

Population Mobility and Inequality in Educational Opportunities: A Review of Mechanisms for Compulsory Education of Migrant Children in Large Cities

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Abstract

With the continuous expansion of the scale of population movement in China, the problem of compulsory education for migrant children in large cities has also begun to draw more attention. This paper examines inequalities in access to compulsory education, defines relevant core concepts, and synthesizes theories of educational equity and social stratification for a systematic review of prior literature.. Based on the existing literature, this study will use an analytical system of three dimensions to examine the reasons for educational disparities among migrant children: institutional factors, family capital and the distribution of urban educational resources. This paper further summarises key research findings, pinpoints deficiencies in extant literature, and puts forward prospective avenues for subsequent research. According to the above, the household registration system, point-based enrollment policies, disparities in family capital and unequal distribution of educational resources have collectively led to unequal educational opportunities. Finally, the following policies will be introduced: promote the reform of household registration, optimise the distribution of educational resources, and strengthen educational support for students. The above contents provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the research on educational inequality in the context of population mobility and put forward some recommendations for promoting educational equity.

Key words

children of migrant workers; inequality in educational opportunities; compulsory education; educational equity; household registration system

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of China's urbanisation, there has been an extensive outflow of the population, and a large number of rural workers and their families have moved to big cities; consequently, the number of children of migrant workers has continuously increased. To promote the goal of social equity in compulsory education, the distribution of opportunities within the system will have an impact on social mobility and change in the social class structure. In recent years, scholars have produced a large number of studies in the field of educational equity, social stratification and educational problems for children of migrant populations. Li Chunling and Liu Jingming have pointed out that inequality in educational opportunities in China is caused by both institutional factors and family background [1,2]. Li Yao and others have shown that local policies, such as points-based enrollment and social security requirements, have further worsened the disparity in school enrollment opportunities for migrant children [3]. However, existing research perspectives are relatively scattered and lack an all-encompassing system for analysing mechanisms specific to the stage of "compulsory education enrollment opportunities". Therefore, this paper will examine the related studies in terms of institutional factors, family capital, and differences in urban resource allocation. Investigate the reasons and reasons for the disparity in enrolment opportunities for children of migrant workers in large cities under compulsory education and offer policy adjustments.

2. Definition of Relevant Concepts and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Definitions of Core Concepts

2.1.1 Children of Migrant Workers

Migrant children generally refer to minors who do not have local household registration and have moved to large cities with their parents to receive compulsory education in those cities. Their main features are that the place of household registration differs from the place of residence, and they have now joined the urban com-

pulsory education system. Cui Sheng and Wu Qiuxiang indicate that both the concepts of "migrant children" and "children of migrant workers" are closely related to population migration, and their educational problems reflect the uneven distribution of public education resources among different groups [4]. Fu Xiaoxing and others have further proposed that the household registration system and disparities in the allocation of urban educational resources create institutional barriers for children of migrant workers in accessing education [5].

2.1.2 Uneven Distribution of Educational Resources

Unequal educational opportunities refer to the different access to educational resources and various educational results for different groups in society due to various reasons such as economic conditions, institutional differences, social capital, and culture. Li Chunling believes that the disparity is also reflected in the different lengths of school life and unequal access to good resources [1]. Yang Dongping believes that educational equity covers three aspects: starting conditions, educational process and achievement, etc., and resource distribution is unevenly distributed, thereby affecting students' chances of study. For children of migrant workers, the problem of inequality is not only whether they can attend school, but also what kind of school they will attend and their future development prospects.

2.1.3 Access to Compulsory Education

Access to compulsory education refers to the qualification of school-age children to enter primary and junior high schools in accordance with the law, and is a basic guarantee of educational equity. Yang Dongping thinks that it is necessary to allow all people access to the public education system equally [6]. Factors that affect the enrolment options for children of migrant workers include household registration, residence permits, social security contributions and the availability of school places in a specific area. Although the state has set the rule that it should be "primarily managed by the local government of the destination area and run through public schools", in practice, children of migrant workers still encounter various obstacles in matters such as eligibility confirmation and school selection. The problems of enrollment opportunities are mainly caused by the uneven distribution of urban public resources at different

institutions.

