

# THE IMPACT OF SEMI-PUBLIC VILLAGE KINDERGARTEN INITIATIVES ON MIGRANT CHILDREN IN ZHEJIANG, CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

Migrant children's equal access to basic education has become a heightened educational equity issue in China. The discussion of equity has mainly focused on equal access-the most basic form of equity. Equity, however, also includes input (equal distribution of resources) and output (short-term and long-term outcomes). Historically, migrant children attended unregistered private kindergartens. Results of China's recent rural preschool reform efforts include new opportunities for migrant children to access semi-public village kindergartens as well. This qualitative study attempts to understand the impact of semi-public village kindergarten initiatives in the Zhejiang province on educational experiences of migrant children and to determine children's developmental/learning needs, and challenges. Findings suggest that in order to achieve equitable outcomes, local educational departments need to equally distribute resources by (1) increasing the quality of semi-public village kindergartens through recruiting and retaining high quality teachers, (2) enacting developmentally appropriate curricula and pedagogy responsive to the needs and challenges of migrant children while also addressing the needs of village children, and (3) accelerating legislation in honor of the migrant population's contribution to the transformation of the Chinese society in order to eradicate social discrimination toward migrant children.

**Keywords:** *migrant children, preschool education, kindergarten, china*

## INTRODUCTION

As China continues to make remarkable strides economically, one notable change is the large-scale flow of surplus agricultural labor workers from less-developed areas into economically-advantaged areas. The Chinese government aims to restrict this flow of agricultural workers (also called *nongmingong* or *liudong renko*) by linking domicile registration to all social welfare-including access to public education- and enforcing a household registration policy called *hukou* (Law & Pan, 2009). The *hukou* policy has caused unequal opportunities in housing, health care,

and access to public schools—especially for the *nongmingong* whose number exceeded 211 million in 2009 (The National Population and Family Planning Commission of the People’s Republic of China, 2011). Scholars expect that by 2015, the number of migrant children in public elementary schools will reach 58 million (Du, 2008).

The phrase *migrant children* is used in a variety of circumstances. For example, it can refer to rural children living in a city with their *nongmingong* parents; to children who take part in rural-urban migration; and to children who take part in rural-rural migrations. This latter type of migration is an important yet under-examined topic since over the past decade (1) the cost of living in urban China has significantly increased, (2) local governments opened more economic development zones in rural areas, and (3) increasingly rural factories are recruiting *nongmingong* workers, as local governments have set flexible and generous taxing policies to encourage businesses.

The increasing rural-rural migration has significant implications for rural preschool education reform as well. Chinese scholars have reported that migrant children were at risk for lower academic achievement, they suffered from social and/or cognitive deprivations, and often had no access to a safe preschool (Guo, 2007; Ou, 2008). In 2010, The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (2010) declared a ten-year plan for equalizing educational opportunities for all Chinese children. Based on this plan, all Chinese children should receive one year of preschool education by 2020. The following article provides an introduction to the Chinese preschool education, describes a study that was conducted to explore the impact of Chinese preschool education reform, and provides recommendations to meet the needs of all migrant children.

## **NATURE OF THE PROBLEMS**

### **Preschools in a Planned Economy**

Planned economy means that the central government is in charge of distributing all goods and services. Although the Chinese government regarded preschool education as the foundation of basic education, the Compulsory Education Law—the most influential educational law guaranteeing the rights of all children from grades one to nine to receive a basic education—does not pertain to preschool education. When China employed a planned economy between 1949 and 1980, the government funded public preschools affiliated with the government, government institutions, and government enterprises. The civil administration channels (e.g., community associations) funded neighborhood public preschools in urban cities. These public preschools are generally regarded as high quality and are supplied

with sufficient resources from both the central or local government (public funding) and fees collected from parents who tend to earn stable incomes. Public school teachers receive respect, earn a stable salary, and have a well-regarded social guarantee system. They are also viewed to be well prepared and highly dedicated to their profession (Jiang, 2008).

The government, however, did not include funding for rural preschool education in its public expenditures. The township and village committees have to originate a funding mechanism for developing and maintaining their preschools. Since these committees have to be financially accountable for implementing compulsory education for children from grades one to nine in rural China, they are financially constrained from investing in preschool education. One popular practice village committees used was affiliating preprimary classes with elementary schools and offering rural children a one-year service (Tang, 2005). Compared to public school teachers, rural preschool teachers were always underpaid, did not have proper identification, and were uninsured by the government in the social guarantee system-which had inevitably attributed to the lower quality of rural kindergartens compared to the quality urban public preschools (Jiang, 2008; Tang, 2005).

