

Educational Equity and Linguistic Exclusion of Migrant Children in China

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Abstract

Education is the cornerstone of national rejuvenation, and educational equity provides an important underpinning for social equity and equality. After the beginning of the Opening-up Reform and less limitation conducted by household registration system, numerous migrant workers have moved from rural areas to urban cities with their children. At the same time, educational equity of migrant children is getting more and more important and language elements have played a significant role among many factors that affect the education of migrant children. By comparing the differences of language between migrant and local children, the paper analyzed the causes and influential factors of the linguistic exclusion: (a) standard language ideology, (b) social identity behind the language, (c) limited peer communication. Linguistic exclusion affects migrant children's academic achievement, learning attitude and learning motivation.

Keywords: education equity, migrant children, linguistic exclusion, language

Introduction

Since the Opening-up Reform initiated in 1978, China's state-planned economic system has gradually been transformed into a market-oriented one, which has accelerated the pace of Chinese development as well as enlarged the gap between cities and countries. As the urban economy develops rapidly, a huge amount of young rural laborers flocked to cities for employment opportunities and a better life (Liu, Liu, & Yu, 2017; Wang & Holland, 2011; Wei & Hou, 2010). According to the data of National Bureau of Statistics, the population has reached 281 million in 2016.

One of the characteristics of such great migration is to migrate with family and to migrate with an increasing stability of residence afterwards, which means that their children will also move into the city. In 2007 there were an estimated 6 million migrant children living in cities, which took part of 20% of children who had migrant parents (Wang & Holland, 2011), and at present 90% of them were at primary school. Nevertheless, compared with local children, such large quantity of migrant children cannot receive the equity in education. Although in China there is no problem of migrant children with different mother languages, language elements still play an important role in the elementary education. Children from urban areas and rural areas possess different accents, different capability of language skills and verbal expressions that usually reflect one's characters and psychological and social backgrounds, which influences their academic achievement and leads to exclusive experiences at school.

In this study, the author analyzed the inequitable schooling from four levels:

historical, structural, institutional and individual. The paper focused on the linguistic exclusion of migrant children as well as the influence imposed upon them.

Educational Inequity of Migrant Children

Institutional inequity

China has implemented a household registration system since the 1950s, which registers an individual at his or her birthplaces as a rural or urban resident and exercise tight control over the urban-rural division. This system became the main basis for government allocations of various resources (Wei & Hou, 2010) and has become a *de facto* administrative system which has led to unequal opportunities and social-economic benefits between rural and urban residents (Wang & Holland, 2011). In 1980s, the governments began to permit rural workers to move into cities to find a better job and legally transfer their household registration, in order to stimulate the economic development. However, the transference needs too many requirements and rural workers are hard to get a good job.

China's compulsory education was implemented under the household registration system, which means that educational funds are allocated according to the number of students with residence registrations (Wei & Hou, 2010). This funding issue further compounds the equitable issue of migrant children. If a migrant child is enrolled in a public school in Shanghai, the school cannot receive extra funds neither from Shanghai government nor from the government of that child's hometown, because the fiscal payments of educational funds don't go with that child. That's why the urban

school are unwilling to accept migrant children and sometimes requires extra fees from migrant children.

Structural inequity

Migrant children often come from a relatively lower social-economic backgrounds. Their parents come to big cities for a better job, but actually they are not competitive because most of them don't have a college diploma. They cannot afford a house, so their children have barriers to be enrolled in public schools. The expensive price of rent lease limited the size of their apartment, which leads to a bad learning environment of their children at home. Migrant parents usually work too much to have enough time caring for their children's study and lives, which results in children's low academic achievement at school. If they cannot transfer the household registration into the urban cities before their children grow to 15 years old, which is the end of the compulsory education in China, their children must go back to hometown to continue the high school or stay with parents but quit school. All these issues made migrant children hard to break through the educational barriers between them and urban children, which leads to reproduction of social class.

Interpersonal inequity

With the difference in social welfare and other resources between urban and rural areas, Chinese old generations have a deep-rooted concept of urban-rural separation as well as a strong urban identity. Many parents consider migrant children less educated and without good hygienic habits, thus they prefer their children to stay with local students. Local children share the adults' disdain for rural migrants (Kwong,

2011). Thus, migrant children have been enduring exclusion and discrimination from their local classmates. Feelings of “not welcomed and accepted by their host communities” , “lacking in a sense of security” and “isolated” are reported by migrant children (Wang, 2008). Not only the dialects and different backgrounds make migrant children difficult to join in the local children’s groups, but also the achievement gap makes them separated. Migrant students have always experienced a high incidence of mobility and thus were viewed by school districts as nonresidents and, as such, not their responsibility (Nevárez-La, 2012). They are often lagging behind their local classmates because of inferior previous learning conditions, instability of schooling, less parental involvement, etc.

