Population Mobility and Children’s Education

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Abstract. With the acceleration of urbanization, there are continually huge increases in internal population migration from rural areas to metropolitan areas in China that have resulted in not only required work forces to propel the economy, but also in a new social phenomenon—children being left behind in rural areas. The issue of children left behind in rural areas—either in the care of uneducated and incapable grandparents, relatives, neighbors, or alone when their parents go to metropolitan areas to work has become a severe social problem. Through investigating the current conditions of the left-behind children (LBC) in China, this study attempts to discover some of the negative effects that have resulted, particularly on the education of LBC. Based on the empirical study of population mobility and formal education, and left-behindness and family education, practical solutions to the problems that surround the issue of LBC’s education are presented in this study. Included are also measures that must be carried out by governments, schools, parents and local communities. The specific initiatives for the establishment of education programmes particularly tailored to the needs of LBC are proposed. A goal of this paper is to find the effective solutions that might also be useful for the migration population in the other developing countries that have the similar issue.

Introduction

The migration of people searching for employment that will enable them to improve their standard of living is not new. With the development of economy and urbanization, China is currently experiencing migration within her own borders that has brought unexpected results. The first decade of the twenty-first century was also China’s fastest decade in terms of urbanization, with a 13.45 percent increase in the share of urban population. In a decade, China’s urban population expanded by over 200 million, forming the largest scale urbanization in human history[1]. By 2016, the number of internal migrant workers have reached 253 million compared with 230 million in 2010[2]. The huge increases in internal migration in China have resulted in not only in required work forces to propel the economy, but also in a new social phenomenon—children being left behind in rural areas. 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 problem of the left-behind children’s education has become prominent. This paper mainly investigates the education conditions of these migration workers’ children, with the attempt to find the solutions to the education problems from the perspective of whole-person education.

The Plight of Left-Behind Children’s Education

The Absence of Emotional Solace and Support from Parents

The first in-depth study on left-behind children in rural china was conducted in 2007 by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF). According to the federation, approximately one third of the children have been living apart from their parents for more than five years; almost 53 percent are estranged from both parents. 79.7 percent of left-behind children live with their grandparents, 13
percent are taken in by relatives or friends and the remaining 7.3 percent live by themselves. Once children reach 10 or 11 years of age, they may be able to enter a dormitory if there is one attached to a local school. Regardless of the living situation most of the left-behind children must virtually raise themselves while their parents are away working in distant cities[3]. Also that 40 percent or more of LBC children in poverty-stricken areas have had no contact with their parents for a year. Some parents have neither been home nor had any contact with their children for as long as eight years[4]. Being separated from their parents is painful for children.

Parental support is a significant predictor of a child’s capacity to deal with stress, anxiety and loss of control. Children with strong parental support develop mature psychological traits and do better in school. Socio-emotional skills such as perseverance, motivation, self-esteem, and self-control influence health behaviors and consequently physical health as well as educational outcomes. Family plays a critical role in the formation of such skills[5]. A survey of guardians of left-behind children conducted in Sichuan Province showed that 80 percent of grandparents found it difficult to satisfy the psychological needs of their grandchildren; 15 percent said they did not care about such needs at all[6]. Another survey by Zhejiang University found that 68 percent of guardians seldom found time to talk with the children. Only 11.3 percent of left-behind children talked to a guardian when they had emotional difficulties[7]. In a Gansu Province study, 41 percent of 2000 left-behind children aged 9 to 12 either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I feel worthless”; and 29 percent either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “I often feel lonely”[8]. Studies conducted by She Mao, a professor at Central China University found that less than 20% of left-behind children are lively and healthy and many have mild psychological disorders. After parents stay at home for a short time and return to the city, children suffer from fear and depression. Some refuse to speak and some cut their wrists [9].

The absence of parental emotional comfort is harmful to the development to both their physical and mental health. Without the company of parents, LBC can’t get timely emotional comfort and encouragement when they have troubles, neither can they share their joys with parents timely. It is apparent that children benefit emotionally from spending time together with parents in routine life. LBC are at risk to develop emotional/behavior problems, particularly if they are left behind early in life, for longer periods, in the care of young caregivers or relatives with poor education[10]. Neuroscientists are beginning to show that the positive effects of nurture go deep, actually shaping a child’s brain in ways that will provide lifelong health benefits. A lack of nurture likewise affects brain development, but in ways that may permanently increase a child’s vulnerability to depression, social isolation, and other negative outcomes. What is more, without guardianship and proper guidance some of them idle away with juveniles and become ill-behaved and go astray.