### **Preschools in a Market Economy**

As the market economy reform deepened in the 1990s, the funding mechanism changed dramatically for all preschool education. Most public kindergartens turned into self-funded enterprises, operating according to the market principles of survival of the fittest (Zeng, 2008; Zhang, 2008). The loss of public funding forced some public kindergartens affiliated with enterprises to be shut down or leased to individuals. Community neighborhood kindergartens also faced challenges to survive on their own. Township and village committees could not afford to support kindergartens after the 1994 tax reform, which dramatically decreased local governments' share of taxes and weakened their power (Law & Pan, 2009). Usually, only public preschools that had strong connections with governmental institutions had secure access to public funding. The quality of preschool education suffered as private kindergartens constantly had to fight for profits at the expense of lowering teacher pay, reducing investment in materials and equipment, and often skimping on children's meals (Zeng, 2008). Overall, economic reform resulted in the loss of not only public assets but also resources gained over the years, because without public funding and support, many private kindergartens had to close due to low enrollment and high operation costs. The case of Beijing, where the number of kindergartens decreased by 67.9% from 1992 to 2002, best illustrates this point (Jin, Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2005).

## **Illegal Preschools for Migrant Children**

Currently, as China's economic reform deepens, the number of migrant children quickly rises each year that also increases the need for preschool education (Hu & Szente, 2009a). Migrant children do not qualify for the limited public kindergartens since the majority of these programs primarily serve children whose parents work for the government and are urban residents. Thus, *nongmingong* parents have had to seek affordable private kindergartens, which were in high demand. Responding to the market need, many individuals have opened low-cost, unregistered, and illegal kindergartens. Most of these kindergartens charge as low as RMB 100 -200 (\$1 = 6.7 RMB); however, this fee could still be a burden to migratory families who work overtime to earn monthly incomes of RMB 1000-2000. Consequently, a significant number of young migrant children may be unable to attend even unregistered kindergartens. The quality of these unregistered kindergartens tends to be unacceptably poor, because in a few horrifying incidents, these kindergartens were directly responsible for the death of migrant children due to an unsafe environment, poor management, or harsh punishments (Hu & Szente, 2009a).

At this point, China's goal of ensuring all children's right to a basic education may seem to be an empty promise. Whether living in urban or rural China, migrant children can neither afford to purchase services nor qualify for a share of the public educational resources. Recognizing the societal contradictions resulting from educational inequity and social discrimination, Chinese scholars (e.g., Nie, Wang, & Zheng, 2008) have urged the government to establish a financial aid system for migrant children's preschool education and to allocate educational resources fairly between rural and urban areas, among regions, and among or within schools in order to narrow the widening gap in development and learning (Guo, 2007; Ou, 2008; Wang et al., 2008).

## **Preschool Education Reform and Implications for Rural Children**

In 2003, the State Council encouraged local governments to develop alternative forms of preschool programs and reformulate a funding mechanism in support of these programs. The Fifth Plenary Meeting of the Seventeenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, 2010) suggested that any kindergartens fully or partially funded by the government must make efforts to enroll migrant children without posing any discriminatory criteria. Further, in the Reform and the State Council's Suggestions Regarding Developing Preschool Education, The General Office of the State Council (2010) declared that disadvantaged children who have been unfavorably situated in the society should receive assistance from local governments in accessing basic education. Moreover, the document emphasized the importance of developing rural

preschool education by expanding current resources. For example, one suggestion involves using the vacated and extraneous school buildings on a priority basis for rural preschools.

The Chinese government has faced inequity issues and blueprinted the timeline and pathways in distributing resources fairly in order to provide each child with an equal education. However, since discriminatory practices against migrant children persist in addition to the long-standing educational disparities across the nation, the Chinese government is still in its infancy with regards to institutionalizing the principle of equality in preschool education for migrant children (Law & Pan, 2009). Lately, researchers have started to realize this issue. The literature on the impact of such discriminatory practices on migrant children is emerging, mostly in the context of compulsory education (grades one through nine). So far, publications have mainly acknowledged migrant children's (1) academic challenges (Guo, 2007), (2) psychological and behavioral issues (e.g., loneliness, stealing, and hostile behaviors) (He, Liu, & Zhang, 2009; Zhang, Tan, Wu, & Tang, 2010; Zhou, 2010), and (3) experiences with social discrimination (Li, Zhou, Zhang, & Yang, 2008; Lu, 2009). Educational policymakers have traditionally been challenged to ensure migrant children from grades one to nine a public education. Most recently, educational policymakers are planning to extend such support and policies to preschool-aged migrant children. The regulations, implementation techniques, and monitoring of kindergartens need to be clear in terms of how to assist migrant children's development in preschool programs in the ever-changing sociocultural context. The following review of research may help one gain a better understanding of the educational needs of migrant children, the challenges children face in preschools, and may also suggest ways how China could formulate new policies.

