

# **Beyond *hukou*-based exclusion: Revisiting rural migrant parents' active agency in educational involvement and impacts on their children's educational trajectory**

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## **Biographical note**

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# **Beyond *hukou*-based exclusion: Revisiting rural migrant parents' active agency in educational involvement and impacts on their children's educational trajectory**

China has witnessed significant growth in the number of children affected by internal rural–urban migration. These children predominantly suffer from educational inequalities. Most relevant studies have primarily attributed such inequalities to *hukou*-based exclusion. However, the active agency of rural migrant parents in their reactions to such structural barriers has been downplayed in these studies. We conducted qualitative investigations with migrant parents, their children, and schoolteachers from a private migrant school in Beijing in 2014, 2015, and 2019. We found that in the post-2014 period, rural migrant children still faced increased and systematic marginalization in the urban public education system. Faced with this evolving policy context, most rural migrant parents proactively addressed the structural barriers to maximize the quality of education their children could receive. The data further suggests that the educational involvement of parents from disadvantaged backgrounds is likely to be shown in the school choice and enrolment process and is influenced by their economic conditions and social networks in urban and rural communities. This study contributes to understanding rural migrant parents' differentiated abilities in educational involvement in the light of economic and social influences and the resulting precarity and increased mobility in their children's educational trajectories.

## **Introduction**

The rural migrant population in China continues to expand to approximately 293 million in 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC] 2022), and significantly more children have been affected by this rural–urban internal migration in recent years. In 2015, the number of migrant children (aged 17 or younger) in China reached 34.3 million, accounting for 12.6% of all children aged under 18; another 68.8 million left-behind children remained in villages, awaiting

possible reunification with their parents in cities (NBSC, UNICEF China, and UNEPA China 2017). As estimated by the New Citizen Program [NCP] (2022), about 130 million children were affected by rural–urban migration in 2020, accounting for over 40% of the total child population in China, and is therefore a phenomenon that cannot be ignored.

Many studies have confirmed that children of rural migrants predominantly suffer from various types of educational inequalities, such as unequal school access, low-quality education (Chen and Feng 2017; Duan, Lü, and Wang 2014; Pan and Ye 2017; Woronov 2011; Yang and Wang 2013), and marginalization in their schooling experiences (Kaland 2021; Lan 2014; Li and Liu 2018; Ling 2017). Due to such experiences and social exclusion, children of migrant workers are likely to be tracked into vocational education or directly enter the manual labor market, as they are perceived as failures in school education (Goodburn 2016; Hansen and Woronov 2013; Song, Zeng, and Zhang 2016).

This prevailing pattern of academic failure and social reproduction among children of rural migrants has attracted public attention and led to increased research initiatives. Many scholars have argued that the *hukou* (household registration) system is the primary cause of the large gap in education provision facing the rural migrant population (e.g. Goodburn 2016; Li and Placier 2015), and it undoubtedly plays a central role. However, it should also be noted that within this dominant *hukou*-based exclusion discourse, rural migrant parents and their children are easily situated as passive recipients of social exclusion and the resulting educational inequalities. More recent studies have indicated that the interplay between parents and the structural barriers to their children’s education is also important and can provide a better understanding of the educational inequalities facing disadvantaged groups (Peng 2019; Wang and Teng 2022; Yu 2020). Thus, it is essential to explore rural migrant parents’ active agency (or

lack thereof) in reacting to the educational inequalities facing their children in urban areas and the influencing social factors, which is the focus of this study.

### **Review of the educational inequalities facing rural migrant families**

Although rural–urban internal migrants make major contributions to urban development and economic growth in China, a large body of literature has revealed that China’s central and urban local governments fail to provide the children of migrants with equal and high-quality education (S. Liu, F. Liu, and Yu 2017; Ming 2014; Zhang, Yan, and Chen 2021). As documented in many studies, even after the issuance of the Two Priorities policy<sup>1</sup> by the central government in 2001 (State Council 2001), meeting the public school enrolment thresholds set for rural migrant children in urban areas has remained a challenge for many migrant families (Liu and Wang 2017; Zhang, Yan, and Chen 2021). Recent research has also found that local governments in megacities (e.g. Beijing and Shanghai) have tightened their public school admission requirements for rural migrant children in 2013-2014 period, further reducing these children’s educational opportunities in urban public schools (Dong and Goodburn 2020; Liu and Wang 2017; Yu 2018). In 2020, around 2.86 million school-age rural migrant children were excluded from public schools in Chinese migrant-receiving cities (NCP 2022). If they stay with their parents in the cities, they must attend private migrant schools where the quality of teaching staff and education standards are generally lower compared to urban public schools (Friedman 2022; Goodburn 2016).