Lack of Formal Preschool Education

Early childhood education of a huge number of LBC in the rural areas is also a big problem. The issue of ‘kindergarten crunch’ is not new in China, and it is more severe in the countryside, let alone LBC. With the advancement of urban-rural economic integration and new rural construction during these years, rural infrastructure and public services have been updated, some new kindergartens are built up, which, to some extent, have eased the tension of the lack of early childhood education services in rural areas, but the quantity and quality of rural kindergartens cannot meet the needs of rural children. According to the survey in 2012, the gross enrollment rate is 29.69% in the rural areas[11]. The number of rural kindergartens was 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. Due to the lack of public-oriented kindergartens, most of the kindergartens catering to children in rural areas are illegal as they are unlicensed and are out of government’s accreditation and management system[11]. Also, these kindergartens are usually run without well-educated staff and with large children-teacher ratio and low quality. Many of the teaching staff didn’t have formal education or lack professional training. Under these circumstances, left-behind children like many other children in the countryside lack good preschooling education from the start. Some left-behind children stay at home with the old guardians without going to the kindergarten until they reach the age for the school.
Lack of Supervision and Education failure

Unlike their urban counterparts, most of migration workers’ children have poor performance in their academic work due to lack of parental supervision and support. Many schools in the countryside do not offer accommodation, or the accommodation conditions even in the boarding schools are not good, therefore, 80% left-behind children live with grandparents, relatives or alone with little or no supervision, which lead to behavior problems and mediocre performance at school. Compared to children who live with their parents, left-behind children have to shoulder a heavy burden: farm work and even taking care of elderly family members. The responsibilities that many of the children face leave them with little or no time for studies and play. Additionally, guardians—particularly grandparents—rarely give them encouragement to attend and do well in school. A prominent problem of grandparenting is that the grandparents are liable to coddle their grandchildren, and it is particularly so when their parents are not on their side. As a consequence, lacking the supportive presence of their parents, many children lose confidence in their abilities, dislike going to school, are frequently truant, and even drop out at an early age or before reaching high school.

Even if some of them are left with one parent, mostly, the mother, lack of fraternal education is also a problem to sound family education. The absence of effective supervision and necessary guidance actually underway nine-year compulsory education that the children of rural migrant workers should receive.

On the other hand, the children that migration workers have left behind at home have to receive the rural basic education of lower quality while their parents are making contribution to the development of city economy. Compared with its development in urban area, the quality of rural education, currently, has still lagged behind and the urban-rural disparities of Chinese education development are still severe. The left-behind children like many other rural children do not have the same educational opportunities as their urban counterparts. The educational resources possessed by rural children, including teachers, school buildings, teaching aids, are far less than urban children. Inequitable educational opportunities and process eventually led to inequitable outcomes[11]. No access to equitable education resources in the city put these children of migration workers at unfair disadvantage from the start.

Left-Behind Children’s Education Issue Becomes a Stubborn Problem

According to China’s fundamental education policy, school-age children are basically only allowed to go to school where their household is registered. In a few cities the policy has been eased. However in most urban areas, rural migrant workers must still pay higher school fees for their children to attend schools there. In addition to the higher tuition, children require books, clothing and other school-related items. They also need adequate food and health care, which are costly in urban areas. Thus, even though parents want their children with them, the difficulty in getting hukou, exorbitant housing prices, high school tuition, lack of health care benefits, and the high cost of living, most of them are forced to leave their children back home with grandparents, great-grandparents, relatives—or even alone. Geography and birthplace equal or determine educational destiny though their parents are making contribution to the development of city economy. Migrant workers are providing the essential workforce for construction and development in urban areas, in exchange for a second-class existence. Moreover, their children—who are the victims of urbanization—are making huge sacrifices for the country's economic development as well. It is evident that parents’ mobilities cause their Children’s education to become a tough issue, although this may not be a problem that baffles China only. History has witnessed the migrations of populations for different reasons, such as for survival, the need of economic development, geographic and historical reasons, and etc. in almost all parts of the worlds. With the mobility of population always come negative consequences. In Australia, indigenous population mobilities and schooling was regarded as a wicked problem[11] when people were attempting to find solutions to mobilities of indigenous population and their formal education. The asserted features of such a
‘problem’ type are described as:

- Wicked problems have many interdependencies and are often multi-causal.
- Attempts to address wicked problems often lead to unforeseen circumstances.
- Wicked problems are often not stable.
- Wicked problems usually have no clear solution.
- Wicked problems are socially complex.
- Wicked problems hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organisation.
- Wicked problems involve changing behavior. (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007, pp. 3–4)[12]

The education of rural migrant workers’ children might be also depicted as a “wicked problem”, and that “migrant disadvantage” has been identified explicitly as such a problem. The issue of LBC’ education problem of migration workers should have increasingly received people’s broad concern, but not greatly enough, particularly the effective solutions are still in question. Periodically, the government has announced guidelines to ease the rules of the housing system. However, in Beijing and Shanghai for example, the changes apply mostly to white-collar workers who can afford to buy an apartment. Because of the high housing prices in urban areas blue-collar migrant workers can barely afford to rent a small apartment. All citizens will be equally eligible for public services and social security programs. Practically speaking, though, reforms will be slow to reach most of the nation’s 253 million migrant workers.

