

## Barriers and Challenges of Educational Development in China: An Analysis on Rural-Urban Migrant Residents

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### Abstract

*Educational inequality and inequity has been the cry of all stakeholders in the educational development in every country. China is of no exception. The barriers of education development in China are gradually being uprooted by solid and sound policies. That notwithstanding, there are still few challenges that demands a critical look. The basic aim of conducting this study is to analyze the barriers and challenges of educational development in China with emphasis placed on rural-urban migrant residents. The study employed a qualitative method to analyze its findings by conducting document analysis. The result showed that the National College Entrance examination and its associated rules remain a challenge and barrier to rural migrant children receiving education in urban schools. It is recommended in this study that the government should stipulate clearer laws that will ensure that there is minimal educational disparity among Chinese residents.*

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**Key words:** *Migrant residents, Educational development, Barriers, Challenges*

### Introduction

Education worldwide has been regarded as the engine of growth and the vehicle for the social and economic development of every society and country and china is of no exception. There have been excellent achievements in the reform and development of education in China. Education has also played a significant part in economic growth, scientific and social progress in the country by producing large scale of sophisticated talents for the construction of socialist modernization. However, there are still a few challenges that will determine further development and over-all success of the Chinese education in the near future. This paper seeks to shed light on the challenges and barriers that confront the development of education in China and to suggest possible remedies for such challenges and barriers.

### Brief history of the Chinese Education System

China has a very rich educational history dating back to so many years ago. The Chinese education system has its root from the legalist and Confucius ideologies. External factors has also influenced the educational development. As a result, western advances in technologies and science were revealed to Chinese scholars. This situation had a major impact on the educational system and curriculum.

In the 1950s, the Chinese government implemented policies to nationalize all education institutions. The education system was under central government's tight control and everyone had access to free education (Bardhan, 2002). In the post-Mao era the State Council began to move educational issues towards decentralization (Mok, 2000). At the same time, peasants and farmers were keen to build their own schools in the villages. It is this view that led to the acceptance of local nongovernmental organization to finance schools starting from 1980. This paved the way for a major reform of education (OECD, 2010). Due to the challenges of monitoring and bearing of the cost of free education, steps were taken in 1986 to decentralize education with the enactment of the Compulsory Education Law. The idea with decentralization was to push decision making and

responsibility for public functions from the state to the local government. Decentralization increases efficiency in delivery of public services and promotes democracy, if it is promoted in the right manner (World Resource Institute, 2002).

The Education law from 1995 promoted equal opportunity for all citizens to receive education and gave schools and other educational institutions the permission to charge education fee, and laid guidelines on how the State Council and local governments should manage the educational system.

In 2006, the State Council made amendments to the Compulsory Education Law to further improve education for migrant children. The local government was made responsible for primary education cost of all migrant children forbidding them to charge any kinds of additional fees during compulsory education (Chan, 2009). According to the law, all migrant children at the age of six should have the rights to free compulsory education irrespective of gender, family status, nationality, race or religious thoughts. Migrant children are the children whose parents have migrated from rural areas to urban area for various reasons.

### **Literature Review**

The study seeks to investigate and explore the challenges that rural-urban migrant children face in their educational pursuit. Therefore, in order to have a proper overview of the problem, an in-depth review of the literature is provided on the household registration system, the role of Hukou in planning and management of economic and social development as well as education in China.

### **The Household Registration System**

The Household Registration system, or Hukuo as it is called in China, first came again into existence in China after the communist revolution in 1949 when Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of The People's Republic of China (PRC), (Cheng & Selden, 1994). The foundations of the Household Registration System can be excavated all the way back to the Xia dynasty (16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century BC), during that time it was used as a social control system, which permitted tax collection, recording of birth and death rates of citizens, as well as the preservation of order (Zhu, 2003).