2.2 Theoretical Basis

2.2.1 Theories of Educational Equity

Theories of educational equity hold that educational resources should be distributed reasonably among the people of the country, and that all individuals should have the right to education. Educational equity refers to fairness in opportunity, as well as in the process of education and the results of education. Yang Dongping believes that educational equity is a type of social equity, and equity of opportunity is especially necessary during compulsory education [6]. The government should ensure that all children in their school years have an equal right to education and that no one is excluded from compulsory education due to their family's financial situation, their place of residence or other reasons.

2.2.2 Social Stratification Theory

Theories of social stratification believe that considerable differences in the opportunity for education exist among various social groups due to disparities in economic conditions, cultural capital and other social resources. Education can provide opportunities for social mobility and is at the same time one of the primary channels of reproduction for the social class system.

Based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, Privileged social groups transmit their accumulated cultural capital intergenerationally, thereby granting their descendants sustained educational advantages across successive generations.[7]. Families of different social classes have varying levels of educational investment, cultural environments and access to information resources, thus affecting children's ability to obtain educational resources. Wu Yuxiao points out that the problem of educational inequality is closely related to the structure of social stratification, and different family backgrounds also affect people's access to education and the results of their studies [8]. As a result, students in compulsory education are more likely to face problems such as admission barriers and a lack of educational resources.

3. Main Manifestations of Ine-

quality in Enrollment Opportunities for Migrant Children in Compulsory Education

3.1 Uneven Enrollment Thresholds

To distribute the limited school seats more reasonably across the major cities, many have established a system of "point-based enrollment" or "conditional enrollment", linking the eligibility for school entry for migrant children to factors such as the length of their parents' social insurance contribution history, stable employment, and the duration they have held a residence permit. Li Yao's empirical study shows that high enrollment barriers have negatively affected the social insurance enrollment behavior of the migrant population, leading to a vicious cycle of "low ability to pay premiums - short social insurance coverage - difficulty enrolling children "[3]. Zheng Lei and others have also found that as the threshold rises, the willingness of migrant families to take their children with them decreases significantly; thus, these children are often left behind, and the problem of inequality has spread from the enrollment stage to the migration decision-making stage [9].

3.2 Unequal Access to Educational Resources

3.2.1 Differences Between Public and Private Schools

Even after meeting the enrollment threshold, the kinds of educational resources available to migrant children are often quite different from those available to children with local household registration. Some students have been sent to private schools or schools that are particularly favourable to children of migrant families. Generally speaking, these schools have poorer teaching staff and facilities compared with public schools, as well as a less favorable distribution of educational resources; thus, a pattern of resource segregation among different educational groups has been formed objectively [10]. Although some cities have introduced an "public schools as the first choice" admission policy in recent years, in practice, the proportion and capacity of

public schools for admitting children of migrant workers are still limited by fiscal allocation mechanisms and local protectionism.

3.2.2 Uneven Distribution of High-Quality Educational Resources

Although some migrant children can attend public schools, the quality of educational resources is generally relatively low. Liu Jingming's research shows that combining the main school system with neighborhood-based enrollment concentrates high-quality resources in particular school districts, and migrant families mostly live in suburban areas or urban villages with fewer school resources [2]. This "spatial mismatch" systematically directs children of migrant workers to low-quality schools, extending the inequality from "whether they can go to school" to "what kind of school they can attend".

4. Factors Affecting Inequality in Educational Opportunities for Children of Migrant Workers.

Before unpacking the specific driving factors of educational inequality among migrant children, this section first establishes an integrated analytical framework grounded in educational equity theory and social stratification theory to avoid parallel and isolated discussion of three dimensions. From the perspective of educational equity theory, equal access to compulsory education represents the basic right of school-age children, while institutional barriers, family resource gaps and uneven urban resource allocation all essentially constitute exogenous obstacles that violate the principle of equal opportunity in education. In the meantime, social stratification theory further explains the internal operation mechanism of such inequality: restrictive enrollment rules derived from the household registration system solidify the institutional boundary of educational participation; differentiated family economic, cultural and social capital inherited across generations widens the capacity gap for families to cope with enrollment thresholds, which in turn reinforces class solidification; and the spatially unequal distribution of high-quality urban educational resources finally materializes stratification outcomes

through residential segregation and school sorting. Collectively, institutional constraints, family capital disparities and inter-city/intra-city educational resource imbalance are not three independent parallel factors. Instead, they interact and reinforce one another through the stratification reproduction mechanism, jointly shaping the structural inequality in compulsory education enrollment opportunities for migrant children across the whole process of policy implementation, family decision-making and school resource allocation. The following subsections will elaborate on the specific influence path of each dimension under this unified theoretical logic.