**Intervention Initiatives and Recommendations**

Education has been a basic human right today, and the equity of education has received worldwide attention. Educational equity requires all the citizens to have the equal access to quality education, which is based on principles of fairness and inclusiveness[13]. Equitable allocation of public-oriented early 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 process and receive the equitable educational services. Therefore, governments should set up more public-oriented kindergartens or schools or service institutions, meanwhile they should invest in infrastructure construction in the rural areas.

The Municipality of Chongqing has some of the most aggressive initiatives designed to alleviate the problems of the 1.07 million left-behind children under its jurisdiction. During the past few years the municipal government has built more than 1,800 out-of-school institutions and 980 children’s homes in its rural communities. Local residents who work there help left-behind children in the village live healthy and happy lives. The Happy Homes are places where children can go to play games, talk with psychological counselors, read books or get tutoring for their school subjects from officials who are college graduates. Happy Homes are run using the assistance of local citizens. Village committees have selected about 80,000 people to be substitute parents who are responsible for not only overseeing the children’s daily life but giving them parental love and guidance. Children who are living alone are placed with responsible relatives.

In addition to the Happy Home system and substitute parents, 2,000 boarding schools have been built or renovated. Nutritious lunches are being provided and soon children can receive free health checks. Thousands of phones are being installed in schools and more than 2,000 chat rooms have been set up to encourage and increase communication between the children and their parents. The ACWF, which has been involved with the programs, reported that the measures are practicable and effective. Similar initiatives are being carried out in other parts of China[14].

Other support initiatives about schooling for children of migration workers can also be established including the employment of school-based attendance officers[12] and qualified mobility support teachers working closely with the rural schools with large numbers of left-behind children.

In addition to focusing on the needs of left-behind children, the authors recommend that the government also place attention on education for parents. It is crucial that all members of society
understand that children’s earliest experiences significantly influence their future development. If parents are unaware of the fact that their actions, though well-intended, can inflict pain and possible irreparable harm on their children, the situation of left-behind children will be difficult, or even impossible to change. Therefore, parenting training should be mandatory to help them understand how both 1) the nurturing children and 2) the parent-child relationship impact the overall well-being and future of their children. It should include fundamental parenting skills and family counseling should be available to them, if needed. These programs can be offered at hospitals and locations in the communities in which they live and be supported by local governments. As a large number of trainers will be required, parenting and family specialists can train responsible local citizens to give the parent training and serve as supervisors. However, counseling must be done by professionals. Although parents of left-behind children are the immediate group targeted for these services, programs should welcome and encourage all parents to receive this very important education.

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 whole-child development. As each human is precious and rich in potential, the whole-child approach to educating children takes into consideration each child’s emotional, physical, social, security, academic and creative needs. It requires the shared contributions of families, schools, communities, and policymakers. The whole-child approach requires that schools and families work closely together to—with the support of local communities and governments—help children realize their potential and dreams for the future.

Information that will raise people’s awareness about the rights of children should be made available in all agencies and institutions that are in any way related to children and families. The Convention on the Rights of Children should be a guide for handling issues concerning the treatment of children. The government should always protect the child, which means that it should try to prevent children from being separated from their families unless the separation is in the best interest of the child. In hindsight, it is clear that parents’ leaving children in the countryside for long periods of time is not the best option for the children.

Policy-making that fails to take into account the welfare of children, negatively impacts not only children and their future, but the future of all members of society as well. The consequences of the harm done to left-behind children in China can be expected to surface later in the areas of education, nutrition and health. Without a doubt the consequences will have important implications for the income, mental health and poverty of future generations. On the positive side—once the hukou system is eliminated and development of rural areas begins, the number of left-behind children in China’s rural areas will decline.

Many elements of the ‘stubborn problem’ that is the interface between mobilities and formal education, and also between left-behindness and family education, need further analysis. Further researches need to be done to shine new light onto the complexity of this issue, and thereby to enhance current understandings of the issues of migration workers’ LBC education, and to fashion innovative solutions to this particular stubborn problem.

References