The Hukou word turned up in the end of the Qing dynasty (beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century) and when it was taken up again by the PRC it later became the touchstone of the social distinction between urban and rural inhabitants. The Hukou system, which was designed to provide population statistics and identify personal status, became important to the central government as a measure of social control, which assisted to standardize rural - urban migration. But as a matter of fact, its roles go far beyond just controlling population mobility (Chan & Zhang, 1999).

Before advent of Mao, the country thus China was largely agricultural state. In the 1950s onwards, there was the introduction of industrialization and the mobility regulations aided the Chinese government to strengthen the command structure of the economy that ranked industrial areas higher than rural ones. With the intention of financing the industrialization, the central government underpriced agricultural products and increased the cost of industrial products to bring an inequity between the agricultural and industrial sectors (Chan & Zhang, 1999). This led to increase in rural urban migration.

In order to be able to control the population flow between the sectors, the government had to introduce a system which obstructed liberal flows of labor between industry and agriculture and between urban and rural areas. The rapid urban population growth and the unraveling of their economic plans threatened to create social disorder; the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began to issue directives to bring an end to uncontrolled rural migration (Windrow & Guha, 2005). Despite the migrant worker's contribution to urban development, the central government saw them in a bad way and referred to this group of workers as blind migrants or mangliu. The state expected them to go back to the rural area after their work was accomplished (Cheng & Selden, 1994). In 1955, the government enacted the food rationing system to prevent migration flows from rural to urban areas (Wang F.L., 2005). Then in 1957 the government set up detention centers to return peasants to the countryside. But all of these policies failed to control the migration tide (Windrow & Guha, 2005).

### **The Role of Hukou**

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1932 designed an internal passport system, the Propiska system, for the urban population as it needed an oversight of the migration of their citizens in order to control the geographical distributions of labour supply and mobility in the economy (Lyubarsky, 2001). China tried to implement a system that was somewhat modeled after the Propiska system (Shatrunga, 1991). On October 1, 1949, Chairman Mao opted to associate or be inclined towards the USSR in the bid to restructure the Chinese economy.

The very existence of the hukou system has much to do with China's development strategies under the authoritarian government of Chairman Mao and the Communist party (Wang F.L., 2005). At the initial stages, the Hukou system promoted the country's rapid economic growth and was an important mechanism to create political stability. But as time passed both political and economic factors changed and the issues of regional and economical inequalities became evident with the Hukou system. Nonetheless the Hukou system has played an important role in China's impressive economic development. It disturbs China's political stability, governance, economic growth, social life, as well as equality. The function of the system allows authorities to control mobility of laborers by giving a Hukou status to migrant workers.

The Regulations on Hukou registration in the People's Republic of China was introduced with its purpose to manage social order and serve socialist construction, and therefore prohibit freedom of movement (Cheng & Selden, 1994). The hukou system required all Chinese citizens to register with the authority. The Hukou registration is legal for personal identification and its classification is dual in nature. The first classification is local residency classification (hukousuozaidi), which can be urban or rural, and defines one's permanent residence. This specific type of hukou gives citizens rights for social and economic benefits, only in their local area. The second classification is the status or type of hukou registration (hukouleibie), which can be either agricultural or non-agricultural hukou. This classification originated from the occupational division in 1955 which gave the non-agricultural hukou holders entitlement to grain subsidies and greater employment opportunities, free education, and medical care (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Until 1998, hukou residency and type was inherited from a person's mother to safeguard minimum upward movement of peasants, due to the fact that women were

less likely to marry down (Davin, 1999). After 1998 children were allowed to choose either fathers or their mothers' hukou residency and type.