## **OBJECTIVES**

A paucity of research exists regarding preschool-age migrant children. A few survey studies suggest that compared to their local counterparts, these children consumed less meat and fish (Jiang et al., 2009) and had a high incidence of anemia, diarrhea, and coughing within two weeks of birth (Wang et al., 2008). Ou (2008) indicates that migrant preschoolers exhibit learning difficulties, lack of confidence, and poor social skills with feelings of loneliness. Similarly, Guo (2004) indicates that (1) migrant children tend to be shy and passive during social interactions; (2) *nongmingong* parents do not have time to collaborate with schools; and (3) the preschool curriculum is geared more toward urban residents' children. He (2007) revealed the impact of socio-economic status on a migrant child by illustrating the home life of, school experiences of, parental expectations for, and family member's views of the child. In general, these findings indicate migrant

children not only need access to a quality preschool education, but they also need targeted interventions due to their unique socio-economic status.

No study has focused on rural-rural migration and related educational issues concerning migrant children. As the Chinese government deepens the preschool reform, semi-public kindergartens represent a new reform initiative that offer a new ray of hope for migrant children in rural villages. As the local government furthers the development of semi-public village kindergartens, research is needed to explore the unique situation and needs of migrant children in order to guide policy formation and adjustment. In order to aid the Chinese government to reach her plan of providing every child with a quality preschool education, the purpose of the present study is threefold. More specifically, this study aims to (1) explore the educational needs and challenges of rural-rural migrant children; (2) examine the impact of semi-public kindergarten initiatives on the educational equity of migrant children in Beilun, within rural Zhejiang; and (3) provide recommendations regarding how to better meet the needs of all migrant children.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants and Setting**

This study took place in Chaiqiao, Beilun, which is located in one of the most progressive coastal provinces in terms of economic advancement. It is also well-known for its successful preschool reform. Since the 1990s, Beilun has attracted millions of *nongmingong*. According to an official from the Chaiqiao police department, the population of temporary residents in Chaiqiao exceeds one third of its total population of 41,000. The Zhejiang Provincial People's Government (2011) declared to improve the quality of preschool education for rural children through (1) funding more public and semi-public kindergartens in rural towns and villages; (2) ensuring that 80% of teachers have certifications by 2013; and (3) establishing at least one town-level public kindergarten for each rural town to serve as a model program. In a semi-public village kindergarten, the director is granted a contract to use the newly furnished facility free of charge and receives some funding. The director is also responsible for student recruitment, teacher and staff salaries, and other programmatic costs as long as s/he abides by reform policies and ensures that the program meets quality indicators set forth and monitored by the Beilun DOE. According to the research coordinator for preschool education in Beilun, local DOEs provided each reformed village kindergarten with a standardized blueprint, two certified model teachers as instructional support, and fiscal support. Meanwhile, these semi-public village kindergartens must have teachers attend mandatory training and pass certification in a given time frame,

maintain activity management and minimum program quality, and follow a fee schedule predetermined by the educational department.

In the current study, the researchers focused on all ( $N=3$ ) transformed semi-public village kindergartens in Beilun, all of which were located in Chaiqiao when the field work took place. It is noteworthy that since 2008, the local government has made great efforts to reform private kindergartens and closed all unregistered private kindergartens. Table 1 indicates the number of research participants, the number of students, and the number of teachers in each semi-public village kindergarten.

Table 1: Description of Each Kindergarten

Kindergarten ID	Number of Research Participants	Number of Students	Percentage of Migrant Children	Number of Teachers	Number of Teachers with Two Year College Degrees and Above
A	4 (A,B,C,D)	120	60%	9	2
B	3 (E,F, G)	100	66%	8	3
C	3 (H,I J)	110	45%	8	2

## Procedures

During June and July of 2010, after obtaining consents, the first author scheduled a one-week visit to the three semi-public kindergartens: Kindergartens A, B, and C. During the visits, morning observations were conducted in each classroom using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998)-an observational tool that measures the global quality of a preschool program based on a seven-point rating scale, ranging from 1 (inadequate) to 7 (excellent). ECERS-R is one of the most widely used research tools for preschool quality rating in the U.S. and in many developed countries (Harms et al, 1998). The results allow researchers to determine the quality of the program in seven areas including space and furnishing, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, program structure, and parent and staff. The first author systematically recorded data collected from the ECERS-R observations according to the rating scale and took anecdotal notes on student and teacher behaviors.

