The Impact of Urban-rural Parental Migration on Children's Academic Performance in China

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Abstract. The academic performance of migrant children in China has been a subject of growing concern. With a significant number of parents migrating for work, these children often face unique challenges in their educational journey. While some studies have shown a positive impact of parental income on academic outcomes, it remains uncertain whether this effect outweighs the consequences of reduced parental time and neglect of educational investment. This research aims to investigate the various factors contributing to the divergent academic performances of migrant children in the context of parental migration. This article reviews the literature on parental migration and highlights the complex interplay of factors shaping the academic trajectories of migrant children. While parental income can positively influence academic performance, its efficacy is contingent on mitigating the effects of reduced parental time and educational neglect on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development. Furthermore, the external environment significantly impacts the mental health of these children, necessitating enhanced support systems for their psychological needs. In conclusion, this study's findings emphasize the significance of creating focused interventions and assistance programs to meet the particular difficulties experienced by migrating children in China.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Migrant Children, Parental Migration, Rural China.

1. Introduction

During the previous three decades, China's rapid development and urbanization have resulted in significant rural-to-urban migration as rural residents seek improved employment prospects and opportunities in urban areas. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBCS), there were 288.36 million migrant workers in 2018, and 172.66 million of them were employed outside of their residence regions. In terms of population distribution, China's urbanization rate among permanent residents has exhibited consistent rapid growth, surpassing the 50% threshold in the past decade [1]. Notably, population migration has played a pivotal role in driving the achievement of the 50% and 60% urbanization rate milestones during the seventh National Census conducted from 2010 to 2020 [2]. This rapid increase in the number of internal migrants has drawn an extensive amount of attention from policymakers and refocused research on the effects of migration on children's development.

However, large-scale rural-urban migration has also raised concerns about the development of future generations of migrants. Institutional barriers to rural-urban migration in China, in particular, forbid adult migrants from bringing their kids while working in cities. The implementation of the Household Registration System, commonly known as hukou, imposes limitations on rural migrant workers and their families, thereby impeding their access to subsidized education, healthcare, and various other public services [3]. Consequently, when rural parents move to the city for employment, some choose to take their children to an unfamiliar environment, which forms a special group - migrant children.

It is of paramount importance to understand the impact of parental migration on the academic performances of migrant children as it directly affects their future opportunities, socio-economic mobility, and overall well-being. Since one-third of low-income groups still receiving compulsory education [4], many researchers have attempted to study the impact of family migration on educational outcomes. Previous research has demonstrated negative consequences such as lower academic achievement and educational attainment to instances of resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity [5, 6]. By critically examining the underlying factors that contribute to these mixed

impacts, this article provides a more nuanced understanding of the educational experiences of these children.

This paper will explore several key factors that may account for the differing academic performances observed among migrant children in the context of parental migration in China. This examination will shed light on the microsystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem that influence their educational outcomes, highlighting the challenges they face. Ultimately, through this critical lens, this study can identify gaps in support systems and develop targeted interventions that promote equitable educational opportunities and positive academic trajectories for these children.

2. Impacts Analysis

2.1. Non-Cognitive Development

Non-cognitive development plays a crucial role in students' academic performances, complementing the focus on cognitive abilities. Personality attributes including self-assurance, self-esteem, self-control, persistence, an entrepreneurial spirit, and social skills are numerous instances of non-cognitive abilities [7]. Studies have demonstrated the way they affect aspects including education, employment performance, subjective well-being, income, and financial management. Moreover, studies have revealed the positive influence of non-cognitive abilities on students' academic performance [8, 9]. Therefore, considering non-cognitive abilities becomes crucial, particularly in the context of socially disadvantaged groups like migrant children.

Notably, the process of moving to a new location can be highly stressful for migrant children, as they must adapt to new routines, navigate unfamiliar environments, cope with the loss of old friendships, and establish new social connections. As demonstrated by Liu et al., migrant children often yearn for the security of what they left behind, and the uncertainty of the future only adds to their distress [9]. Establishing new social connections becomes a crucial yet daunting task. The fear of rejection, coupled with language barriers and cultural differences, can make forging new friendships seem like an insurmountable challenge.

Apart from the pressure of adapting to an unfamiliar environment, migrant children often lack communication and care from their parents and are under even greater pressure to study [10]. Financial limitations and busy schedules prevent them from offering extracurricular knowledge and educational materials that foster non-cognitive skills. However, this does not imply a lack of concern for their children's education. Many migrant parents recognize the importance of education and have high expectations for their children's academic performance. Consequently, some adopt strict measures, organizing study schedules and prioritizing exams over leisure activities. In instances of poor academic results, communication tends to be limited to reprimands or physical punishment [10].