### **Education in China**

Education policy was one of the most discussed topics throughout the National People's Congress (NPC) and Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) annual sessions, in March of 2010. Proceeding these sessions, the Ministry of Education (MoE) released the first copy of the State guidelines for middle- and long-term educational reform and development strategy for public feedback. The guidelines were subsequently finalized and issued on 29 July 2010. These guidelines cover a number of plans for the education industry for the next 10 years. Priority is placed on developing the education industry and so expenditure by government is expected to increase. A lot of policies will be out to inspire growth in private-own institutions as well as vocational education. Extra financial provision will be provided to grant equal education chances to students residing in rural areas and places of ethnic minorities. Adequate resources will be extended to enhance the value of teachers in rural areas. At the higher education level, the entrance exams will be restructured to guarantee brilliant students are not sidelined to the academic system, and the quality of higher education will be enriched (KPMG, 2010). The admission into higher education institutions is based on National College Entrance Examination Policy known as 'the Gaokao' that was instituted in 1952 by the newly founded People's Republic of China. Gaokao is interpreted as a "high-stake test", and is a curriculum-based exam that "tests students' mastery of the subjects taught in high school" (Muthanna & Sang, 2014). The test is considered to be the world's first standardized educational examination. It annually takes place in June. According to Schroch (2014), an event of such a test could seriously be the most critical one in the lives of the Chinese youth and parents who care a lot about their children's future. Millions of students apply for such a test. In 2013, for example, about "9.4 million graduating seniors across China" took this test. Goako also determines the type of institution to which a student is admitted. In other words, the higher the score, the higher ranking university will be selected for that score achiever (Muthanna & Sang, 2014).

### **Methodology**

This section of the study discusses the research design. It sets out the information required for the study, the procedure followed to obtain the required information as well as how the data was analyzed.

The writer adopted a qualitative method in this study. Since the paper is descriptive in nature, the writer used a documentary search strategy to explore the topic under review in arriving to the results. The study used China as a case study. According to Ghauri and Gronhang (2005), a case study is particularly useful in studies when the phenomenon under investigation is difficult to study outside its natural setting and also when the concepts and variables under study are difficult to quantify. Ghauri and Gronhang (2005) also argue that the case study strategy is useful for theory development and testing. This paper seeks to assess the challenges and barriers of educational development in China.

To be able to uncover the challenges and the barriers of educational development in China, the writer used document analysis and relied heavily on qualitative and quantitative data from secondary sources to draw

conclusions. The researcher relied on secondary data from relatively credible sources such as review of literatures of previous studies in articles from journals, reports, policy documents, UNESCO reports, official statistics from governmental websites, and other articles to establish basic understanding of educational challenges and barriers of migrants.

### **Findings and Discussions**

This part of the paper analyses, presents and discusses main challenges and barriers faced by Chinese migrants. It focused on the main educational challenges and barriers which are divided into three parts: the national college entrance examination, the hukou system and the political and institutional issues.

#### **The National entrance examination**

The educational system in China starts with 9 years of compulsory education which consists of 6 years of Elementary school (6-12 years of age) and 3 years of Junior high school (12-15 years of age). After the compulsory education, children have the option of leaving school or entering secondary program. All students sit the senior secondary school entrance exam at the end of their junior high school education (Zhongkao). Depending on the outcome of this exam, students may enroll into an academic or a vocational upper secondary school, or they may choose to end their formal education (Ministry of education of the people's republic of China, 2010). The next level includes 2-3 years at a Senior high school or a Secondary Vocational school. The final stage is university, high vocational school or employment (Yingkang, 2012). To continue their education to university or higher education, students must take and pass the National College Entrance examination (Gaokao). Passing the Gaokao is one of the most important goals to reach for Chinese students as its score determines which college or university they can attend. Gaokao is usually taken over a two-day period in June (China daily, 2012). The Gaokao was established in 1952 and was suspended during the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976 (Economist, 2012). Gaokao is the only exam that allows students to be enrolled at a college or a public university in China and is seen as the best option for a brighter future (Rabkin, 2011).