Additionally, rural migrant children’s opportunities for post-compulsory education in urban areas are minimal. Research has revealed that most of them are tracked into vocational schools after compulsory education (Hansen and Woronov 2013; Song, Zeng, and Zhang 2016).

In addition, as Goodburn (2020) found, some cities like Shenzhen allowed migrant children to take their *zhongkao* (high school entrance examination) in the receiving city, on the condition that their parents could procure the required documents; a migrant child must also attain higher scores than local children and compete with other migrant children for the limited quota of non-local children in urban academic-track high schools. Thus, most rural migrant children must return to their hometowns if they aim to pursue post-compulsory education along the academic track (Goodburn 2020; Ling 2017; Yang and Wang 2013).

A review of the literature shows that most studies have primarily conceived of the conflicts faced by children of rural migrants in the education system as due to the differentiation between rural and urban and between migrant and local generated by the *hukou* system. In addition to this rural–urban dichotomy discourse, a close examination of the enrolment requirements in megacities, such as the five-certificate requirements in Beijing, the six-certificate requirements in Shenzhen, and the points-based school enrolment (*jifen ruxue*) system in Shanghai, reveals that migrant children’s enrolment in urban public schools is not merely restricted by *hukou* status *per se* but is also contingent on characteristics associated with their parents’ social class, such as education level, employment status, and economic conditions (Author 2022; Dong and Goodburn 2020). Nonetheless, the active agency of rural migrant parents in their reactions to such structural barriers in the education system and in improving their children’s education has been downplayed in the literature.

### **Review of working-class parents’ educational involvement**

As confirmed in many studies worldwide, parents play an important role in ensuring that their children acquire an education and in improving their academic performance (Billingham 2015;

Houtenville and Conway 2008). However, as Lareau (2003, 1-13) further identified, while both working- and middle-class parents may hold high educational expectations for their children, their parenting practices differ, with the former applying a strategy of “accomplishment of natural growth” and the latter of “concerted cultivation.” Middle-class parents tend to have higher requirements for their children’s academic performance and are willing to spend time and effort cultivating their skills and interests, while poor and working-class parents rarely perceive their children’s education as their responsibility and leave it to the schools and teachers (Lareau 2003). Thus, compared with working-class children, those from middle-class families will find it easier to acquire the knowledge, skills, cultural norms, and ways of speaking that are valued in the school education system, which will further contribute to their academic success (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003).

However, recent studies based in Western countries have found that some working-class and low-income families may, like middle-class families, carefully consider their children’s education quality when deciding where to live and use their social networks to facilitate the search for schools (Cuddy, Krysan, and Lewis 2020; Lareau and Goyette 2014). These studies imply that the scope of parents’ involvement in their children’s education should be considered beyond the schooling process and including parents’ participation in the school choice and enrolment process.

In terms of the Chinese context, the prevailing aspiration of Chinese parents is of “hoping children grow into dragons and phoenixes” (*wangzi chenglong, wangnü chengfeng*), and they believe in the upward social mobility function of school education (Kipnis 2001; Kong 2015). However, others have found that compared with urban parents, rural parents, including rural migrants, are less present in their children’s education, in terms of participation in school affairs,

communication with teachers, and homework supervision, and are less likely to feel confident about contributing as educators of their children or as teachers' collaborators (Kim 2019; Lei 2020; Shen 2020; Yu 2020). Nonetheless, these discussions have mainly focused on rural parents' presence (or absence) in the schooling process. The question of how parents from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds can play an active role in their children's school choice and enrolment process is rarely discussed in studies of rural migrant populations. To fill this research gap, we explore the active agency of rural migrant parents in their children's education during the school choice and enrolment process. We investigate three main research questions: (1) How do rural migrant parents react to the structural barriers their children face in urban public school enrolment? (2) How are rural migrant parents' reactions affected? (3) What are the possible impacts of migrants' active participation in the school choice and enrolment process on their children's educational trajectory?

## **Methods**

The data presented in this article are drawn from a multi-year qualitative investigation conducted in a private migrant school (referred to as H School) in Beijing. Multiple field trips were conducted in 2014, 2015, and 2019. H School was established in 2005, and offers low-cost primary education for rural migrant children excluded from Beijing public schools. It is located in the Sun District far out of the central Beijing, which has a large migrant population. According to a report by the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics (2016), by 2014, Sun District's migrant population represented over 45% of all residents. Therefore, the district-level government is likely to face significant pressure to provide equal and decent education to all migrant children compared with districts with smaller migrant populations.

