

# From Access to Quality? Examining the Interim Quasi-State Schools for Rural Migrants in Urban China

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the educational quality of the newly emerged quasi-state schools for rural migrant children in urban China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 government officers, school leaders, teachers and migrant parents in Shanghai. Adopting a theoretical perspective of policy as a temporary settlement of interests, the article deconstructs the power relations that constructed the disadvantaged positionality of these schools in the local school system. What can be identified from the empirical data is the emergence of an “interim quasi-state school system” with three interrelated features: it belongs to the state sector, offers quasi-state education and has an interim nature. Under the local government’s low-cost and inferior schooling approach, the whole system is treated as an emergency mechanism for solving the floating children’s schooling problem, rather than as regular schools offering high quality education. While realising the children’s right to education, this system does not guarantee them a “good” education.

**Keywords:** migrant; China; low-cost school; educational quality; social justice

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## The Changing Landscape of Migrant Children's Schooling Policy in Urban China

In China, millions of rural labourers have left their hometowns to work in urban areas over the past three decades. In 2019, there were 135 million rural-to-urban migrant labourers nationally (National Bureau of Statistics 2020) with 14.27 million migrant children of compulsory education age studying in schools (Ministry of Education 2020). These children have difficulty accessing free compulsory education in urban state schools because they do not hold local household registration (*hukou*) in urban areas and are not able to afford private schools, which have relatively higher costs. In 2001, *The State Council's Decision on the Reform and Development of Fundamental Education* stated that “the receiving municipalities and state schools should be the mainstream channels for recruiting migrant children into compulsory education” (State Council 2001). Called the “Two Mainstream Channels” (TMC) policy for short, this policy started to explicitly assert the responsibility of the receiving municipalities and state schools to recruit migrant children. Following the TMC policy, the local governments nationwide have tried hard to make sure the majority of migrant children could enrol in local state schools (Liang, Liu, and Ye 2019; Mok, Wong, and Guo 2011). Over the past decade, the state school sector has recruited around 77%–80% of migrant children nationwide.<sup>1</sup>

What about the remaining one fifth of migrant children enrolled in the private sector? During the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a boom of unregistered informal private (“UIP” for short) schools in Chinese metropolitan areas. This type of school emerged when some migrant children were rejected by local state schools. In Beijing, the number of UIP schools increased to 152 in 2000 and to 263 in 2005.<sup>2</sup> Before 2003, the informal nature of UIP schools was legitimated by Ministry of Education policies. The 1996 policy, *The Regulation on the Compulsory Education of Floating Children in Cities and Towns (Trial)* (Ministry of Education 1996), legitimated the establishment of informal educational settings by stating that “[i]f the children are not able to access state schools, they can study in all forms of classes and study groups to access informal education”. This policy also set up loose requirements for these educational settings in terms of their organisational forms and teaching content: “In the primary level, the educational setting could offer only Chinese and Maths courses with the content aimed to eliminate illiteracy. In the junior secondary level, the setting could reduce its subjects.”

Similarly, the 1998 policy, *The Provisional Regulation on Floating Children's School Attendance*, legitimated the informal nature of these schools by stating that “the established criteria of the informal school could be lower than that of [a] regular school”

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished Ministry of Education statistical data obtained from an interview the authors of this article conducted with Ministry of Education Officer A on 12 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished Beijing Municipal Department of Education statistical data obtained from an interview the authors of this article conducted with a member of Beijing Municipal Department of Education B on 14 May 2017.

(Ministry of Education 1998). Furthermore, the 1996 and 1998 policies did not establish concrete responsibilities of the city and district government for supervising and supporting them.

As a result of loose government supervision, the majority of the UIP schools did not follow the standard state curriculum and lacked certified teachers and basic teaching facilities, especially for non-examination subjects such as art, sports and music (Deng and Zhao 2014; Qian and Walker 2015; Yu 2016). Moreover, some schools have big class sizes, for example more than 50 students per class. As a result, the students studying in these schools have lower scores in key subjects such as Chinese and Mathematics, and they have poorer sociocultural adaptation to urban life (Chen 2020; Mu and Hu 2016) compared with other migrant students who enrolled in the state schools.

In 2003, the central government promulgated *The Decisions on Improving the Compulsory Education of Migrant Peasant Workers' Children in the Cities* (State Council 2003) policy to supervise and support the unregistered informal private (UIP) schools. Within a few years, most of the former UIP schools had been shut down or turned into licensed schools. Among the major migrant recipient cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, Shanghai is a successful example for turning a large amount of UIP schools into licensed schools (Qian and Walker 2015; Wang 2016). In 2008, Shanghai Municipal Department of Education proposed a new initiative titled the “Three-Year Action Plan (2008–2010) for Compulsory Education of Migrant Children”. As part of the three-year plan, the city and district level government invested around ¥1 billion to purchase or gain control of UIP schools and turn them into quasi-state schools that provide free compulsory education specifically for migrant children. By 2012, 157 quasi-state schools had emerged, providing education to 136,000 migrant children, which accounts for 25.28% of the total number of migrant children (Shanghai Municipal Department of Education 2013).

