by the previous researchers include absence of parental care, formation of poor behaviors and bad habits, poor academic performance and etc.[1,2,3]. Some scholars found that lack of parental care caused the mental problems of LBC and others pointed out the risk of moral abnormality due to the absence of home education[3,4]. Shen[5]found weak family guardianship, inadequate social support and poor basic infrastructure are major problems in LBC education. There are a handful of other scholars conducting survey studies on the education problems of LBC in specific areas, and they have similar findings.

It is evident that pervasiveness and severity of the education problems of LBS due to population mobility have aroused more concerns and are agreed on by increasing numbers of scholars. However, the research on the complexity of causes and embodiments of LBC education is still insufficient. Countermeasures proposed are vague and general that lack effectiveness. Few scholars study the LBC education problems from the perspective of education equity. This paper summarizes the emergence of the left-behind phenomena of rural schoolchildren in Mainland China, the problems, and the countermeasures; analyzes the education dilemma from LBC children, parents,
governments, society; discusses inequitable circumstances of LBC education and specific manifestations, and proposes the ways that might lead to education equity of these newly emerging disadvantaged people.

**The Rationality of Education Equity**

Education equity usually refers to the three major indicators: educational opportunities, educational process and education outcome[6,7]. In the analysis framework proposed by Wang[8], education right and entrance opportunity, public-education resources configuration, education quality and equity among different social communities are the indicators of education equity. According to this framework, equitable education right and opportunities, equitable public-education resources, and equitable quality should be provided for all different social communities. Based on these principles, educational equity requires all the citizens to have the equal access to quality education.

Education equity has been prioritized in education policies around the world. Both developing and developed countries are making great efforts to promote education equity regardless of some challenges. In recent years, China has taken the realization of education equity as the goal and strategic guideline of education development to promote compulsory education. In 2010, the Central Government of China distributed the Chinese Mainland Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020), which lists education equity as a basic of national education policy and emphasizes that the key to education equity is the promotion of equitable access to education of different levels. The Plan also stresses the promotion of balanced compulsory education and support of the vulnerable groups through speeding up the reduction of education gaps. However, the equity issue still exists, and particularly prominent in the rural education of rural left-behind children. It is imperative to find the effective ways to promote LBC education equity to obtain favorable balance in basic education in China.

**Current Situation of Rural LBC Education**

With parents’ high mobility, LBC are inevitably confronted with long-term lack of parental care and education. No parents’ supervision and tutoring will undoubtedly impact their academic performance. Since most LBC live in rural areas, their rural education environment may cause them to be at disadvantage from the very start, either in terms of education opportunities, education resources or the teaching quality.

**Parents’ High Mobility Leads to LBC’s Absence of Home Education**

Family provides all children initial education and direct guidance which play a crucial role to the development of positive personality, healthy mentality and academic performance, even the development of IQ and EQ. Unlike non-LBC who are accompanied by their parents, LBC’s long-term lack of parental companion in their periods of growth may not only cause some mental problems but also increase the risks of poor behaviors and habits and learning outcomes.

**Long-term Separation Leads to the Low-quality Guardianship of LBC.** Rural migrant workers’ mobility causes their children’s mobility or being left-behind with their grandparents or relatives. Being separated from their parents is painful for children and the guardians with whom the children are left behind with are often the elderly relatives with poor education. Duan[9] in his study found that 86% of Left-behind children are raised by grandparents, whose education level is rather low; 74.96%—84.02% of them had just received elementary education or none. Therefore it would be rather tough for them to educate their grandchildren, let alone tutoring their study. Most of these guardians cannot provide timely emotional comfort when it is needed, nor can they give the children support in study, therefore the role of guardianship is actually just limited to feeding their stomach.

**Inadequate Home Supervision and Support Lead to Poor Learning Behavior.** Children’s being left-behind can have an effect on children’s performance in school as well as finishing and
meeting school requirements[10]. Most of migration workers’ children have poor performance and learning habits in their academic work due to lack of duel supervision and support of their parents. In general, LBC are poor in learning habits and behavioral habits, many of them lack self-discipline and the initiatives to study, and lack the ability of autonomous learning. By Comparing LBC’s academic performance with non-LBC who have parents’ tutoring, Ji[3] found that being left-behind indeed has a significantly negative effect on their study. Without parental support and supervision, LBC easily develop negative learning attitude, lack of definite goals, and low self-expectancy of learning, probably low cognitive development, which will all contribute to their academic outcomes.