Most rural migrants in Beijing reside in *chengbian cun* (villages on the urban fringe) or *chengzhong cun* (inner-city villages), and so did the student participants and their parents in this study. Less-educated workers can take advantage of more working opportunities and lower rents and living expenses in these areas, and thus these areas attract many rural migrants. While Beijing's city centre boasts shopping malls, skyscrapers, clean and attractive restaurants, and neatly arranged market stalls, migrant communities feature large numbers of rural migrant families squeezed into crowded low-rise buildings, street vendors plying their trade between small, shabby makeshift shops, and poor hygiene and living conditions. The rural migrant children featured in this study thus subsisted in poorly developed communities that were geographically segregated and visually different from the "outside" modern Beijing.

This article is primarily based on semi-structured interviews with students and parents from H School and a review of policy documents over multiple years. We interviewed 59 rural migrant students (32 fifth graders and 27 sixth graders) and 25 migrant parents (15 current students and 10 graduates) from H School in 2014 and 2019. Municipal- and district-level education policies for rural migrant children implemented between 2014 and 2019 were collected from government websites and online media. In addition, data from 12 teacher interviews (one principal, 10 full-time teachers, and one part-time teacher) and 110 valid student questionnaires collected in 2014, and participant observations in family contexts obtained in 2019, were combined for data triangulation.

The student questionnaire data indicated that most of the migrant parents were manual workers (39.2% of the fathers, 24.4% of the mothers) or were self-employed (29.2% of the fathers, 25.3% of the mothers), with 11.8% of the fathers and 30.9% of the mothers being unemployed; 32.7% had a family monthly income below RMB3,000 and 64.5% below

RMB5,000. In 2019, among the parents of the 15 student interviewees, two families owned small factories, while the others worked in various manual and self-employed occupations such as apartment managers, mall security guards, deliverymen, drivers, recycling collectors, and laborers. The distribution of parental occupations in the 2014 and 2019 data implied that although most were involved in manual work, economic and occupational differences could be observed within this rural migrant population. Since their children were all shut out of public primary schools in Beijing at the time of investigation and faced the transition from primary to junior secondary education, we use this period of educational transition as a window in this article to investigate the differences in how these migrant parents handled the structural constraints on their children's public education acquisition in Beijing.

In this study, we initially applied an open coding strategy (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to establish patterns in the migrant parents' involvement in their children's school choice and enrolment process. We also analyzed our student interviewees' main educational trajectories by analyzing their narratives. After comparing the emerging themes, we focused on coding the main factors that potentially shaped the parents' educational involvement, such as *hukou* status, a family's economic situation, and acquired social networks. Linkages between parents' active agency in educational involvement, children's educational path, and these social factors were further identified.

## **Findings**

### ***The evolving policy context of public school enrolment for rural migrant children in Beijing***

Previous studies have illustrated that the specific public school enrolment requirements for

migrant children in Beijing were significantly raised in 2013–2014 (S. Liu, F. Liu, and Yu 2017; Yu 2018). Friedman (2022) and Wang (2017) further explored this changing education policy context in Beijing as an effect of the nation’s new urbanization plans. Megacities with the political goal of population control are more likely to expel people from the low-end manual labor population and replace them with a highly educated population. Elsewhere, Author et al. (2017) noted that the two new national education policies issued in 2013 and 2014 (i.e., the national student electronic ID system<sup>2</sup> and the ban on cross-district school enrolment<sup>3</sup>, respectively) also increased the difficulties faced by rural migrant parents when attempting to enroll their children in Beijing public schools in the 2014 intake year.

Our interview data and policy review further highlighted that such systematic marginalization of rural migrant children has continued and intensified in post-2014 urban public education in Beijing. First, as shown in Table 1, in addition to proof of employment, the detailed requirements of proof of residency, residence permit, and certificate verification procedures in Sun District continually increased after 2014 and are highly associated with parents’ working and economic conditions. By cross-checking the policy documents issued by other districts in Beijing, we found that this evolving education policy context for rural migrant families was not unique to Sun District. These stricter requirements further challenged rural migrant parents with higher standards for their working conditions, income level, residential conditions, and, more importantly, with higher familiarity with related policies and public-school enrolment certificate verification procedures.