In the afternoon or after the school day, the first author used semi-structured interviews with directors and teachers to obtain their perceptions about the education of migrant children. Specifically, the questions were related to (1) teachers' perceptions about the preschool reform with regard to rural kindergarten; (2) the impact of the reform on migrant children; (3) migrant children's educational experiences, needs, and challenges in a rural kindergarten; and (4) educational equity. Questions were designed so that interviewees were free to express feelings, thoughts, and ideas based on their judgments (Glesne, 2006). All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Finally, the first author reviewed (1) policy papers distributed by the local DOE; (2) all paperwork required from the kindergarten by the local education department for monitoring (e.g., students' health record, fee collection receipt, and itemized meal purchase receipt); and (3) students' files (i.e., academic program and plans). All main points of each document were organized in an Excel spreadsheet according to subject.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data, a qualitative research design of multiple case studies was used (Yin, 2009) to examine multiple factors in naturally occurring events (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By collecting data on various aspects of the phenomenon, a thorough appraisal of the case was made (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Specifically, triangulating the data through interviews, observations, and document analysis helped researchers consider multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, and [verify] the repetition of an observation or interpretation (Stakes, 2000, p. 433).

In developing themes and subthemes, constant comparative method was utilized (Patton, 2002). First, interviews from Kindergarten A were reviewed and possible codes and early emerging themes were identified (Grbich, 2007). Kindergarten A was chosen for initial analysis in the process because those interviews and observations were conducted first and that school also had the most participants. The first version of the codebook was formed by giving each code a definition. Then, interview data from Kindergarten B were reviewed. Certain themes and codes were added or deleted at this stage, and the original codebook was reviewed. This process was then repeated for Kindergarten C, resulting in the final revision of the codebook. Finally, a new codebook was generated with detailed quotes, observation rating/notes, and document notes to support the identified themes and subthemes. Specifically, a thematic conceptual matrix was used to grasp the significance of the interview data. Additionally, when analyzing transcriptions and additional data, supporting quotes were identified under each theme and directly recorded in a data display format. A great attention was paid on

organizing meaningful, significant quotes according to each subtheme. Quotes were chosen when they represented strong opinions and also when multiple interviewees expressed similar concerns.

When synthesizing findings and interpret findings, three data display formats were used as a primary strategy: (1) ECERS-R rating table to summarize the quality of the program; (2) a checklist/matrix listing significant findings from documents; and (3) interview data organized by a thematic conceptual matrix. Because interviews served as the main data source for this study, the observation data and document analysis data were compared to support the findings from the interview data. Points from the observation or document data that were in support of the interview data were added to the final codebook.

## **FINDINGS**

Two main themes emerged from all participants' responses: (1) Positive Impact of the Preschool Reform Initiatives; and (2) Remaining Challenges of the Preschool Reform Initiatives. Both themes are described below with corresponding subthemes.

### **Positive Impact of the Preschool Reform Initiatives**

All participants commented on the positive impact of preschool reform initiatives on children in the rural Beilun. Particularly, participants recognized the impact of preschool reform on migrant children since the reformed semi-public village kindergartens have nondiscriminatory admission policies. The participants were very appreciative and excited about the new legislation pertaining to rural preschool reform and the degree of integrity in carrying out that legislation. The following four subthemes supported one overall theme of how the reform has benefited migrant children particularly:

#### **Equal Accessibility Opportunities (EAO)**

All teachers and directors sincerely appreciated the local government's support for migrant children to attend reformed semi-public village kindergartens. Policy documents and interview data showed that besides funding the building, the local DOE has consistently provided personnel support for two certified teachers, mandatory training and certification, guidelines for regular activity management, evaluation criterion for program quality rating, and a guideline for a fee schedule based on quality rating results. The findings confirmed that these reformed village kindergartens do not need to require any other documents or certificates from migrant children besides immunization records and health examination certificates. The first author's conversation with the local hospital pediatrician, who oversees

all village children's health, confirmed that the local hospital provided the same free health services to migrant children as to native children. Furthermore, the kindergartens charge the same fee schedule to migrant families as to local children.