**Poor School Education Quality Impacts Learning Process and Outcomes**

**Lax School Supervision Leaves LBC’s Problems Unsolved.** Because of the poor boarding conditions at school, the school’s supervision to LBC is often out of control. Rural LBC are often ignored by their teachers and classmates due to their poor academic performance and can hardly get help from them[2]. LBC are obviously more disadvantaged than non-LBC, and are shown less attention by teachers with respect to their studies and their lives. In one survey, by comparing the situations of migrant children, non-migrant children and left-behind children, Shen[5] found that less than 50% of the left-behind children were able to get the teachers’ attention, 56% of left-behind children had never received a home visit by a teacher, and 24.1% of the left-behind children never received attention from teachers. It can be seen that the teachers’ attention for LBC was highly inadequate.

On the other hand, the teachers in some schools also complained about their difficulties in helping LBC because guardianship of left-behind children is actually unclear, which makes school education more difficult[5]. It is not hard to find that since the LBC’s parents are long-term away, teachers and parents lack communication and collaboration, and do not forge alliance in supporting LBC. They may even pass the buck to each other for their failure of supervision, as a consequence, it is the LBC who sustain the consequences.

**Rural Education Resources Impact LBC Education Opportunity and Quality.** Equitable allocation of public-oriented educational resources, particularly in the stages of early child education and nine-year compulsory education is not only the key for LBC children to enjoy the same public-oriented resources but is also the guarantee for them to achieve equal education process and receive the equitable educational services. However, public education resources in rural areas, including the number of rural schools, the number of teachers and teacher-students ratio, and the teachers’ qualifications, teaching facilities and etc. are not satisfying, which directly affect LBC’s enrollment ratio and learning quality.

Preschool education. The issue of the kindergarten’ crunch is not new in China, and it is more severe in the countryside, especially affecting LBC. According to the survey done by Hong [7], the gross enrollment rate is 29.69% in the rural areas. The number of rural kindergartens is still less than half of the total number of national kindergartens while rural children make up two thirds of the total number of children in China. Some rural kindergartens are usually run without well-educated staff, and with large children-teacher ratios and low quality. Many of the teaching staff didn’t or don’t have formal education or lack professional training. Under these circumstances, LBC like many other rural children lack proper preschool education from the start. Some LBC stay at home with the elderly guardians without going to the kindergarten until they reach school age[11].

Compulsory education. Nine-year compulsory education in China today is still confronted with unbalanced development between urban and rural school age population. According to the survey conducted by Duan[11] with a sample size of 2.58 million LBC, more than 10% of LBC in provinces like Jilin, Heilongjiang, Yunnan, Tibet and Qinghai, didn’t complete compulsory education. About 600,000 of LBC at the age of 15-17 didn’t receive compulsory education. The senior high school education for LBC is much worse, for example, LBC at the age of 15 who were receiving senior high school education is just 6.6%. In Linhe middle school of Qingshen school of Sichuan, Pan[1]found that only 20 of 53 junior high school graduates could luckily enter ordinary senior high schools, the majority of the students had to go out for work after they graduated from
senior higher school, which means they are doomed to join the migrating workers like the older generation, and in the future will again repeat migrating and being left-behind between them and their next generation.

Teaching staff. Rural schools that LBC attend are confronted with a bad need of qualified teachers. The problems of rural teaching staff are not only found on the quantity but also on the quality which is reflected in teachers’ professionalism and the level of qualification. Low wages, low public welfare, and low social status of rural teachers keep college graduates far from the willingness to come to work in rural schools. Lack of effective incentives system cannot attract and retain qualified teachers. What’s more, the experienced and qualified teachers are likely to transfer to the schools in the town or urban schools. Due to the scarcity of teachers, some subjects like English, music, physical education, art education which are fundamental to full development of students cannot be offered to rural children. All of these factors possibly impact the development of LBC’s cognitive ability, positive learning attitude and good study methods, and cultivation of interest, and in the long-term, the learning outcomes.

