



The education of migrant children in Shanghai: The battle for equity



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ABSTRACT

The PISA success of Shanghai has aroused open challenge and debate about whether the city is a “model of equity”. There have been heated debates about the education of migrant children in Shanghai. This paper analyses publicly accessible policy papers and literature to provide a contextualised interpretation of the major progress and ongoing challenges surrounding the education of migrant children in Shanghai. The paper shows the structural inequalities affecting migrant families and their children. It refers to central as well as local government policies and the constraints these policies face. The analysis shows that Shanghai remains riddled with ongoing challenges that may have been obscured by the PISA success.

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1. Introduction

Mainland China was first included in the Organization for Economic Development’s (OECD’s) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing in 2009. Chinese involvement was restricted to Shanghai, which was selected because it is generally regarded as being at the forefront of educational innovation and development in China (Qian and Walker, 2013; Walker et al., 2011). Given its debutant status, Shanghai’s results in PISA were quite outstanding. It outperformed other countries in mathematics, science and reading literacy by a clear margin (OECD, 2010, 2013).¹

Shanghai’s success went beyond academic performance, as it was also commended as “a model of equity” (Loveless, 2014) where students tended to “perform well regardless of their own background or the schools they attend[ed]” (OECD, 2010, p. 9). The PISA 2009 result revealed that 76% of the disadvantaged students in the Shanghai sample were considered to be “resilient”; that is, despite being classified as “disadvantaged” – defined by placement in the bottom quartile in terms of the distribution of

socio-economic status (SES) – they scored in the top quartile of students from all countries with similar socio-economic backgrounds. In the foreword to the 2009 volumes analysing the PISA results, Shanghai was mentioned by name as the education system “that [has] been able to secure strong and equitable learning outcomes” (OECD, 2010, p. 3).

This high commendation flies in the face of a commonly held belief that China adopts an exclusive and elitist educational system (Pepper, 1996; Ross, 2000). For years, there have been reports of how urban schools shut their doors to students migrating from rural regions (Goodburn, 2009; Han, 2004; Lai et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014) and how greater resources and quality teachers are distributed to favoured schools (Walker and Qian, 2012). The OECD, however, presented a different picture. Has Shanghai become the world model of both academic success and equity?

Not surprisingly, the release of the PISA results triggered open challenge and quite intense debates. Some scholars and media reporters attempted to find out “the truth behind the boasts” (Roberts, 2013) or reveal “PISA’s China Problem” (Loveless, 2013, 2014). The veracity of the PISA results was challenged in different ways. One of the key debates was whether the large number of migrant children living in Shanghai had been included in the formal education system and thus represented in the PISA sample (Loveless, 2013; Roberts, 2013). Many also felt that OECD had ignored the Chinese Household Registration system (*hukou*), which might be having a devastating effect on the lives of these migrant children (Loveless, 2013, 2014).

Responses from the opposite camp emphasised that the influence of some institutional barriers, such as the *hukou* system,

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¹ The recently released PISA 2012 results show that Shanghai continues to top the overall ranking across the three subjects (OECD, 2013). In PISA 2009, Shanghai scored 556, 600 and 575 on the overall Reading, Mathematics and Science scale. The OECD average scores across the three subjects were 493, 496 and 501, respectively. On the PISA 2012 test, Shanghai scored 613, 570 and 580 in Mathematics, Reading and Science against the OECD mean scores of 494, 496 and 501, respectively.

Table 1

Statistics of migrant children and total number of children receiving compulsory education in Shanghai in 2012.

Migrant children attending primary and junior secondary schools	538,000
Total number of primary and junior secondary school students	1,200,000
Ratio	About 45%

is dissolving because of the government's pursuit of education equity (Tucker, 2014; Zhang, 2013). For example, Zhang Minxuan, the Director of Shanghai's PISA, mentioned that it was not possible for the programme to have "exclude[d] most migrant students", confirming that Shanghai's success was the result of "unremitting education reform" during the past 2 decades (Zhang, 2013, para. 10). The Shanghai chapter in the OECD publication, entitled *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*, highlighted the Shanghai government's awareness of the importance of "overcoming disparity and inequality in education" (Cheng, 2011, p. 95). The city established the notion that migrant children were "our children" to be treated "with reason and sympathy" (p. 96).

These ongoing debates warrant further examination of notions of education equity in Shanghai, and the education of migrant children deserves particular attention. This is not to deny the importance of other dimensions of equity; these may include, for example, equity issues confronting local students from low SES families and students with physical disabilities and learning difficulties. However, given that education of migrant students stands out in the PISA debate, this paper focuses on this particular dimension of the equity issue.

