

A Brief Analysis on the Educational Problems of the ‘Left-Behind Children’ in China

WANG Wenjuan^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Political Science and Public Administration, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

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Abstract

While urbanisation continues affecting Chinese cities, more and more migrant workers leave their children at home. These children are so-called ‘left-behind children’. Increasing concerns among our society draw on how to ensure these children complete their compulsory education. Hence, this paper will provide a basic analysis on the constraints and its reason focusing on left-behind children’s education issue. And recommendations on improving current situation will also be listed at the end.

Key words: The ‘left-behind children’; Education; Urban-rural dual structure

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INTRODUCTION

With the gradual deepening of the reform of China and the continuous improvement of agricultural productivity, a large number of rural surplus labour force have been swarming into cities, which not only has made great contribution to the development and construction of the cities, but also performed an important function on increasing the income of farmers. One coin always has two sides, no exception of this thing. Simply speaking, It brings a series of social problems at the same time, among which the ‘left-behind children’ problem is the most prominent one. For the sake of the long-term ‘three lack’ of family affection, family guardianship and family

education, the living, learning and physical and mental development of the ‘left-behind children’ have been influenced a lot. Consequently, the influence not only manifests the decline in the actual quality of their living. It is more likely to cause that the education problems of the ‘left-behind children’ begin to emerge gradually and the subjective well-being of them suffer a lot. This social problem has appealed extensive attention from society, and Hu Jin-tao delivered an important speech in 2008, specially coming up with the idea, or claim exactly, that the whole society should pay great attention to the work about the ‘left-behind children’ in rural areas.

1. CURRENT EDUCATION PLIGHT OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

The ‘left-behind children’ refers to a particular group of children who were born in rural area (between the age of 6 to 16) and left at home by their parents, and they normally should be taken good care of by family relatives. On one hand, those migrant workers are able to earn lucrative salary to improve their financial situation and provide larger possibility for education for their children. Few of their children learnt to be strong, thoughtful and independent. For these left-behind children, what their parents done inspired and encouraged them to study hard in order to get into university and enjoy a life in the city. However, it is believed that most of the ‘left-behind children’ are more likely to be affected by the negative side, especially on their education than their financial situation.

Using Zhengyang County of Henan Province as an example, this paper surveyed 19 local schools. According to class advisors’ records and major test results, 5 per cent of the ‘left-behind children’ in those schools dropped out. Among the rest of 95 per cent, 40 per cent of them is always at lower scores, 30 per cent at lower-mid scores and only 10 per cent ranked at the top (the top 20 per cent of classes). From the interviews with class

advisors, the 'left-behind children' were more likely to fail to complete their homework comparing with 'non-left-behind children'. High proportion of plagiarism or not to finish in their assessments were common issues among the 'left-behind children' where children who lived with their parents tend to be more serious on assessments in terms of the quality and efficiency. In fact, the 'left-behind children' could suffer from many mental and psychological problems such as autism, self-abasement, timidity and so on. It is caused by that they lives in a factual 'single-parent family' or intergenerational family environment because of the long-term absence of their direct guardian and parents' love.

Lacks of care from their families and education cause them skipping from school, fighting and even starting to act illegitimately, which could potentially become a new instable factor to the society. Some professionals warned that the 'left-behind children' could grow into a 'ruined generation'. Therefore, the issue on how to educate the 'left-behind children' has become a major challenge as a result of increasing migrant workers from rural to urban areas in China.

2. THE REASONS ANALYSIS ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

From previous discussion, the current situation of the education problems of the 'left-behind children' are not optimistic. So what are the reasons of that?

2.1 The Basic Reason: Delay in the Disintegration of Urban-Rural Dual Economic Structure and the Adjustment of Dual Social and Educational Structure

Current educational issues for migrant workers' children fully exposed the weakness of China's old policy on dividing rural and urban population. As the country's economy developing, the urban-rural dual economic structure started to disintegrate; the dual social structure tended to weaker; and the household registration system which caused close restraint for urban and rural movement of population has got loosening. However, a more radical change on the policy need to be further addressed. There is significant difference between urban and rural education on the financial budget, especially on compulsory education. In other words, Chinese educational appropriations are partial to the urban areas. According to 2001 data, allowance for urban students on compulsory education was 4015 RMB in average whereas rural students only had 900 RMB. What's more, the enrolment rate to junior middle school for rural students from primary school is 91 per cent whereas urban students is 100 per cent. Moreover, rural students tend to receive poorer education resource including qualified teachers and

facilities in comparison to urban students. It concludes a significant gap between rural and urban students in their education rights just because of different birthplace though all of them are the flowers of hope of the motherland.