In general, recognizing the critical influence of non-cognitive abilities on academic performances, it becomes crucial to implement targeted interventions and support systems that address the challenges faced by migrant children. By fostering positive parent-child interactions, providing adequate support for non-cognitive skill development, and empowering the caregivers and communities, the academic performances and overall well-being of rural left-behind children can be gradually enhanced.

2.2. Cognitive Development

Cognitive abilities refer to a range of mental processes and skills that enable individuals to acquire, process, store, and apply information. They encompass various cognitive domains, including attention, memory, language, problem-solving, reasoning, and perceptual skills [11]. Strong cognitive abilities, such as attention and working memory, facilitate students' ability to focus, concentrate, and retain information in the classroom. Existing research highlights the significance of engaged parenting in promoting cognitive and social-emotional development [11]. Infants who experience emotional neglect are at a greater risk of compromised cognitive development compared to their peers. At the same time, cognitive development is influenced by various factors, including a family's

financial condition and the parent's education levels. Migrant children's development can be affected differently by these factors.

Specifically, migrant children may experience disruptions in their schooling due to frequent relocations or enrollment issues [12]. For example, some schools may have residency requirements that prioritize local residents over migrants. This can further complicate the enrollment process for migrant children, making it more difficult for them to access education in their new location. Additionally, Migrant families may face bureaucratic hurdles, such as the need to provide specific documents or proof of residence, which can delay or impede the enrollment process [12]. These disruptions can impede their access to quality education and affect cognitive development.

Additionally, migrant parents often work long hours in demanding jobs, leaving less time for direct involvement in their children's education and cognitive development. According to Liu, Zhang, and Jiang, rural migrants in China often have lower levels of education and are employed in low-paying jobs with long working hours [12]. Research suggests that migrant parents are generally less involved in their children's education, such as helping with homework, compared to non-migrant parents [12, 13]. Thus, rural migrant families' socioeconomic situation can limit their access to opportunities and resources, making it difficult for them to improve their own educational attainment or provide better support for their children. This lack of parental involvement may further exacerbate the developmental differences between migrant and non-migrant children.

Apart from the above influences, migrant children may face a combination of risk factors, including limited family resources, residential and social segregation, and inadequate school resources, and qualified teachers [12]. These factors can contribute to poorer early development and academic achievement among migrant children compared to their non-migrant peers.

Taken together, the findings highlight the critical role of cognitive development in students' academic performances. Addressing the challenges faced by migrant children requires comprehensive support systems that prioritize cognitive development. By fostering engaged parenting, providing targeted interventions, and recognizing the significance of parental presence, academic outcomes could be promoted among these children.

2.3. Mental Health

Mental health plays a crucial role in shaping children's academic outcomes. Factors such as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem significantly influence academic performance. Migrant children are susceptible to mental health challenges, such as low self-esteem and anxiety, due to prejudice in their social and cultural environments [7]. These children often experience feelings of exclusion, which contribute to their compromised mental well-being and academic performance.

The intricate interplay between migration and mental health manifests diversely based on the unique regional contexts. Notably, there is evidence suggesting that migrants initially experience certain advantages in terms of mental health [14]. These early benefits can be attributed to the presence of a robust support network within migrant families, coupled with access to urban amenities and public services. These factors serve as buffers against the potential stressors brought about by migration.

However, around the 8-year mark, mental health issues tend to resurface and increase among migrant children [14]. This phenomenon points to the complexity of the mental health trajectory within this group. Lu et al.'s research delving into the experiences of migrant and urban children has shed light on this matter [15]. Their findings indicate that migrant children face an elevated risk of grappling with externalizing problems, as well as thoughts and behaviors related to self-injury. Central to this mental health problem is the vexing issue of marginalization and discrimination – formidable adversaries these migrant children must confront daily as their cognitive abilities develop [15, 16]. This not only underscores the challenges these children encounter but also emphasizes the need for targeted interventions and support systems to address their evolving mental health needs.

The presence of a vexing issue surrounding marginalization and discrimination among rural-to-urban migrant children can be attributed to a confluence of complex factors inherent to the migration

process [15, 16]. For one thing, when these children transition from rural settings to urban environments, they often encounter a socio-cultural landscape that is unfamiliar and, in some cases, unwelcoming. This unfamiliarity is compounded by disparities in social and economic status, as well as cultural norms between the migrants and the established urban population [15]. For another, marginalization and discrimination can stem from deep-rooted biases and stereotypes that perpetuate negative perceptions about rural migrants. The urban areas, while offering opportunities for economic advancement, can also harbor tensions arising from competition for resources and services [16]. This competition can inadvertently lead to the exclusion of migrant children from vital social networks and community support systems, exacerbating their sense of isolation. Furthermore, the urban setting may be characterized by a rapid pace of life, diverse cultural practices, and varying linguistic norms, which can pose additional challenges for migrant children in terms of assimilation and social integration. The lack of familiarity with urban social codes can render them vulnerable to misunderstandings and even prejudice, fostering a sense of being "othered" within their new environment.