In this article, when we refer to migrant children, we focus mainly on children aged between 6 and 15, the ages of compulsory education mandated by the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 (Wang and Holland, 2011). The parents of these children are usually rural labourers who flock to Shanghai in search of employment opportunities and a better life. Table 1 shows the most recent, official data about the number of migrant children in Shanghai in 2012 (Shanghai Education Commission, 2013; Shanghai Statistics Bureau, 2013).²

The education of migrant children in China has been quite extensively discussed in the international literature. Dozens of research reports have been produced by both Chinese and international researchers (e.g., Goodburn, 2009; Lai et al., 2014; Tan, 2010; Wang and Holland, 2011). Whereas these studies have contributed much in the area, they have largely neglected a number of areas. First, with few exceptions (e.g., Wang and Holland, 2011), most of the published papers on education of migrant children do not focus specifically on Shanghai. Although sharing the same national framework, the local interpretation and implementation of national policies differs from province to province. For example, while the majority of migrant children in Beijing have to attend "privately run, tuition-funded, for-profit migrant schools" (Lai et al., 2014, p. 69), this is not the case in Shanghai. Second, many studies focus on the difficulties, obstacles and discriminations that migrant students face while pursuing education (e.g., Tan, 2010; Wang and Holland, 2011). Government efforts to improve education equity of migrant children are under-explored. Third, with increasing public concerns about migrant children's education in Shanghai, there has been a recent surge of empirical research in the area in the Chinese literature (e.g., Gao, 2012; Lu, 2013; Wang and Cui, 2013). For example, a report

entitled *Blue Book of Education of Migrant Children in Shanghai* (Lu, 2013) was published in 2013. This massive research collected data from policy-makers, principals, teachers and parents. These new research findings have not yet been reported in the international literature.

This paper attempts to address these inadequacies and sketch out the current state of play of education of migrant children in Shanghai. To this end, the paper mainly relies on publicly accessible policy papers and available international and Chinese literature. It uses this literature to analyse the progress and difficulties of improving educational equity for migrant children in Shanghai. As such, this article does not examine how well migrant children perform on PISA – this data is not available. However, the analysis of education of migrant children can contribute through providing a more contextualised understanding of Shanghai's PISA success.

The paper is comprised of seven sections. The next section explores the impact of *hukou* on the education of migrant children and discusses the definition of equity used in this paper. Sections 3–5 outline the progress Shanghai has made in enhancing equity of migrant children. The ongoing challenges and remaining obstacles will also be discussed. The sixth section attempts to form a more contextualised understanding about the PISA success. The final section concludes the paper.

2. *Hukou*, migrant children and equity

The education of migrant children has become a social issue predominantly because of the barriers of *hukou*. *Hukou* is a form of population registration legalised in the 1950s (Chan and Zhang, 1999). This system binds people to their place of registration, or "*hukou* location (*hukou suozaidi*)" (Fan, 2008, p. 41). Because of the formidable barriers imposed by the *hukou* system, there was little inward migration (within China) until the 1980s, and most students remained in their own localities to be educated. However, the relentless economic boom that started in the early 1980s made "large-scale rural-to-urban migration" necessary (Goodburn, 2009, p. 496). In Shanghai, the ratio of migrants to the resident population rose from 13.3% in 1986 to over 20% by 1993 (Shanghai Statistics Bureau, 1994). The 2013 statistical data showed that among a total population of 24 million residents, only around 14 million had official Shanghai *hukou* (Shanghai Statistics Bureau, 2014).

Many migrant workers bring their children with them when they move to the cities. They do this largely because they believe that education is a powerful "determinant of future life chances" for their children (Brown, 1990, p. 65). Migrant parents expect that their children will receive better education in the cities and have improved employment prospects. However, without *hukou*, migrant workers did not have access to the goods and services provided to Shanghai *hukou*-holders, including state education for their children (Goodburn, 2009; Wang and Holland, 2011).

Thus, equity issues facing migrant children in Shanghai are manifold. Borrowing Levin's (2002) definition, education equity in this paper is broadly defined as the "fairness in access to educational opportunities, resources and outcomes" (p. 163). We focus on these three interrelated equity issues facing migrant children in Shanghai – opportunities, resources and outcomes.

The first issue is migrant children's access to educational opportunities. This concerns whether the entitlement to compulsory education is a "substantive equality" rather than "formal equality" for migrant children (Brown, 1990, p. 73). An opportunity exists "when an agent is capable by his own actions, of doing or having something if he so chooses" (Green, 1988, p. 4). The nature of an opportunity is "directly related to the nature of the obstacles confronting the agent" (p. 4). For migrant children and their parents, the obstacle has been the *hukou* system that reserves

² The ratio of migrant children was higher in primary schools than in junior secondary schools. The 2012 data showed that among all the newly enrolled Primary One students, 55.01% of them were migrant children while the ratio was 39.81% among new junior secondary school students.

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