Linguistic Exclusion and its Influential Factors

Henry Levin (2002) defined equity within the US context as ‘the quest for fairness in access to educational opportunities, resources, and outcomes by gender, social class, race, language origins, and geographical location of students’. As the United States is experiencing an influx of immigrants, public schools are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of an increasing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011). ELL students with a migrant background are facing an intersection of educational equity issues in language and social-economic background, sometimes even in race. Although in China migrant children don’t speak another language, but the dialect confronting standard language (mandarin) put them in a similar situation with ELL students with a migrant

background in the United States, and even resulted in a linguistic exclusion.

If we want to eliminate, or at least decrease this kind of linguistic exclusion, we should first analyse factors or causes which have led to it.

Standard language ideology

The accent discrimination is more specifically referred as language-trait focused (LTF) discrimination, which stems primarily from the acceptance of a standard language ideology. In the educational system, the standard language ideology contributes a direct link between “nonstandard” language and lack of logic and clarity (Lippi-Green, 1994). In urban public schools of China, teachers speak mandarin and textbooks and examinations use standard language. The dialect should be educated and transformed into a more “legal” language (Yu, 2004). Local students in urban areas are exposed to mandarin environment early whereas many rural school teachers still speak dialect in the classroom. Teasing and swearing based on dialects is reported by migrant children in Xiamen (Wang, 2008).

Besides accent, standard language also emphasizes the system, logic, literary and cultural cultivation of the text, which is reflected with elaborated expression in reading and writing at school. Since the “nonstandard” language of migrant children consists mainly of simple sentences, few conjunctions and simple words, their expressions at school are limited after migrating to urban areas.

One of the characteristics of elaborated expression is that sentence arrangement and word choice is more complex and unpredictable. For children, the acquisition of a variety of vocabulary and syntax depends mainly on students’ daily reading and

writing practices. The more children read, the more elaborated their language is. The reading quantity is very limited from daily classes, although almost all of the classes are equipped with a book shelf. According to the children's nature, books with dialog easy to understand and colorful pictures are more attractive to students. Students tend to choose straightforward books to read, paying no attention to the development of their literacy. Migrant children's parents are busy with work, ignoring children's daily reading requirements, rarely concerned about what kind of extra-curricular books their children are reading. Meanwhile, they are not buying their children high quality extra-curricular books as frequently as local parents in urban areas do. What's more, local students began to develop their standard language much earlier. During the pre-school period, migrant children lived in the hometown with the same old contact scope, confined to people with the same background and living area. Many of them even didn't go to kindergarten, while local students were immersed in elaborated expression environments before elementary schools.

Social identity behind the language

Much of linguistic variation is structured around social identity. When people reject an accent, they also reject the identity of the person speaking: his or her race, ethnic heritage, national origin, regional affiliation, or economic class (Lippi-Green, 1994).

Language is influenced by economic and educational situation of the family. Historical materialism believed that the economic basis determines the superstructure. The economic status of the family is largely decided by the educational level of the students' parents. If the economic condition is good, the parents are more likely to be

highly educated. Such parents have the ability to invest more money and time on children's study, offering their children a better cultural edification and educational resources. They will create condition for the development of language skills for their children.

In the early family's education, the parents' educational level has a great influence on the formation of children's language. If parents' educational level is below the average and they possess less cultural capital, their own language tends to be less elaborated. Children cannot inherit excellent cultural capital from their parents and they are more familiar with "nonstandard" dialect. Parents who lacks the consciousness to cultivate and guide children's linguistic habits in the early age, can't realize that children's language level is inferior to their peer and is in need of appropriate correction and guide.

Such influence on next generation's language leads to the result that one's speaking and writing reflects and enforces its identity. The value judgement of linguistic features is highly ideological, as the linguistic features themselves are neither good nor bad, but it is people who attribute social values to them (Dong, 2018). Thus, migrant children with dialect accent and nonstandard expressions are easily related to a lower social-economic backgrounds and less educated parents, giving a clear identity separation between migrant and local children.