4.1 Institutional Factors

4.1.1 Restrictions on Enrollment Opportunities Imposed by the Household Registration System

The Purpose of the household registration system is to link access to public services with one's place of residence. Although reforms of the household registration system have continued in recent years, the thresholds for obtaining household registration in megacities are still high, and the disparity in access to public services between "permanent residents" and those with "household registration" has not been significantly reduced. Liu Jingming believes that this institutional arrangement has formed a welfare exclusion mechanism under "territorial management", and local governments in destination cities frequently use household registration as the primary standard for allocating public education resources [2]. Zhang Ming'ang and others have studied that although the reform of the funding mechanism for urban compulsory education has increased the number of educational institutions in destination cities, the distribution of funds still "favours household registration over permanent residence", leading to a considerable lack of school seats for children of migrant workers [10].

4.1.2 Disparities in Urban Public Services

The Cities have different levels of capacity and willingness to provide public services. Zou Yueqing and others have taken a sample of cities with an urban population of more than one million to study the restraining effects of school admission policies for migrant children

on the consumption of migrant households empirically [11]. They have found that the strict admission policies are not only reducing school enrollment but also restricting the consumption expenditure of migrant families in the destination cities, thus resulting in a "deficiency in consumption under institutional constraints". This shows that the impact of school admission policies has spread beyond the education sector to seriously affect household living standards and urban integration.

4.2 Household Factors

Most families of migrant children work in labor-intensive industries, such as construction, manufacturing and low-end services, and generally have low and irregular incomes. A shortage of economic capital will restrict funds available for housing construction, education, training, etc., and thus reduce school enrollment and the overall quality of education. In cities with relatively high point-based admission thresholds, families with low economic foundations will find it even harder to meet the prerequisites for continuous social insurance contributions and will thus be unable to enter the top-tier public schools. Xiao Rikui believes that family economic capital will affect a child's access to education directly and indirectly by influencing their cultural and social capital [12].

Cultural capital refers to the cultural resources that a family has, such as knowledge, refinement and language habits. Bo Xiaoqi and Wang Yijie have found that families with a rich cultural foundation are better equipped to understand the point-based enrollment plan, meet all the necessary conditions and choose reasonable options, while those without such a background may miss out on the benefits or have to make less optimal choices due to a lack of information [13]. Therefore, the same institutional threshold is applied to different families; their capacity to comprehend policies and various response methods thus affect enrolment results differently.

Social capital refers to the network of social relations and the resources that can be drawn from the family. Coleman believes that social capital can help people obtain information and other support for education, thus changing the way children can learn [14]. Migrant families are often connected through their social networks and may receive some information on school admission

and educational resources. Migrant families with a certain level of social capital can obtain interpretations of enrollment policies and practical experience through channels such as hometown networks, employers, and community organisations, and thus reduce some institutional information asymmetry. Families with low social capital are more likely to have to make arrangements in a short amount of time based on official announcements and are thus more exposed to the risks in the complicated admission process.

4.3 Inter-city Policy Differences and the Allocation of Educational Resources

Section 4.3 unpacks educational inequities stemming from policy divergence and resource distribution across three nested analytical dimensions. First, it examines horizontal policy gaps between different cities. Second, it explores resource disparities between public and private schools within a single city. Third, it analyzes the spatially uneven geographical allocation of high-quality educational resources inside urban areas. This three-tier framework gradually narrows the analytical scope from inter-city divergence to intra-city structural and spatial imbalance.

4.3.1 Differences in Educational Policies Across Cities

Although the central government has issued a single set of guiding documents for the compulsory education policies of children of migrant workers, there are still significant differences among cities in the admission thresholds, point-based criteria and the proportion of students entering public schools. Beijing and Shanghai are typical megacities that have set higher enrollment requirements; some Type II large cities and medium-sized cities have had relatively relaxed standards. The strength of the fiscal system, scale, population distribution, educational resources, and so on are all different in the cities; therefore, the implementation of compulsory education policies for migrant children varies among the areas. Under the same circumstances, the enrollment opportunities and educational resources available to migrant children differ by city, thus forming an unevenly distributed structure of educational opportunities [11].