<Table 1 here>

In addition, until 2019, the lack of official student status issued by the Beijing Education Committee remained the most challenging issue for migrant parents of children in H School to

enrol their children in a public middle school in Beijing. Before the bar was raised, many H School graduates attended public Middle School L in the neighboring area. As the Principal of H School noted,

Before 2009, our students had to take an examination to enroll in School L... then, its school leaders felt that our students were generally good. So, as long as you graduated from our school, they would consider you. At that time, the temporary student certificate (*jiedu zheng*) was not hard to apply for. If you could not get it yourself, you could ask around for help, or our school could find someone to help. For instance, for a good student, even with mediocre academic performance, we could negotiate with the Director of Teaching in School L to recommend the student. If the director agreed to enroll this student, they would come out to solve the certificate issue for the student. Because School L was losing its within-district local students to other public schools due to school choice. It needed a supply of students.

However, the compulsory requirement of holding Beijing student status in the public-school enrolment policy for migrant children from 2014 onward prevented almost all graduates of H School from entering any public middle school in Beijing. H School was deliberately excluded from nationwide student status online registration by the Sun District Education Bureau, due to its status as an unlicensed private migrant school:

Each year... I submitted all my students' information to the District Education Bureau ... I thought they would give us official student status [eventually]... but they did not. (Principal of H School)

The flexible space in the public middle school admission for H school graduates, therefore, was significantly compressed. The informal negotiation between the H School and the L School no longer worked. Thus, in 2014, only two students (out of more than 70 graduates) were admitted to the public middle school in Beijing. In 2019, none of the 15 sixth graders interviewed were admitted, as their parents gave up on the Beijing public school option early that

year when selecting their children's middle schools. Instead, eight families chose their hometowns for their children's secondary education; three preferred private migrant schools in Beijing and one chose a private school in Hebei province; two were unsure at the time of interview.

### ***Rural migrant parents' active involvement in children's middle school selection***

The data obtained in our study show that when faced with systematic marginalization in terms of access to Beijing public schools, rather than acquiescing the rural migrant parents actively participated in their children's middle school selection and enrolment process. First, we found that before the local government raised the thresholds, rural migrant parents continued to try and find ways to overcome the hurdles of public school enrolment. For instance, as newcomers to the city, many were initially unfamiliar with the public school admission policies and were unlikely to fulfill requirements such as proof of employment and residency. However, children's being excluded from urban public primary schools made a significant number of them begin to prepare the required certificates consciously, as they hoped to enroll their children in public middle schools in Beijing:

(When our child first came to Beijing), we could not offer any certificates, like proof of parents' employment and other stuff. We did not know about these things at all. Hence, we then directly enrolled our child in a private migrant school. We have all these certificates now: proof of no guardianship in our hometown, proof of employment in Beijing, proof of residence, and proof of one child in the family. But our child does not have the [Beijing] student status, and they did not ask for it last year. (2014 Graduate A's father, taxi driver)

The father of 2014 Graduate E (exhibition decoration worker) also described his experience of preparing documents for his child's enrolment in a public middle school in

Beijing, indicating that migrant parents were willing to invest money and time in any opportunity to provide their children with urban public education:

We have already attained temporary student status in Beijing. To apply for it... the certificate of the child's lack of guardianship in the hometown [already] cost us a lot of time and money by going back and forth to our hometown in Hunan province [1,000 miles from Beijing]. However, we lacked official student status in Beijing. We reported this issue to the education bureau and the municipal government. It was useless.

Second, due to the evolving policy context post-2014, migrant parents' previous preparation of certificates for Beijing public schools turned out to be a waste of time, and many of their children ended up going to middle schools in their hometowns or private migrant schools in Beijing. However, it would be too simplistic to blame their parents' lack of action. We found that under these circumstances, many migrant parents turned to researching alternative options for public middle schools in Beijing, other cities, and their hometowns. For instance, some of the parents interviewed stated the following:

The best public middle school in our township... My younger sister's son is in that school, and his learning is not bad. You must pass the exam to enroll in that school—the class arrangement there depends on your academic performance and exam scores. We could barely meet the costs. But everything we do is for our children... My sister lives in the township. My home is also near the school, 20 minutes' drive. I may go back together with Jing and settle her down. I won't let her board at school. She is still too young to take care of herself. (2019, Jing's mother, salesperson in a clothing store outlet)