In a nutshell, inadequacy or absence of supervision and support both from parents and teachers are the significant factors that lead to LBC poor learning outcomes. Rural schools that LBC attend are weak in basic infrastructure, fund, resources configuration, particularly teachers’ qualification and quantity, and school management and etc., all of which not only impact LBC education opportunities but also education quality. Compared with non-LBC or urban counterparts, it is evident that LBC are put at disadvantage from the start with respect to their early childhood education and basic education, and this trend might be continually repeated in their next generation if no effective methods are found to prevent it from happening.

Initiatives to Promote LBC Education Equity

The consequences of the inequity left-behind children suffer today in China can be expected to surface later in their lives. Therefore, the effective solutions to education equity of LBC should be sought.

Increase of Public Education Resources Configuration to Offer Equitable Education Opportunities and Process for All LBC

Equitable allocation of public-oriented childhood educational resources is not only the key for LBC to enjoy the same public-oriented resources but is also the guarantee for children to achieve equal compulsory education and receive equitable educational services. It is necessary to provide more support for weak schools and equip them with a full set of basic infrastructure and facilities. Provincial and municipal governments should set up more public-oriented kindergartens, schools and service institutions to offer adequate opportunities for each rural child to receive quality compulsory education, while investing in infrastructure construction in the rural areas to bridge the rural-urban gap. Rural education funding system should be established to guarantee the improvement on teaching facilities and other basic resources, to increase the wages of rural teachers, to provide financial help for the disadvantaged LBC children.

Improvement of School-running Level and Enhancement of Rural Education Quality

One key indicator of education equity is quality education that should be offered to all the receivers of education. Apart from the investment in basic infrastructure and fund support, enhancement of rural education quality is crucial for education equity that can ensure LBC children receive equally good quality education. School-running level partly determines the education quality. It is necessary to enhance the educational ideas of rural schools and management level through regular training to school masters and administrators by superior education departments or academic institutions. Besides, the educational supervision should be a basic system to ensure the implementation of education policies, the practice of education ideas, and the promotion of education quality.

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On the other hand, strengthening rural school teachers’ qualification is the prerequisite of promoting the equity and enhancing the quality of Chinese LBC education. Fostering rural school teachers by multiple policies and incentives should be given the priority. One way to enhance rural faculty is to implement Mobile Rural Education-Supporting Project in rural areas, which means recruiting volunteers from rural kindergartens and schools, college graduates, or teachers from urban schools to provide various and flexible mobile guidance for children and parents in remote areas by working closely with the rural schools with large numbers of LBC. Qualified teachers from other rural schools or urban schools can offer their mobile teaching services in one term or more. These teachers should be well-paid or provided with extra subsides. In addition, improving the treatment and welfare of rural teachers may attract qualified college graduates to work in rural schools. What’s more, rural schools should always attach importance to in-service teacher training with the support from governments at all level or social institutions.

**Concerted Efforts Needed to Improve the Whole Conditions of LBC Education Equity**

Education equity impacts not only children and their future, but the future of all members of society as well. It is crucial that all members of society understand that children’s earliest experiences significantly influence their future development. Multiply supports and combined actions from governments, schools, social elements and LBC families are needed to tackle LBC education equity radically. Parent-Teachers Associations and NGOs that help children and families, can arrange for experts to talk to teachers and parents on topics related to various aspects of LBC full development. The government also place attention on education for parents. It should include fundamental parenting skills and family counseling available to them, if needed. Anyway, it requires the shared contributions of families, schools, communities, and policymakers to provide equitable education environment for LBC.

Education equity for LBC in countries like China where continued migration is the inexorable outcome of social transformation and economic development still have a long way to go, and the ever-changing social structure makes it difficult to propose a long-term solution to educational equity. Further research needs to be done to shine new light onto the severity and complexity of this issue, and thereby to enhance the consensus of education equity of LBC, and to fashion innovative solutions to this particularly stubborn problem.

**References**