### **Improved Program Quality**

The reform has not been able to make huge improvements in program quality of these semi-public kindergartens; however it has ensured a minimum quality for migrant children. The ECERS-R quality scores for Kindergarten A, B, and C showed average means around three for each program. Teachers primarily utilized whole group instruction, even in the classrooms for three-year-olds, and rarely implemented free play. The low quality score is mainly resulted from the lack of play materials to set up learning centers and teachers' lack of strategies for implementing child-centered teaching. In addition, the first author observed poor health practices regarding hand washing and maintaining a clean facility, especially the bathrooms. Despite the low scores on program quality, the reformed rural kindergartens still represent an improved setting to prepare children for grade schools.

### **Improved School Readiness**

All teachers and directors believed that migrant children are as capable of learning as local children. When migrant children first arrive to school, teachers report them to be behind local children in terms of academic readiness. In addition, teachers commonly recognize the fact that *nongmingong* parents spend much less time helping their children with homework. Data sources further reveals that the lessened time investment is due to *nongmingong* parents' working hours, since most of them have to work flexible and extended hours with little time left even for chores. Moreover, *nongmingong* parents, who typically have low levels of education, lack strategies or access to resources for helping children learn. Also, some migrant children, depending on their parents' dialect, could not speak Mandarin-the language required at school-nor could they speak the local dialect. Not being able to speak Mandarin could create initial barriers to understanding learning materials and teachers' directions for daily activities. In addition, not being able to speak the local dialect created initial barriers in social interactions with local children. Fortunately, teachers reported that children typically overcome the language barrier quickly after a period of adjustment and start catching up academically as well.

Teacher D commented:

Some migrant children are very introverted. They have poor oral communication skills and they don't speak Mandarin, which could be attributed to the fact that they come from

isolated poor rural areas. Therefore, they have a hard time communicating with local children and teachers. It is hard for them to learn. It also requires a lot of efforts from the teacher to help them.

Teacher C shared:

In terms of learning, migrant children are no different from local children cognitively. However, I found that *nongmingong* parents do not have time to pay attention to their children's learning. We have weekly reports that summarize what the child has learned, and we request parents to provide feedback. Compared to local parents, *nongmingong* parents provide very little feedback.

Director B commented:

If the migrant child does not attend kindergarten until the age of 5 or 6, it is very obvious that he (she) is quite behind in learning compared to local children. But, if the migrant child starts preschool at three, by the time he (she) reaches 5 or 6, you could not tell any differences if you compare him [her] with local children.

Director C said:

At the beginning, the migrant children might have difficulties in learning mainly because of their lack of preparedness...plus they did not have a lot of prior knowledge due to deprived life experiences. However, I think their parents do care about their learning; that is why they send them to school.

Overall, preschool education is viewed optimal for increasing migrant children's school readiness skills, which will take these students far in their academic career. The same impact applies to migrant children's social, emotional, and behavioral development.

### **Improved Social Skills Competencies**

One common problem is that many migrant children first come to school in inappropriate outfits and with poor hygiene. Teachers have to work hard to teach children about how to dress appropriately for school. Both the observations and interviews revealed that teachers frequently taught migrant children proper hygiene skills, such as brushing teeth and washing their faces and hands. Additionally,

teachers made efforts to consistently communicate with parents about the importance of maintaining good hygiene at home and at school.

Director C shared:

Migrant children play very roughly. It is a safety concern as well as a health concern. When they first come here, some of them have mud all over their legs. Some of them have not bathed and changed in days...our teachers work hard on these issues. But they learned quickly and their parents cooperated after we talked with them.

Director A added:

In terms of behavioral problems, well the child sometimes takes toys such as small construction toys home....Once the teacher talks about the problem, he or she turns around quickly.

Besides hygiene issues, several teachers brought up concerns regarding migrant children's social competencies. According to the teachers, many of these children were very shy and unresponsive to adults and peers. Many teachers described these students as lacking confidence in expressing their ideas. This social problem existed across grade levels when the students were new to school; however, observations showed that the problem was more obvious in the three-year-old class. Some teachers also pointed out that several of these older children played roughly and easily became upset and aggressive, especially when they were new to school.

Teacher C said:

I need to spend a lot of time teaching rules.

Teacher F said:

When my migrant children have a conflict with local children, they tend to be more aggressive in how they argue or fight.

Teacher E shared:

They are not open...talk very little...seem to be afraid.

### **Remaining Challenges of the Preschool Reform Initiatives**

The interview data revealed the second significant overall theme about the preschool reform. There are three subthemes related to this main theme as described below.