I plan to enroll him in [a private middle school] in Yanjiao (a town in Sanhe City, Hebei province). He cannot attend the public [middle] school in Beijing... I also took Yuan to visit there once... It would cost RMB30,000 to RMB40,000 per year, including tuition, living, and accommodation fees... We think having a tight economic situation is better than letting him attend school in hometown. [In our hometown,] nobody cares for him, and we cannot

see him all year... He can also attend high school [in Yanjiao], and [my relatives] said that by enrolling him in this school, Yuan could take his *gaokao* (national college entrance examination) there [in Hebei]<sup>4</sup>. (2019 Yuan's mother, factory owner)

These interview quotes illustrate that it is never easy for rural migrant parents to decide where to send their children for further education. The educational path their children follow is, therefore, to a great extent, determined by the intersection between *hukou* barriers and parents' careful calculations concerning the school's education quality, their children's safety, the guardianship available for the children, and the possible opportunities for further education. In addition, as the parents who were interviewed had different occupations, the findings suggest that most (if not all) rural migrant parents, probably irrespective of their socioeconomic status, would give careful considerations to the choice of their children's middle schools.

### ***Economic and social conditions differentiating rural migrant parents' actual choices***

As mentioned above, while most (if not all) of the rural migrant parents became actively involved in their children's middle school selection and enrolment process, further analysis showed that their actual choices remained highly dependent on their economic conditions and their social networks in urban and rural societies.

First, economic condition was found to affect what rural migrant parents considered as available school choices for their children. Faced with increased requirements for urban public school enrolment (see in Table 1), most of the rural migrant parents interviewed expressed reluctance to maintain consecutive social insurance payments or to look for a house that met the requirements for proof of residency. Comparing to the income levels of most of the migrant parents in our study (below RMB5,000), personnel in flexible employment in Beijing needs to pay RMB775.1 per month in 2014 for their social welfare package (i.e., pension, unemployment,

and essential medicine insurance) (People Net 2014), which is less than for employees with legal labor contracts. Thus, the parents of around 64.5% of the 110 H School students may need to pay at least 15% of their monthly incomes for social insurance for at least six months if they plan to enroll their children in public schools in Beijing. Jie, a full-time teacher in H School and a migrant parent of two children of compulsory education age, also explained the following:

Migrant parents... Two parents together would earn around RMB5,000 or RMB6,000. But the living expenses here are also high. For one month, the cost for a whole family of food and children's education is at least RMB3,000. Some have one child; some have two or even three children... Like us, we (Jie and the two children), our monthly expenses are around RMB2,000. Not to mention that our meals and education for my children are free in this school... Also, here, in some families, only the fathers work. Many mothers just stay at home. (2014, Teacher Jie)

In addition, the admission results for H School graduates in the 2014 intake year and onward show that even if they did so, such an investment may not grant them a secured place in the public school. This uncertainty further reduces the willingness of migrant parents to make payments, even for those who can afford it.

Teacher Jie exemplified this. Rather than investing time and money to prepare for the required certificates, Jie chose to take advantage of her teaching experience in her hometown and her teacher certificate to seek a school job in Beijing, which could help her secure her children's urban education. Later in 2015, she transferred to another licensed private migrant school with better financing and teaching quality and took her children there. Her decisions regarding her children's schooling were significantly affected by her family's economic limitations, and in response, she chose her occupation according to the accessibility her children would have to

urban education. However, her job transfer for children's education also resulted in the school transfer for her children, who were at the compulsory education level.

Unlike Jie, many migrant families in poor financial situations had no occupational skills for them to make use of in the children's school enrolment process; therefore, they found that their available school options were highly constrained, although they also carefully searched for alternatives in both urban and rural spaces. Ting's parents replied:

Her father wanted her to attend the public school (in her hometown). Not because it is a better school. It mainly serves people in poverty. So, it can waive miscellaneous costs and textbook fees and provide subsidies for us...we have financial problems. It is too expensive for us to support our daughters' education here in Beijing... It costs RMB6,000 to RMB7,000 per season for one child [in another private migrant school in Beijing]. We cannot afford it. (2019, Ting's mother, a street snack vendor)

In contrast to Teacher Jie and Ting's parents, very few migrant parents with much healthier financial conditions presented a different choice. For instance, the parents of Student Yuan owned a computer parts recycling and distribution factory, and earned a higher income than most parents interviewed in 2019. Yuan's mother realized that it was unlikely that Yuan would be admitted to a public middle school in Beijing under the current policy context. Yet, unlike Jing's parents mentioned above, who considered schools in their hometowns directly, she researched the school admission requirements in other cities. She then decided to enroll Yuan in a private middle school in Hebei on high-tuition-fee for its high quality of education and, more importantly, the opportunity to have a Hebei student status for taking the *gaokao* exam in Hebei province. Thus, rural migrant parents' different economic conditions have led them to adopt different strategies in the face of Beijing's higher bar for public school enrolment, and ended up selecting different schools.