The National College Entrance examination and associated rules remain a challenge and barrier to migrant children receiving education in urban schools. According to the MoE, all students must take the Gaokao exam in the county to which their original hukou belongs (Chan A, 2009). Due to this requirement, millions of students have been forced to return to their local residency to take the Gaokao exam (Xinhuanet, 2012). It has been argued that migrant students, who return to their hometown to sit the exam, are often not competitive as the curriculum and textbooks may be different from what they are used to in the urban area (Fang, Miller, Trieu, & Yang, 2006). Moreover, the exams are likely to be set in a different way compared to what they are used to and in some cases they need higher marks than their urban classmates to be accepted into a city college or university (China Labour Bulletin, 2012). This might encourage families not to bring their children to the city. Although discussions have been brought up to let migrant students sit Gaokao at their destination place city governments are still reluctant to do so.

### **The Hukou System**

Institutionally, the Hukou system is widely considered a fundamental cause for unequal treatment of migrant workers, resulting in a series of problems with regard to public goods provision, such as children's education (Jiang, 2009). Although Hukou is an important tool to control and curb rural-urban migration, the functioning of the Hukou system generates social barriers and provides unequal access towards education. As said before, hukou classifications are inherited from parents, and migrant parents are often living in cities without the urban hukou, which is necessary for entrance to state services. Domestic migration has caused millions of children to have no household registration due to where they are living now and that generates problems of educational provision (Guo, 2002). Consequently, migrant children living in the cities are in effect kept out of the state schools (Branigan, 2010).

### **The Political and institutional issues**

The Article 10 of the Compulsory Education Law provides that the state shall not charge tuition for students receiving obligatory education and shall set up a system of grants to support the school attendance of children from poor families. However, the Compulsory Education Law provided migrant children with more protection in theory than in reality. Solinger (1999) calculated that in mid-1990s only 40% of migrant children aged between five and twelve, attended school in Beijing, compared to nearly 100% of local children.

The Education Law from 1995 was designed to improve school attendance among migrant children. In spite of the law, school authorities have not shown full interest in eliminating the hostility and discrimination towards migrant children in state schools as they are considered second-class citizen (Amnesty International, 2007). Recent studies have shown that migrant students frequently complain about being teased and bullied by the local students, as well as finding themselves ignored by their teachers when searching for a support for academic and social reasons (Tan, 2010).

The reason why some school going age children and especially migrant children face difficulties accessing education is privation of governmental funding as state institutions often receive little or no financial support from the central government for these children (Chan, 2009). Government funding for education is based on the number of school age children of local residents. Despite the 1995 Education Law, local governments have no absolute obligation to educate migrants (Chan, 2009). Because migrants are not included in the local education budgets, schools are given permission to charge temporary student fees, within limits set by the local government, to cover their expenses. However, the local government's limits rarely cover the additional costs incurred by schools. Consequently many urban state schools were extremely reluctant to admit migrants (Chan, 2009).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There is growing evidence that the reform process and decentralization policies of education have increased both economical and social inequalities (Froissart, 2003). There is no doubt that Hukouas well as decentralization of financing educational have led to great obstacles for migrant children trying to access high

quality compulsory education. Barriers and challenges of migrant children only calls on their parents to take them to schools that are for migrant children, which schools are usually ready and available. These schools are affordable but are mostly of low standard and quality.

While most urban students continue their studies through Gaokao, many migrant students have to find other alternatives of education as they neither have the same opportunity nor access to education as urban students. Attending a vocational school might be the answer for them to get a decent position at the labor market. The condition for attending a vocational school is to sit the Zhongkao entrance exam in their hometown (Liu, et al., 2009). But many migrant students find it hard to get a good score on this examination due to their poor educational background. Therefore in many cases instead of continuing their studies they quit school and enter the labor market (Chan, 2009). Tuition fee and the high cost of textbooks is a barrier for many students in achieving higher education; this is especially true for migrants as they are economically more disadvantaged in receiving higher education due to low household income (Liu, et al., 2009). In a nutshell the study suggests, among other recommendations, that the government stipulates clearer laws that are aimed at eliminating and/or reducing the disparity among Chinese residents.

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