## **Transition**

Transition from kindergarten to the local elementary schools is difficult for migratory children and their families. In many cases, the move from kindergarten to the local school has become a gatekeeper for migratory children trying to access primary schools. Examination of written policies and interviews with local authorities confirmed teachers' concerns that most of these migrant children were either unqualified for local elementary schools or they had failed the admission tests. Teachers expressed their disagreements with the policy of "five certificates mandates" that each migrant child must conform to for school entrance. As a matter of fact, the majority of migrant workers could not obtain the five certificates—temporary worker certificate, temporary resident certificate, identification card, one child per family certificate, and a certificate indicating that the parent has been paying social security. Nor did teachers agree on the admission test mandated exclusively for migrant children. In fact, they consider it a discriminatory practice toward migrant children that a modern Chinese society should no longer tolerate.

According to Teacher G:

If a migrant child fails to pass the test, he or she goes to a separate elementary school that is set up only for migrant children....The school looks like an old factory....Also any one who does not have the five certificates goes there as well.

Teacher E reflected:

I thought all the children have to take to test. When I heard it only applies to migrant children, immediately I got upset. This is unfair.

Director A commented:

I do not feel comfortable discussing this issue; you should ask the local educational department.

## **Life and Learning after School Hours**

All teachers and directors explained that almost all migrant children come to school as early as the gate opens and normally stay one to two hours after school ends before being picked up by parents. The first author also consistently observed this during her visits. Teachers expressed their understanding of and sympathy for *nongmingong* parents who have to work long hours to make a living. The directors agreed and they never charged parents any additional fee. Once these children leave school, they tend to spend the rest of day running all over the village and playing with sand, dirt, and other materials that most adults consider dirty and hazardous. Most migrant children cannot afford to attend any extracurricular private lessons,

which are quite popular among local children. Depending on the program, the fee schedules vary from one to several thousand RMB for a summer semester; such a sum can be equivalent to or exceed a migrant worker's monthly income.

Teacher D emphasized:

Local children almost always attend summer extracurricular training schools. A summer training school costs several thousand Yuan...of course, the migrant family couldn't afford it.

Teacher F said:

Some nongmingong parents have no time at all to care for their children. They bring their children an hour before the classes start, and pick them up very late. When I request them to follow the school schedule, they say they couldn't because of work. Their children like to play with sand, stones, and catching crabs...sometimes in hazardous construction areas all by themselves. Local parents get upset when their children play with migrant child like that. And they sometimes ask me to inform migrant workers to instruct their child not to play like that.

Teacher G stated:

Local parents usually want to talk to me when they drop off or pick up their children; *nongmingong* parents are always in a hurry, sometimes they don't even send breakfast with the child. They are always late for picking up.

Director C said:

We never charge *nongmingong* parents for picking up their children late. Usually, children will have to stay with the security guard if the parents were very late because teachers have to go home. Sometimes, we offer the child some food when it is dinnertime. Migratory workers have to work overtime, they work every weekend too, and yet they are underpaid. How could I charge them? They would like it if we were open on weekends; but I could not afford to do that.

## **Attitudes toward Migratory Children and Their Families**

Many teachers commented on local families' attitudes toward migratory children and their families. Local families, particularly grandparents, tend to view migrant workers as untrustworthy and inferior, referring to them as foreigners or outlanders. This attitude is evident when they instruct their children or grandchildren not to play with migratory children who have poor hygiene. They even directly confront teachers, explaining that they do not want their children to be influenced by migratory children's poor moral and study behaviors. Children, especially older children, are likely to be influenced by adults' views and unconsciously act toward migratory children in a way that shows discrimination.

Teacher D, who is not local, said:

One of my local children often points his finger at migrant children and says: 'You are an outlander, you are an outlander'....he said that his grandma says so. I feel very sad and upset when I hear that.

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to provide research evidence for further refining preschool education services for migrant children and their families living in rural villages. The importance of a quality preschool to every child's development and early academic learning has been widely recognized (Mashburn, et al., 2008; Peisner-Feinburg et al., 2001). Therefore, the Chinese government is seeking strategies for increasing the equal education opportunities and treatment of migrant children and for supporting the educational needs and challenges that these children currently face. It is noteworthy that China's current decentralized funding mechanism for preschool education has resulted in extreme disparities in the status of preschool education development. For example, over 95% of local residents' children in Zhejiang received a three-year preschool education in 2009, whereas only 12% of the children had opportunities to attend preschool education in Tibet (Hu & Li, 2012). In other words, the development of preschool education can symbolize, and result from, the economic development of the local village, town, and city. Therefore, findings from this study can inform stakeholders in other regions that share similar economic status as Chaiqiao, Beilun of Zhejiang province. The two main limitations of the study are the limited data sources (views from only teachers, directors, and reform leaders without including views from parents and children) and the use of a small sample size (i.e., three village Kindergartens). However, the triangulation of findings through observation, interview, and document analysis is strong thus provides insightful interpretations and recommendations for future practice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for Increasing Equal Education Opportunity (EEO) for Migrant Children