Therefore, It is essential to recognize that these issues are not solely the result of individual attitudes but are often rooted in systemic factors such as policies, economic disparities, and urban planning. However, in many countries, migrant children are neglected by the healthcare system due to various barriers, including their legal status, socioeconomic background, and cultural and linguistic differences [14]. Thus, it requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the unique challenges faced by migrant children, including providing mental health support services, promoting a supportive school environment, fostering social integration, and combating discrimination and stigmatization. By prioritizing mental health and well-being, educational institutions and society as a whole can support the academic success and overall flourishing of migrant students.

3. Policies

Education policy implementation in the macro-system is essential for addressing the specific needs of left-behind and migrant children. These children often face barriers to education and experience disparities compared to their peers. Effective policy implementation ensures equal access to education, addresses educational gaps, promotes social integration and inclusion, enhances academic performance, breaks the cycle of poverty, and brings long-term societal benefits.

Over the past two decades, the substantial influx of children born to rural-urban migrant families has engendered a pronounced societal concern, precipitating discussions and inquiries into the educational prospects accessible to this group. Despite the formulation of policy measures by the central government aimed at addressing this issue, there remains widespread concern that the educational attainment of these migrant children will be hampered and that they will not be able to access the same educational resources as their urban counterparts [10].

In order to further explore the existing gaps and impediments to policy implementation, the education policies will be divided into three parts: funding and school access policy, equal opportunity policy, and school support and social integration policy. These policies ensure that migrant children have the opportunity to attend school in urban areas, get equal opportunities, and promote the integration of migrant children within the school environment.

3.1. Funding and School Access Policy

The inadequate implementation of funding and school access policies can be attributed to the self-interested decisions of local governments. It has been claimed by some researchers that the primary obstacle to implementing school access policies is the lack of financial resources, as migrant children's education policies are not adequately supported by funding [10]. Consequently, the policy's effectiveness is hindered, leading to a situation where governments exercise discretionary powers that result in evading responsibility for proper implementation. Hu's research further reveals that local core governments in cities C and H fail to allocate sufficient funds to the local education systems,

placing significant financial burdens on the local education bureaus tasked with meeting the educational needs of migrant students [10]. Additionally, rather than focusing on the expansion of the educational sector, local core governments are more concerned with local economic growth. Consequently, more public funds are channeled into business investments that generate additional public revenue, while education for migrant children remains chronically underfunded. Thus, private schools created specifically for migrant children have emerged as another option for migrating families [3]. These migrant schools frequently charge low tuition rates, have subpar facilities, and hire subpar teachers, all of which contribute to the academic failure of migrant children.

3.2. Equal Opportunity Policy

Another Implementation barrier to equal opportunity policy is the exam-oriented education system in China. As required by the central government, schools must educate migrant and urban students in the same classrooms, follow the same admissions standards, and make an effort to help migrant students catch up in their academics [17]. However, the intense competition among parents to enroll their children in schools with impressive examination results, coupled with schools vying to establish themselves as reputable or prestigious institutions, perpetuates the emergence and persistence of a stratified educational system that prioritizes examination scores. For this reason, long-term school stratification develops and stabilizes, increasing test results' significance. Thus, the central government's policy of equal school admission conflicts with the exam-oriented education system, thereby undermining the interests of local schools and leading to the neglect of these policies by local governments.

3.3. School Support and Social Integration Policy

Nonetheless, the implementation of social integration policies appears to be commendable, largely attributable to the provision of effective support within schools for migrant children and the establishment of positive intergroup relations between migrant and urban children. Hu corroborates this assertion by highlighting the proactive engagement of urban schools with migrant parents, as well as their efforts to identify students who may require additional support in various aspects of life [10]. Although available psychological consultancy services remain underutilized, both at the institutional and individual levels, schools offer psychological well-being offices and teachers who can provide assistance to migrant children encountering psychological difficulties. Furthermore, the absence of discriminatory treatment ensures equal treatment of migrant and urban children within educational settings, fostering a welcoming environment conducive to frequent and equitable interaction between the two groups [10].