Second, our findings show that the rural migrant parents' social networks in urban and rural societies also affected their school selection process. For instance, as mentioned in Jing's case above, parents rely on their connections with relatives to acquire information about schools in their hometowns, such as a school's reputation in quality of education and entrance exam requirements. Migrant parents' social networks in rural areas can offer more than information; in many cases, such networks also serve as social capital, facilitating the attainment of official student status (*xueji*) in the parent's *hukou* location, which is a requisite enabling the children to take two critical exams in the Chinese education system— *zhongkao* and *gaokao*—in their home province:

Our relative helped us out [with] Lang's student status in our hometown... Her uncle was a schoolteacher [in a primary school]. Although he is retired, he still has some connections in that school. So, we used his *guanxi* (social networks); otherwise, we would not have made it... Now, we can use Lang's student status to register for *zhongkao* at the township level. (2019, Lang's father, self-employed as a garbage collector)

The parents of 2014 Graduate E had similar experiences in terms of their child's school admission in their hometown:

As we did not receive any response from the local education bureau, we immediately contacted people in our hometown... We wanted to enroll our child in the key middle school in the county center. However, the local education bureau only allowed this school to accept 700 new students out of 1,000 local students, not counting returning migrant students. Hundreds of students were out there. Fortunately, I still have an acquaintance, my classmate, and later found that this person was working in the local education bureau. We've gone through many challenges and spent some money to make this happen.

Student Hua's parents, however, had to rely on information from the residing migrant community in Beijing when considering Hua's middle school selection:

We might let Hua attend the private migrant school in Beijing. We have not decided yet. His classmate transferred to a nearby school in the fifth or sixth grade. That student said that the school has a junior secondary education level there. (2019, Hua's mother, a cook in a factory)

This is because Hua's parents lacked social networks with relatives in rural areas and had little knowledge of school conditions in their hometown. Due to this lack of relatives in their hometown, they were also concerned about whether Hua would be in good hands there. Therefore, they prioritized the private migrant school over a hometown school.

In summary, although most (if not all) of the rural migrant parents demonstrated a willingness to react to the unequal access to urban public schools faced by their children during the transition period from primary to middle school, their ability to attain urban public education for their children was constrained and their actual choices for children's middle school differed according to their economic conditions and available social networks in urban and rural communities.

***The high mobility of migrant children's educational trajectory: Stuck between rural and urban spaces***

In this study, we found that the educational trajectory of children from rural migrant families was stuck between urban and rural spaces, going back and forth. Although rural migrant children officially have equal entitlement to public education in migrant-receiving cities according to the central government's education policies (State Council 2001), in this study we found that their educational experiences involved much precarity and mobility. Of the 59 interviewed students, 53 described their experiences of school attendance during their primary education, and around two thirds of these students had experienced at least one school transfer from their hometown to

Beijing. However, after migrating to Beijing, stability in terms of staying in Beijing for their compulsory education remained impossible for most of them. In the interviews, they mentioned that they had to be prepared to transfer to other schools in Beijing and elsewhere or go back to their hometowns for their further education:

My parents want me to return to my hometown after this semester... they want to first look at my performance in the sixth-grade final exam. I have to take another exam in my hometown. I can join the high-performance class (*haoban*) if I score well. If not, I will rejoin the sixth grade in primary school there. (2014 Student GR12A)

I transferred to this school in Grade 4. I studied in many schools before (she named two private migrant schools in Beijing and one public school in her hometown). There may be several more. I cannot remember clearly. (2014 Student GR11B)

Additionally, for many of them, leaving Beijing during the transition period from primary to middle school was not the end of their educational mobility, as their parents would continuously seeking possibilities to enrol them in urban education:

I'm returning to my hometown in sixth grade and will study there until the first or second year of junior high school the following year. And I may go back to Beijing right after that. (2014 Student GR09B)

Where these rural migrant children received their education was not under their control, and neither was whether they transferred to other schools. With no doubt, one main reason for their high level of mobility in primary and secondary education is the growing and systematic marginalization of rural migrant children in public education in Beijing. However, it was evident that the high mobility demonstrated in their educational trajectory was not a simple result of *hukou*-based exclusion in the urban public education system. Rather, as shown from previous sections, it was also shaped by their parents' actions and abilities to meet the prerequisite

conditions for admission to urban public schools and moreover the ongoing efforts to seek alternatives to urban public schools to provide their children with better education, which were affected by the migrant parents' economic conditions and available social networks in urban and rural communities. Thus, the highly precarious educational trajectory of rural migrant children may *de facto* result from the interplay between the systematic exclusion of the rural migrant population in Beijing's public education system, the active coping of rural migrant parents, and social class-related factors that influencing their coping strategies.