The findings strongly support that migrant children have EEO in accessing the semi-public village kindergarten in Beilun. This city has made a significant forward-step toward ensuring a basic preschool education for migrant children and, thus, closing the development and learning gap between migrant and local children. However, when migrant children transition from kindergarten to public elementary schools, local educational departments continue to enforce discriminatory practices of *hukou* regardless of the national policy (Nie, Wang, & Zheng, 2008). It seems that local governments strategically avoid the newly enforced national policy of serving migrant children by legitimately enforcing other national policies (e.g., one-child-per-family). Even when the *nongmingong* jump through hoops to qualify their children for admission, another discriminatory policy surfaces e.g., students must take an admission test. This process will now prevent them from enrolling in “well resourced” public schools thus forcing them to go to “poorly resourced” schools designed exclusively for migrants. Once migrant children have successfully obtained all the documentations and have passed the test, most schools demand an additional school-place rental fee. All teachers and directors disapprove of the policies (i.e., five certificates) and practice (i.e., admission testing) toward migrant children. Research findings on educational policy and practice toward migrant children suggest that social discrimination exists, in many alternative forms (Feng & Huang, 2010; Li et al., 2008; He et al., 2009). Therefore, in order to ensure their integrity, national policies on EEO need a systematic implementation procedure and an explicit monitoring process at both federal and local levels.

The ECERS-R results of an average mean of 2.5 (Kindergarten A), 2.7 (Kindergarten B), and 2.9 (Kindergarten C) clearly indicate that semi-public village kindergartens have not shown much progress in terms of curriculum and teaching. However, the majority of rural preschools in China have reported similar low quality, mainly due to the lack of quality teachers and effective professional development (Hu & Li, 2012; Hu & Szente, 2009b). Rural preschool teachers need specific guidance on how to address the educational needs of migrant children. Moreover, current curriculum is based on the learning experiences and needs of urban children; therefore, village kindergarten teachers need training on curriculum adaptations or development of school-based curricula. Specifically, teachers need

support for instructional and play resources, ongoing and on-site professional guidance, and parental involvement (Tang, 2005). Local DOEs need clear guidance on how to invest educational resources beyond structural features of the program in order to improve the process quality of semi-public village kindergartens. Some specific suggestions include providing assistance in learner-centered teaching, purchasing instructional and play materials in support of developmentally appropriate learning centers, and developing a curriculum framework and instructional activities that reflect the local village economy and diverse culture due to integration of *nongmingong*.

### **Recommendations for Meeting Educational Needs and Challenges of Migrant Children**

The findings show that migrant children can benefit from early interventions in all developmental domains, particularly social-emotional and behavioral competencies. Even though migrant children do not show apparent cognitive delays, many teachers reported that compared to local village children migrant children showed unpreparedness in pre-academic skills. Fortunately, our interview findings suggest that migrant children tend to be academically ready by the time they are in a kindergarten class if they had the opportunity to start preschool early. This exciting result implies that it is critical to encourage *nongmingong* to enroll their children in kindergarten as early as possible –especially as previous research has repeatedly indicated migrant children having difficulties in academics (Ou, 2008) and performing significantly below their local counterparts (Guo, 2007). The semi-public village kindergarten and local DOEs need to advocate their programs by building a strong collaboration with *nongmingong* in the village through community events such as free health screening. The semi-public village kindergarten should also reach out to *nongmingong* families by expanding its services, such as parenting workshops, to those who are not yet enrolled in any preschools. At the beginning, provide incentives such as free books to encourage participation. Another critically needed service is workshop for *nongmingong* on how to prepare their children for the admission test required by local elementary schools.