In general, while the central government has published policies to improve education for migrant children and LBCS since the 2000s, there are still challenges in their implementation. The inadequate allocation of funds and resources by local governments hampers the effectiveness of funding and school access policies. The self-interest of local governments focused on economic growth rather than education, results in underfunding for migrant children's education. Additionally, the exam-oriented education system creates a barrier to the equal opportunity policy. However, the implementation of social integration policies shows positive strides, with schools providing support and fostering positive relationships between migrant and urban children. Overall, further reforms are needed to address the ambiguities, weak incentives, and barriers present in migrant children's education policies, ensuring their proper implementation and improving the educational outcomes and experiences of migrant children in China.

4. Recommendation

4.1. For Parents

In order to address the challenges faced by migrant children, it is crucial to prioritize and support the development of both non-cognitive and cognitive abilities. Special attention should be given to

bridging the gaps in these areas, which have often been neglected. To achieve this, measures such as strengthening parent-child communication and reducing the excessive pressure on children's academic outcomes are recommended to these children [7]. By encouraging open and supportive communication between parents and children, the emotional well-being of migrant children can be enhanced, fostering a positive environment for their overall development. Additionally, reducing the intense focus on academic performance can alleviate the burden on children and allow for a more balanced approach to their education.

Additionally, investing in these children's academic growth is paramount. While economic opportunities may have improved for some families due to migration, it is crucial to ensure that investment in their children's education is also prioritized. Financial resources should be allocated to provide adequate learning materials, resources, and educational support for rural left-behind children. By investing in their academic development, it can empower these children with the necessary skills and knowledge to overcome educational disparities and create a brighter future for themselves and their communities.

4.2. For Schools

Teacher support plays a crucial role in nurturing the overall development of these children. To effectively improve the cognitive and non-cognitive abilities of migrant children, it is recommended to prioritize two key areas: increasing teacher support and incorporating non-cognitive training within schools [7, 8]. Investing in professional development programs for teachers, focusing on topics such as understanding the unique needs of left-behind children and implementing effective teaching strategies, can greatly enhance their ability to support and engage these students.

Furthermore, integrating non-cognitive training into the school curriculum is essential. This involves providing explicit instruction and activities that target the development of social-emotional skills, resilience, problem-solving abilities, and self-regulation. By incorporating such training, schools can equip migrant children with the essential tools to navigate challenges, build healthy relationships, and excel both academically and personally.

4.3. For Government

In order to proactively solve the burgeoning expansion of migrant children within the Chinese context, it is imperative to contemplate a comprehensive way of public policy measures. One such policy path worthy of serious examination is the concept of urban-rural integration [6, 7, 18]. Through a harmonic integration of urban and rural worlds, this method may create an environment favourable to decreasing the growing spread of migrant children.

Furthermore, recalibrating the existing household registration system appears as a critical aspect of this policy discourse [7, 18]. Relaxing the rigidities inherent in this system could reduce the structural constraints that currently limit the possibilities for migrant families. This, in turn, might significantly reduce the economic pressures suffered by these families, making their condition more tenable and allowing for more equitable participation in urban life.

Moreover, as discussed above in macrosystem analysis, these policies need to be accompanied by strong incentives for their effective implementation. Currently, the absence of sanctions or rewards for achieving policy goals undermines the impact of these laws and regulations. It is imperative to establish mechanisms that hold local governments accountable for adhering to policy requirements and encourage them to actively pursue the desired outcomes. By reinforcing incentives, the implementation of these policies can be strengthened, leading to tangible improvements in the lives and well-being of left-behind children and their families.

5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the various factors contributing to the divergent academic performances of migrant children in China specifically in the context of parental migration. By

exploring the microsystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem that shape their educational outcomes, this paper has gained insights into the challenges faced by these children.

Though some studies have found better academic performances through parental income, this positive effect is depended on whether the income outweighs the impacts of reduced parental time inputs into child learning or not. However, more researchers have found negative impacts of parental migration due to parents' neglect of education investment and children's cognitive and non-cognitive development. Thus, the benefits of parental income become uncertain. Additionally, Factors in the external environment also have a profound impact on a child's mental health, and neglecting to build a healthy psyche in a child may further lead to depression and low self-esteem. Therefore, society and schools need to establish more mental health support systems to better detect children's psychological needs. From a macro point of view, although contemporary government policy mentions care for children with special needs, there is a lack of an active and effective management system to implement the policy on the ground.

It is evident that a comprehensive understanding of these factors is essential in developing effective support systems and targeted interventions. By identifying gaps and addressing the unique needs of LBC and migrant children, the combined efforts of individuals and society can strive towards fostering equitable educational opportunities and promoting positive academic trajectories for these children. This research serves as a call to action, highlighting the importance of continuous efforts to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of LBC and migrant children, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape in China.

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