### **Discussions and conclusion**

In this study, we investigated rural migrant parents' active agency in reacting to the structural barriers against their children's equal access to urban public schools. Using qualitative data collected from Sun District, Beijing, over multiple years, we discovered a growing systematic marginalization of rural migrant children in the urban public education system after 2014. However, in the face of this evolving education policy context, we found that rural migrant parents are not passive recipients but proactively addressing these structural barriers, to maximize the possibility of improving the quality of their children's middle education.

While extending the prevailing *hukou*-based exclusion discourse in explaining the educational inequalities facing rural migrant parents and their children, the findings of this study also challenge the prevailing subtractive image of working-class and rural parents as incompetent and absent in their children's education, found in both international and Chinese studies (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Kim 2019; Lareau 2003; Lei 2020; Shen 2020; Wei and Ni 2023). Although the rural migrant parents in our study generally had low levels of education and little experience of academic success themselves (35 of the 44 students interviewed in 2014 had

fathers and 34 had mothers with secondary education or less; eight parents out of the nine families interviewed in 2019 had completed middle school education or below), most of them were actively engaged in their children's school choice and enrolment process, preparing the required documents for public school enrolment in Beijing and researching alternative school options in both urban and rural spaces. Such findings echo to other recent studies which have also identified similar practices in terms of school choice among disadvantaged parents in the Chinese context. For instance, Friedman (2022) found that rural migrant parents engaged in bribery and falsified documents to get their children enrolled in urban public schools. In addition, Wang and Teng (2022) noted that some rural parents were willing to migrate to other counties or townships to enroll their children in urban schools (*peidu*) to ensure academic success, regardless of the cost. Thus, we suggest that, even if rural migrant parents are not personally involved in their children's academic learning process, they are less likely to believe that their children's education is not their responsibility or allow them to grow up naturally in their education (Lareau 2003). Hence, research into educational involvement should consider extending from primarily assessing parenting behaviour in the educational process to also including parental participation in the school choice and enrolment process, particularly when investigating disadvantaged families. Researchers should pay more attention to rural migrant parents' active agency and their reactions to the *hukou*-based structural exclusion in the public education system.

In addition, we found that all of the interviewed migrant parents in H School preferred urban schools, particularly urban public schools, as they believed that such schools could offer a good education and made it easy for them to take good care of their children. However, although most of the rural migrant parents were actively involved in their children's school enrolment process, their actual practices and eventual school choices differed. These parents' decisions

about their children's middle school selection were closely associated with their economic status and available social networks in urban and rural communities. For instance, when faced with the growing difficulties of enrolling their children in Beijing public middle schools, only a few migrant parents, i.e., those with healthier household finances, could afford private education in another city as an alternative (as in Yuan's case). For the majority, working in the low-end labor market in the urban economy greatly limited their ability to seek a good school for their children in urban or even rural areas (as in Ting's case).

In this case, findings imply that such differences in rural migrant parents' actual school choices for their children were not based on their different expectations of their children's education or their different understandings of school quality. Our finding partially echoes Hong and Zhao's (2014) arguments that Chinese parenting practices are mainly determined by their economic conditions, not by different parenting beliefs and norms. Our study also highlights that, besides economic status, rural migrant parents' practices in the school choice process could be further shaped by their social connections in urban migrant communities and rural societies.

Scholars have suggested that some working-class families initiate practices similar to those of middle-class parents in the school selection process, such as researching available school options by seeking information from neighbors and acquaintances (Cuddy, Krysan, and Lewis 2020; Lareau and Weininger 2003). As the school options available to low-income and low-social-status families have been found to be limited to socially segregated networks (Cuddy, Krysan, and Lewis 2020), the social connections of these families can be considered a possible mechanism through which disadvantaged children end up in poor schools. However, our study suggests a different pattern that some migrant parents who are limited by their *hukou* status and financial conditions in procuring urban public school education in Beijing for their children may

possess valuable social connections, which can help to further their children's education in other cities and hometowns. This can include ensuring their children's student status in hometown schools, sharing information about good schools, and having reliable relatives look after the children of migrant parents. Besides, the differences we found in migrant parents' school choice and enrolment process also indicate increasing heterogeneity and social diversification within the rural migrant population, which has not been fully acknowledged in the literature.

