



The influence of preschool rural migrant composition on rural migrant children's early development in China



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ABSTRACT

A multilevel modeling approach was employed to investigate the relationship between preschool rural migrant composition and the pre-academic and behavioral outcomes of young rural migrant children with different durations of residence in urban China. This study represents a unique contribution because (1) few studies have focused on young Chinese rural migrant children and examined the influence of preschool rural migrant composition on their academic skills and behaviors, (2) few researchers in China have used a continuous (i.e., percentage of rural migrants in school) as opposed to a binary (i.e., mixed school versus rural migrant school) indicator for school rural migrant composition, and (3) few investigations have distinguished groups of rural migrant children by the duration of urban residence (i.e., short-duration (SD) rural migrant children versus long-duration (LD) rural migrant children). Based on data of 1213 Chinese children (2.7–6.17 years of age) and their parents and teachers from 81 urban preschools in Beijing, we found that SD rural migrants (≤ 2.5 years) were rated significantly lower in oral language and numeracy skills and that LD rural migrants (> 2.5 years) were rated as having significantly more behavioral problems than their urban counterparts after controlling for the children's gender, age, family socioeconomic status (SES) and preschool SES. Cross-level interactions indicated that SD rural migrant children in preschools with proportionally more rural migrant peers fared better in terms of oral language skills, and LD rural migrant children had fewer behavioral problems when there were more rural migrant peers in their preschools, whereas urban children performed worse in terms of oral language skills and displayed more behavioral problems in preschools with a high rural migrant composition. These findings provide insights into improving the early development and adaptations of rural migrant children.

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1. Introduction

The remarkable growth of the economically driven rural-to-urban migration in China has led to an influx of rural migrant children via family reunification (Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2009). According to the 2010 Chinese Census, there were 35.8 million

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rural migrant children (zero- to 17-year-olds) living in host cities; of this number, 9.81 million were young rural migrant children (zero- to five-year-olds), which represented almost one-third of the total population of migrant children (China Women's Federation, 2013), and showed a 38.6 percent increase in only five years (2005–2010; China Women's Federation, 2013). From the perspective of individual lifelong development, the early stage is the first key stage, in which children's development is plastic and irreversible (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006). Success in the adaptation of rural migrant children in this stage lays a foundation for their urban integration and adaptation in the future.

In China, preschool education is the first formal educational stage that children are exposed to (Zhang, 2011), which is significant in terms of reducing the difference from the start and promoting educational equity (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). However, early childhood education in contemporary China is not compulsory; no efforts or official policies exist that systematically assign rural migrant children to preschools. This system results in two possible situations when young rural migrant children are of preschool age: they do not enroll in preschool or they enroll in “mixed preschools”—that is, preschools with urban children. First, many rural migrant children are unable to enter preschool because of various obstacles, such as extra education endorsement fees. A large-scale survey conducted by China's National Population and Family Planning Commission showed that only 62% of rural migrant children enter preschool (Song & Li, 2012). Second, rural migrant children who are enrolled in preschool are inclined to attend preschools that are in close proximity to their homes, which results in a high proportion of rural migrant peers attending certain preschools because rural migrant families tend to be clustered in specific areas. Only the children whose parents emphasize the need for early education and can afford the extra fees enroll their children in preschools with a high proportion of urban children. Thus, the result is that rural migrant compositions vary among different preschools.

Since Coleman's renowned study was published in 1966, school composition, as a contextual factor that influenced students' academic development and adaptation, received increasing attention (Portes & Hao, 2004). In Western countries, a growing number of studies have focused on the influence of school ethnic composition on students' development (Mickelson, Bottia, & Lambert, 2013; Portes & Hao, 2004; Walsemann, Bell, & Maitra, 2011). In China, as the number of rural migrant children has increased, Chinese researchers have focused on the effect of primary/ secondary school rural migrant composition on rural migrant students' development (Li, Zou, & Wang, 2009; Lin, Fang, Liu, & Lan, 2009; Lin, Wang, Zhang, & Zhou, 2009; Zhou, 2006). Research in both Western countries and China has investigated children's academic and behavioral outcomes, which are important components of children's development. Language and math are important components of academic development and are also the bases of other academic skills (Mashburn et al., 2008; Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Howing, 1990); behavioral problems are the expressions and indicators of maladjustment (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; Fuemmeler, Elkin, & Mullins, 2002). Previous studies from Western countries and China demonstrated that school composition (i.e., ethnic minority composition or rural migrant composition) showed varying influences on different developmental aspects of ethnic minority or rural migrant students. In addition, these effects were moderated by the duration of residence in the host countries or cities (Brännström, 2008; Okamoto, Herda, & Hartzog, 2013).

However, to date, no studies have directly addressed the effect of preschool rural migrant composition in China. The present study, for the first time, will investigate the effect of preschool rural migrant composition on young rural migrant children's emerging language and numeracy skills as well as internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. These findings will contribute to the international literature regarding school composition and early child development and, more importantly, will provide insight into improving early development and adaptation of Chinese rural migrant children.

In the following section, we will review previous studies on school ethnic minority composition in Western countries and studies focusing on primary/ secondary school rural migrant composition in China, which will provide insight for the present study given that both groups (minority students and rural migrant children) are underprivileged groups who have certain common experiences in a new environment.

2. School ethnic composition and students' development in Western countries

In 1966, the well-known Coleman report found that schools with high proportions of ethnic minority students were associated with lower academic performance and identified school ethnic composition as an important context index that influenced student's academic performance (Coleman et al., 1966). Since then, an ongoing debate has ensued regarding the effect of school ethnic composition on the academic performance and integration of immigrants and ethnic minority students.

Researchers have obtained different results regarding the influence of school ethnic composition on students' academic and behavioral outcomes (Belfi et al., 2014; Benner & Crosnoe, 2011; Mickelson et al., 2013; Portes & Hao, 2004; Walsemann et al., 2011). Regarding academic performance, most studies have shown that higher proportion of immigrant or ethnic minority students in a school were associated with lower levels of math or language performance in immigrant or ethnic minority students (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012; Belfi et al., 2014; Driessen, 2002; Mickelson et al., 2013). In a meta-analysis of 25 U.S. studies that were published in the past 20 years, Mickelson et al. (2013) found that a high concentration of ethnic minority students had a significantly negative influence on the math performance of ethnic minority students. Research on 5000 5th and 6th grade pupils from Flanders, Belgium, found that school ethnic composition was negatively related to immigrant pupils' performance in reading fluency, spelling and reading comprehension (Belfi et al., 2014). Research also found that a high concentration of ethnic students attenuated the math and language performance of the non-minority students such as white Americans (Mickelson et al., 2013) and non-immigrant students (Agirdag et al.,

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