This division in education system also narrowed opportunities for migrant worker's children to be educated in cities. From economic point of view, a worker's earnings not only include wages by finishing his work but also other benefits which are supposed to include the compulsory education rights for their children. Since migrant workers to some extent helped economy development of inflow areas, theoretically, their children's education should be provided by local government agencies where they worked at. If the education is still burdened countries as outflow areas with, it is tantamount that backward outflow areas subsidy well-developed inflow areas. This circumstance will exacerbate the imbalance in regional development, reduce the financial resources of local government to engage in other public utilities including rural social security, and go against the realization of local over-all construction of well-off society. It will lead a serious result in social polarisation.

2.2 The Underlying reason: The Principle of Equity in Policy-Making Process on Education Is Not Fully Guaranteed

Public policies aim to reduce conflicts among individuals, promote active cooperation and help achieve the appropriate allocation of limited resources so that it can maximise social welfare. It is the fundamental goal for government policies to solve market-induced inequalities issues, which includes educational rights for rural students. If the pursuit of economic policies adapted to the market economy system is efficiency, then it is fairness that should be the primary value orientation for public policies needed by cultivating rational group structure of modern society. That is to say, by various redistribution means, public policies can alleviate the conflicts among groups to prevent serious polarization. As the society develops and migrant workers increase, it is common to see that issues associated with their children's education somehow are raised. However, why those issues are hard to solve? It is because during the process of making education policies, principle of equity for all citizens in China was not taken into consideration.

Currently, equalization problem becomes one of the main obstacles in education. From the resource distribution's point of view, the essence of fairness in education is that the government as the subject of resource distribution should plan and distribute available education resources equally without distinguishing various stratum of education-received groups and individuals. Public resources should give priority to those vulnerable groups. More specifically, education resources should prioritise to children who are at the disadvantageous situation. And this is the reality reflection of fair view. Education,

especially compulsory education, is the foundation of assisting economic development and adjusting inequalities in society, and is the most important institutional setting to ensure the relative fairness of social opportunities. Government needs to equally distribute its educational resources firstly otherwise it will widen the existing structural disequilibrium and shortage.

2.3 Immediate Cause: China's Compulsory Education Is Based on Hierarchy Structures Where Primary Education Is Managed by Department of Finance of Local Government

As the budget and funding are managed and provided by local government and only available to its local resident, 'left-behind children' who do not have household registration are not supported. Due to the overall plan for the region's education of regional government was made according to local registered population, parents of 'left-behind children' need to pay additional sponsorship fees as they are excluded from the overall plan, although some big cities like Beijing, Wuhan, Shanghai, Tianjin and so on, have tried to reduce temporary schooling fee for the 'left-behind children' and determined the thought that migrant workers' children could be mainly allowed into local public schools.

3. HOW TO GET OUT OF THE CURRENT EDUCATION PLIGHT OF THE LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

So what can be done to help the 'left-behind children'? Following section provides some recommendations.

3.1 Improve Intuitional Environment to Allow the 'Left-behind Children' to Be Educated in Where Their Parents work at

We can study the 'Ten principles to help migrant workers' by Hangzhou City Council, number seven of it is that the 'left-behind children' of migrant workers share equal educational opportunity as local students in Hangzhou, public schools in Hangzhou are encouraged to accept the 'left-behind children'; extra help will be provided to those children if any emergency situation happens; continue to promote 'surrogate parents' program to offer extra care to 'left-behind children' and help them grow up in a healthy situation. Number ten of the principles is also worthy to study: enhance public culture service to migrant workers. For example opening up public art venues free of charge, holding various cultural events to enrich their spiritual life especially for the 'left-behind children'.

3.2 Better Rural Educational Environment to Ensure the 'Left-behind Children' Can Get Better Education at Hometown

The most realistic solution is to increase financial budget, encourage civilian-run schools and call up donations from

society. From past experiences and case studies, it shows that civilian-run schools which have the capability to assist number of the 'left-behind children' to get educated have their own rationality. This way, there will be less pressure on government financially and community also get more satisfied. Therefore, government should give more support to civilian-run schools for the 'left-behind children'.

3.3 Cancel Unreasonable Household Registration System and Establish a Educational System for Urban and Rural Residents

Chinese Central Government constantly order that compulsory education rights for the 'left-behind children' must be protected. Local governments established many policies to comply with that order. However, how to implement those policies are another different story. Until significant changes in household registration system and urban-rural inequalities, it is hard to treat the 'left-behind children' same as local residents' children.

Overall, reform of household registration system is the priority among priorities for the current educational problems of rural migrant workers' children. For migrant workers, although household register allow them to work in cities, their identification cannot be changed. This not only constrained building an equal environment for all citizens but also caused problems for the 'left-behind children'. Consequently, we should act now to abolish unreasonable household registration system, and cancel restrictions in schools for the 'left-behind children' to build a fair educational system for urban and rural residents.