Finally, this study has some limitations. It focused on the Beijing context and the participants were from a single private migrant school. Thus, our findings are unlikely to be easily generalized to other urban contexts, especially non-mega cities. However, as the data were collected in one school context over multiple years for triangulation, our findings can provide insights into how rural migrant parents actively respond to the evolving education policy context and how their children's educational trajectories are shaped by the intersection between changing policy context and these migrant parents' economic and social conditions in urban and rural spaces. The economic and social constraints on parents' active agency in educational involvement may consequently increase the precarity and mobility of their children's educational trajectory, which would also benefit from further research.

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### **Endnotes**

1. In 2001, the State Council established the "Two Priorities" principle for migrant children's education in *Decision Over Basic Education Reforms and Development*, stating that migrant-receiving cities and their public schools have to take primary responsibility for migrant children's education provision.

2. The Ministry of Education (MoE) initiated a singular student registration system in 2013 (MoE, 2013). Its purpose is to ensure that each student receives only one unique ID, following the student through the entire educational process. In Beijing, only students attending public schools and licensed private migrant schools can obtain this unique national student ID as the proof of their official student status, which is necessary for any non-local students who want to enroll in a public middle school in Beijing.
3. Under the request of the MoE's *Notice on Test-Free Admission to Compulsory Education in Major Large Cities* issued in 2014 (China Youth Net, 2010), the Beijing government required all children of compulsory school age to enroll in schools within their residential districts to ensure equal education quality and a less competitive learning environment. Therefore, public schools in suburban districts faced a backflow of Beijing local students from downtown schools, further reducing the available school seats for migrant children.
4. The school mentioned here is a K-12 private school. According to the school's website, it has no compulsory requirement in terms of students' *hukou* status. Thus, all students could apply for the school. Any admitted student would receive Hebei student status and be able to take *zhongkao* and *gaokao* in Hebei province.

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**Table 1. Changing requirements for public school enrolment in Sun District (2014-2019).**

Five-certificates Requirements	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	General situation in Beijing
1. Proof of Employment	Employment within the district (both parents); *Social insurance payments in local district (both parents; at least three consecutive months)	Employment within the district ( <i>at least one parent</i> ); + The term of the labor contract should be <u>more than six months from a certain date</u> (e.g. May 1 for 2015)	+ Social insurance payments in the local district for a certain period should be provided (e.g. at least six consecutive months till May 9 for 2016)				From 2017, all districts required social insurance payments (at least three consecutive months); From 2018, all districts required parents to be employed in the district (at least one parent).
2. Proof of Residency	Tenancy contract or property ownership certificate	+ <u>Proof of rental taxation should be no less than six months from a certain date</u> (e.g. May 1 for 2015)		+ The tenancy contract should be <u>signed before a certain date</u> (e.g. November 1 for 2017) + The lease term should be at least six months until May 1 for 2018			Until 2019, 10 districts required proof of rental taxation; six districts added the principle of one residential address for one nearby school place within six years to their enrolment policies for non-local students.
3. Household Registration Booklet	Certificate of family planning for non-only child		<i>Cancellation</i>				Until 2019, it is waived in all districts.
4. Temporary Residence Permit (replaced with Residence Permit <i>juzhuzheng</i> in 2018)	Valid permit	+ The validity date of the Temporary Residence Permit should be <u>more than six months from a certain date</u> (e.g. May 1 for 2015); + The address shown on the permit should be <u>the same as that of the actual residence within the district for more than six months</u>					From 2018, 13 districts have a specific requirement for the start date of this permit.
5. Certificate for lack of guardianship in place of origin	Required to submit even when both parents have a valid Temporary Residence Permit				<i>Cancellation</i>		Until 2019, it is waived in all districts.
<b>Certificate Verification Procedures</b>	(1) On-site certificate verification at neighborhood or district offices (2) Online registration (information collection of child's data) (3) On-site check-in for school enrolment at the assigned school (4) Networked audits of relevant departments (e.g. Municipal Land Bureau Sun District Branch to verify the proof of residency)			+ <u>Online appointment</u> for on-site certificate verification			From 2017, five districts require online certificate verification in advance.

*Note:* \* This information is from migrant parents and teachers from H School. The official policy document included this requirement in 2016; The italicized words represent the changes that reduced the difficulty of enrolling migrant children in public schools in Sun District; The underlined words represent the changes that raised the requirements; “+” refers to clauses that are in addition to the previous year’s requirements.