Second, the findings suggested that migrant families would greatly benefit from an extended school and summer programs. *Nongmingong*'s tendencies of early drop offs and late pick-ups suggest a need for local DOEs to fund staff supervision for extended programs. Even though the kindergartens are not charging extra money for extended hours, funding for such programs must also ensure their educational and/or recreational focus. A great way to achieve this goal is to work with the village committee in expanding resources for all children in the village. For instance, the village committee may build a children's center to provide

resources (e.g., books, videos, and games) and activities (e.g., swimming lessons) to all children and their families. The kindergartens can assist to supervise and organize the resource center and coordinate activities. Also, making funding or scholarships available for mentoring migrant children so they can afford enriched educational activities such as field trips and camps. Migrant children typically do not take advantage of modern technology and do not have the luxury to travel, which can broaden their horizons and knowledge. Hopefully, opportunities such as these constitute unique resources that can spark students' interests in learning and motivate them in their academic career.

Finally, findings strongly supported previous literature that migrant children are at risk for psychological and behavioral problems (He et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2010; Zhou, 2010). Specifically, Ou (2008) identified a series of characteristics of migrant children that were indicated by teachers. These included: being shy or extremely introverted, having anxieties about school, and exhibiting hyperactivity and a lack of focus related to poor study habits. Scholars have warned that these early behavioral problems are indicators of later juvenile and adult criminality (He et al., 2009). To highlight the point, police and media have repeatedly reported alarming statistics on stealing, robbery, and in several cases homicide or suicide committed by migrant teenager and adults (He et al., 2009). Though such problems are triggered and caused by environmental reasons as well, these data have clearly warranted an intervention curriculum for at risk migrant children. The development of such an intervention program should focus on addressing all of the issues shared by teachers and directors in the study and targeting migrant children's needs to learn how to regulate emotions and solve social problems instead of using aggression.

### **Recommendations for Addressing Social Discriminations toward Migrant Children**

The findings align with previous studies regarding the discrimination of migrant children and their families in their work place, school, the community, and the society in which they live (Li, Zhou, Zhang, & Yang, 2008; Lu, 2009). Young preschool-aged children probably do not intentionally discriminate; however, their attitudes and views are strongly influenced by their teachers, parents, and other societal members. In order to break the cycle of social discrimination toward *nongmingong*, researchers need to investigate the self-esteem and cultural identity of *nongmingong* in the ever-changing Chinese sociocultural contexts (Feng & Huang, 2010; Tan, Zhou, & Zhang, 2010). At the minimum level, the government must improve the social status of migrant workers by upgrading the social service foundation for worker families, such as free medical services, scholarships, and social activities in honor of *nongmingong*'s contribution to local communities.

Also, local educational departments must monitor the enrollment process and academic performance of migrant children. Any school that rejects migrant applicants should be fined or even suspended. Meanwhile, educational policies must guarantee that migrant children, at any grade level, can access public education with financial assistance instead of financial penalty.

## CONCLUSION

Preschool education is the engineering project that forms the groundwork for the entire education system (Zhang, 2008, p.39). It is the fundamental component of a basic education to which every citizen is equally entitled. To support people's right to education, the Convention Against Discrimination in Education defined *discrimination* as an effort to diminish equality of treatment in education based on race, gender, language, religion, political or other beliefs, geographic location, national or social origin, or economic condition (UNESCO, 1960). Fifty years later, the Chinese people are challenging the government to activate legislative reform to resolve the issue of inequity and discrimination that have long existed and been ongoing. The reform faces thorny issues of meeting the educational needs of migrant children in complex Chinese social contexts. For example, the Zhejiang province's reform initiative of developing semi-public village kindergartens has strengthened the rural preschool education system, yet it does not go far enough in providing an adequate education for migrant children. Even though migrant children are guaranteed equal access to semi-public village kindergartens, local educational departments should include helping these children transition to public elementary school as part of the reform efforts to truly carry out the reform goal. Further, it must be ensured that each Chinese child can obtain basic and quality education. Such quality education warrants that the government, through research and innovative practices, make continuous efforts to refine educational policies and supports for migrant children and their families, including but not limited to (1) recruiting and retaining high quality preschool teachers; (2) developing rural curricula; (3) developing interventions responsive to the social and emotional needs and challenges of migrant children; and (4) accelerating legislation in honor of *nongminong*'s contribution to the transforming Chinese society. These initiatives have the potential to help eradicate social discrimination toward migrant children. As Confucius said, "A thousand mile journey starts with the first step." Indisputably, China has recently made significant improvement in facing inequity issues and has outlined a plan to gradually resolve these issues. The current preschool reform is exciting and heartwarming to every Chinese citizen and anyone in the world who deeply cares about the wellbeing of disadvantaged children. It is hoped that the present study can assist with meeting the educational needs and goals of all children –more specifically migrant children all around the world.

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