4. SUGGESTIONS FROM OTHER ASPECTS

The intervention strategy on the 'left-behind children' is an issue of what many researchers put emphasis on. Some previous studies have suggested some measures how to solve the living and learning problems of the 'left-behind children', such as what is mentioned above, cancel household registration system to prevent the 'left-behind children' from the restricted education, set up special schools for migrant workers' children, establish the trusteeship centres for the 'left-behind children', expand the scale of the boarding schools, and so on. But these measures are mostly from the government's and society's point of view so that a further research for their effectiveness and feasibility is needed. Based on the result of practical investigation and analysis, this study hope to put forward more practical and feasible measures from other aspects' point of view, aiming at increasing the subjective well-being of the 'left-behind children' and improving the living quality of them in order to help solve their education problems in an even better fashion.

4.1 Parents Should Create a Good Family Environment for the 'Left-Behind Children'

Good family relationship is one kind of irreplaceable education resource. Currently in China, in such an

economic environment, the rural surplus labour as migrant workers is both necessary and required. But on the other hand, the parents have to take their children's growth into account whenever they go out, to minimize the impact that they work outside on children. For example, the migrant workers could arrange their working hours regularly so as to make time to look in their children. In addition, They can often send some gifts which are interesting or useful to the 'left-behind children' such as bags, clothes and toys. And this could be a sort of comfort and encourage to the children. Moreover, if the temporary guardian could help take the 'left-behind children' into the city their parents work at occasionally, it is also a good idea. And by the way, it can help increase the children's knowledge and experience. In short, we expect sincerely the tragedy screen that the 'left-behind children' can't recognize their parents because of long-term non-meeting will be minimized and even never seen from now on.

4.2 The Temporary Guardians Should Shoulder Their Responsibilities

The temporary guardians are usually played by grandparents, other relatives, teachers and even neighbours who are authorized to take care of the 'left-behind children' and they promised. Since the trust has been given and the promises have been done, the responsibilities also should be shouldered. What's more, the time that the 'left-behind children' stay with the temporary guardians generally is longer than that with their parents working outside. And researches have showed that the temporary guardians and their parenting style could exert impacts on the subjective well-being, mental health, grades, learning confidence and bad behaviour. So it is an obvious conclusion that the temporary guardians' role and how they treat the 'left-behind children' is of big importance. In the case that the parents' education is of shortage, the temporary guardians ought to take the place of the parents outside so that they can exercise the rights and obligations of parents to give family love's compensation to the 'left-behind children'. In other words, they have to care for the children as well as the biological parents, which not only refers to the physical care such as providing food and clothing to them, more importantly to satisfy their spiritual needs, to create a warm, harmonious and democratic family environment for the 'left-behind children'.

4.3 Schools Should Optimize the Educational Environment

As we have mentioned above, it is a request response to the current situation to encourage more civilian-run schools. It is approved commonly that the quantity of schools is important, but the quality of schools is more important and of great importance. Schools are the most important activity venue besides homes. Additionally, in China, the time the students stay at the schools is more greatly than that at homes so that even the influence the teachers exert on the students could be much more than that the family relatives

do, especially on studying, the development of character and how to conduct oneself and treat others. Hence we reach agreement that the educational environment of schools is an essential indicator for judging the life quality of the 'left-behind children', at the same time, one of the biggest factors of affecting their education.

All in all, the whole society ought to show concern for the 'left-behind children'. The families and the schools the 'left-behind children' live in, and the parents, the temporary guardians and the people with love in society, all should unite together and work together to help improve the subjective well-being and the life quality of the 'left-behind children', in order that the education problems of the 'left-behind children' can get solved more quickly and better.

CONCLUSION

In China's process of urbanisation, left-behind children's educational issue is not only rural workers' home affairs, but also domestic affairs relating to nation and every citizen in China. The existence of these difficulties and problems are result of transformation of China society, therefore government and community should take the responsibility instead of leaving it to migrant workers alone. Children of migrant workers should have got better development opportunities and become the most promising generation out of poor rural areas on account of improved family economic conditions. But If their current educational situation cannot get well-changed, it will constantly emerge that the 'left-behind children' into the cities are marginalized by the society and the rest staying at home are marginalized by family. If this marginalisation continues, predictions and worries that 'left-behind children' will become the 'ruined generation' could become facts.

Additionally, this study only extracted only one country town's 'left-behind children' as the sample tested, with the result that the only sample does not have a broad representation, and thus the conclusions have some limitations. In the study design, the consideration about the factors on the education of the 'left-behind children' is not enough comprehensive, particularly to ignore some important subjective factors such as personality and psychology. On other hand, it failed to control effectively a number of unrelated variables. We will make further efforts in these fields.

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