Limited peer communication

The standard language ideology as well as the social identity factors have created a gap not only in academic achievement, but also in communication between two

groups of students. The views of language could be divided into two general patterns: views of language as a “thing” that can be measured and views of language as a social process (Orellana, Ek, & Hernández, 2000). Children view language principally as a tool for participating in social groups and signalling particular kinds of identities. Language differences make it difficult for migrant children to socialize with local children.

When speakers share the same background with each other, they will have stronger collective social relations, more concise range of words and sentences alternatives, higher possibility to form simple statements, and meanings that rely more on the mutual context. However, when children from different cultural backgrounds gathered together, in order to achieve the purpose of smooth communication, the migrant children should either actively or passively change their original way of forming their language, making communication of both sides can be understood by each other. 65% migrant children in one study identified another migrant child as close friend and 23.9% of them pointed to a migrant child in their neighbourhood (Kwong, 2011), which means migrant children have very limited communication with local children. Many of them even prefer transferring to migrant children school where there are more students from similar communities. But these schools are not public schools and often have issues of lack of qualified teachers and adequate equipment and facilities (Li et al., 2010)

Conclusion

The present paper has developed insights into four levels of educational inequity as well as linguistic exclusion of migrant children which exerts a certain influence on migrant children's academic achievement and may also reinforce the inequity of education.

On one hand, linguistic exclusion contributes to the gap of achievement between migrant children and local children. The public schools in urban areas provide a standard language environment which is more familiar to local children than migrant children. The examinations are conducted with standard language, requiring precise and elaborated expressions, which is challenging to migrant children who cannot have the same reading and speaking environment with local children. As a result, it is difficult for migrant children to adapt to the school life in urban areas.

The economic condition of the family and parents' educational level influences the investment and involvement in their children's education. Migrant parents are reported to have limited parental involvement in schooling. According to the interview with teachers in Beijing, migrant children's parents don't care about their learning condition, parents' expectations to children's learning is low or not clear (Li et al., 2010), they generally believed that once they send the children to school, the responsibility to educate children is borne by the school only. Most of the migrant parents believe that acquiring knowledge is important for their children's future, but they do not know how to help their children or lack the ability, energy and time to help them acquire better knowledge.

On the other hand, the limited communication and linguistic discrimination

leaves a negative effect on migrant children's motivation and learning attitude. Local students who have better linguistic abilities are more likely to express themselves, and more willing to ask questions for an answer if they have problems. In turn, they're more motivated to learn. Because of migration and displacement from a rural area, migrant children's lifestyle and habits are impacted by urban life. The positive academic emotions are correlated with psychological resilience (Wang, Hu, & Yin, 2017), thus migrant children who had less social support, either socio-emotional or instrumental ones, may find the adaptation process more difficult (Ni, Chui, Jordan, & Chan, 2016), which results in a poorer emotion and motivation in learning.

The linguistic exclusion is only one part of the educational inequity of migrant children in urban areas. If we only pay attention to how to better develop their language skills, we will only cover the surface of the issue. What we should do is to promote educational equity of migrant children with better allocated educational resources, more effective policies, more understanding between urban residents and migrant people, which still needs more researches as well as more practices.

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www.futureofchildren.org. Large numbers of immigrant children are experiencing serious problems with education, physical and mental health, poverty, and assimilation into American society. The purpose of this volume is to examine the well-being of these children and what might be done to improve their educational attainment, health status, social and cognitive development, and long-term prospects for economic mobility. This policy brief investigates policies relevant to the education of migrant children across the EU. It outlines the main challenges facing migrant children in schools across Europe, and the existing policy options that aim to redress the disparities in educational outcomes between native children and children with a migrant background. Roughly 10 per cent of the EU population were born in a different country from the one in which they reside, five per cent of whom are children under the age of 15. Although the pattern varies by EU Member State, children with a migrant background (either first

The education of migrant children in Shanghai: The battle for equity. Article. Sep 2015. As part of a study of Chinese migrant children's educational experiences, surveys and interviews were conducted with primary school teachers in a metropolitan city in East China. The objectives of this study were to describe teachers' perceptions of migrant children's education in both migrant schools and in public schools, and to investigate differences in their beliefs between school types. Results found that urban teachers' perceptions of educational inclusion of migrant students were slightly negative in general. However, teachers in public schools showed significantly more posit