4.3.2 Differences in the Distribution of

Public and Private Educational Resources

Within cities, differences in resource distribution for public and private schools are also reasons why not all children can be enrolled. Based on research on the reform of urban compulsory education funding mechanisms, Zhang Ming'ang and others have found that in areas with sufficient public school seats, a larger proportion of migrant children attend public schools; however, in megacities with limited school capacity, while private schools serve as a "buffer", their uneven quality and high tuition fees place an increasing financial burden on families, thus excluding low-income households [10].

4.3.3 Imbalances in Regional Educational Resources

Most of the good schools in the large city are located in the central urban areas, and resources in the suburbs and urban-rural areas are relatively limited. Due to economic reasons, migrant families often live in these peripheral areas and thus are subject to the cycle of "residential segregation - scarce resources - limited opportunities". This is exacerbated by spatial disparities in resources and has consequently reduced access to good schools.

5. Review of Existing Research and Future Research Directions

5.1 Summary of Research Results

Over the past few decades, researchers at home and abroad have gradually established diverse analytical frameworks such as institutional analysis, family capital analysis and inter-city comparison, aiming to examine the impacts of the hukou system, point-based admission policies and family capital on migrant children's educational attainment. Research methods have taken various forms and now include qualitative case studies and quantitative models. In terms of the depth of research, some studies have moved beyond a single dimension of "whether enrollment is possible" to investigate more process-oriented issues such as "which school students attend" and "how well they perform".

5.2 Deficiencies in Existing Research

Despite the above results, the current research is not without deficiencies. First, quantitative research mainly uses cross-sectional data and lacks dynamic tracking of policy changes; qualitative research is often limited to individual cases and therefore has poor generalizability. Second, there is a lack of dynamic analysis and insufficient longitudinal tracking of the entire compulsory education process for migrant children. Third, the influence of institutions, families and urban areas has been studied separately and their interactive effects have not been systematically investigated. Fourthly, the operationalization of "educational opportunities" is too narrow, and less attention has been paid to equity in both the educational process and results.

5.3 Directions for Future Research

Considering the above deficiencies, future studies can focus on the following directions to extend the research. First, build panel data or other mixed-method longitudinal tracking studies to observe changes over time. Secondly, foster multi-level research by introducing urban institutions, community resources and family capital into a single system, and focus on the interaction between institutions and families. Thirdly, compare the effect of the policy in different cities and find that they are not the same. Fourth, expand the scope of "educational opportunities" from enrollment to include process equity and academic achievement, and thus form an all-encompassing analytical framework.

6. Conclusion

Systematically review the research literature on inequalities in compulsory education enrollment opportunities for migrant children in large cities in this paper. Most studies have agreed that the household registration system and its related links, such as point-based school admissions and social security benefits, are all kinds of institutions that act as barriers; differences in families' economic, cultural and social resources have also widened the gaps in their opportunities, and unequal distribution of educational resources both in urban and rural areas disadvantages migrant children. The three factors are related to each other and together cause the present

situation of inequality.

At the policy level, reforms to the household registration system should be accelerated to gradually separate public education services from household registration; mechanisms for funding compulsory education need to be improved, and a cross-regional resource allocation system should be built; the points-based enrollment system should be optimised to reduce the excessively high threshold, support for and oversight of schools enrolling migrant children should be strengthened, and the balanced distribution of high-quality educational resources should be promoted to enhance equity.

At the same time, as a literature review, this paper is based on inductive analysis of existing research results; it lacks empirical studies in specific cities and individual cases, and its discussion of the dynamic mechanisms of interaction among various factors is relatively limited. Future research could further integrate longitudinal survey data and cross-city comparisons to conduct multiple-dimensional analyses—such as access to educational opportunities, experiences during the educational process, and disparities in educational outcomes—to explore the mechanisms underlying educational inequality in the context of population mobility more comprehensively and provide more targeted theoretical support and policy references for promoting educational equity.

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