Regarding the progresses achieved by the Shanghai government, Wang optimistically observes that “the Shanghai model surpassed the ‘Two Main Principles’ [TMC] of central policies by offering free compulsory education to qualified migrant children through public provision entirely” (Wang 2016, 33). Here “public provision” includes not only state schools but also the newly emerged government-funded/controlled quasi-state schools. Yet, another question still exists: How does the quality of education offered by the latter compare with regular state schools? There are still relatively few accounts on the changes that occurred after the Shanghai government took over the former UIP schools. The existing literature reports that these schools’ facilities, the teachers’ level of qualification and the quality of education have improved (Qian and Walker 2015); however, there are still problems with the quantity of teachers, their qualifications, salaries, workload, and chances for professional development (Lan 2014; Lu 2013). Yet the existing literature has not generated a well-rounded empirical analysis of the quasi-state schools’ means of operation and their educational quality compared

to regular state schools. Our study adds to the extant literature through its focus on the following question: Does enrolling in a quasi-state school mean that the migrant children can now enjoy equal educational resources compared with the students in regular local state schools?

Before we elaborate on the formation of the three quasi-state forms of schooling and their unique characteristics, as well as the underlying low-cost and inferior schooling approach of this schooling system, we will first introduce the methodology and theoretical resources that guide the formation of findings in this article.

## Materials and Methods

This article presents findings from a research project that explores the schooling issue of rural-to-urban migrant children in metropolitan areas in China. The data for this article was generated from fieldwork in four districts in Shanghai. Following qualitative purposive sampling and snowball sampling strategies, we started by contacting school leaders and officers through our social networks. Some respondents helped connect us to other school leaders and local government officers. In the sampling design, we did not select the type of school, as the project aims at examining the comprehensive schooling conditions of migrant children. It turned out that there are at least five types of schools in our sample, including primary state schools, junior secondary state schools, senior secondary state schools, government-purchased private schools, and government-controlled private schools. The data for this article was generated from the latter three types. Among these, the government-purchased private school falls under the direct control of the local government, with government funding being its sole financial resource. As for the government-controlled private school, its owner during the UIP stage remains the owner after the school is transformed, but the school's funding and student recruitment affairs are under the control of local government. Unlike the former two forms of schooling that share a common origin in the UIP school system, there is also a group of state schools that recruit migrant children to expand their share in the market to enlarge their income.

As shown in Table 2, semi-structured interviews were used to generate data from 19 participants in the sample, including one Ministry of Education officer, four district municipal department of education officers, six school leaders, two teachers, and six migrant parents. The interview questions related to the themes of this article include the following: What changes were made when the former UIP schools were transformed into government-funded schools? What attitude and policy does the local government assume towards these schools? What kind of education are migrant children receiving in the new forms of schooling? Are there any problems and what are the sources of these problems?

**Table 2:** Participants in Shanghai

District	Type of school	School name	School leader	Teacher	Migrant parent	Officer
Baoshan	Government-purchased private school	School P	1			1
	State school (senior secondary)	School L	1		3	
Pudong	Government-controlled private school	School Q	1			1
	Government-controlled private school	School R	2			
Minhang	Government-purchased private school	School T	1	2	3	2

Based on the empirical data, we have done first and second cycle coding and generated 33 codes, each affiliated with at least one extract of data. The formation of the codes was rooted in the respondents' perceptions and interpretations and was guided (not constrained) by our research questions. The codes related to the themes of this article were categorised into nine categories, which are grouped in three sub-themes, namely, "teaching and school operation", "identity dilemma" and "interim nature". The first theme relates to the schools' operation and teaching resources and includes three categories: the schools' campuses, teachers, and facilities. The second theme relates to the identity dilemma that all three types of quasi-state schools face and discusses the following three categories: the history of the UIP system, its inferior reputation, and its connections to the state sector. The third theme relates to the interim nature of the system as whole, and explores three aspects: the aim of the policies that established these types of schools, the status of these schools' teachers, and the schooling system as a financial mechanism. The above produced a code list that played a constructive and supportive role in further data analysis and writing the article. It presents who said what on which theme, providing clues for our re-visit to the original interview transcriptions and voice recordings.

### Conceptualising Policy as a Temporary Settlement between Groups

Conceptualising public policy as a product of group equilibrium, Truman (1951), Latham (1952) and Dye (2008) have redefined what is called "policy" and offered valuable implications for our research. Truman (1951) explored how the interactions among interest groups shaped the governmental process in the United States (US), which includes public opinion, political parties, elections, the legislative process, the executive branch, the administrative process and the judiciary, bringing an "interest

group” approach into political research. The primary implication is that “even a temporarily viable legislative decision usually must involve the adjustment and compromise of interest. Even where virtual unanimity prevails in the legislature, the process of reconciling conflicting interest must have taken place” (Truman 1951, 392). Another main implication is that the underlying impetus for legislative changes lies in changes in the balance of influences among interest groups. As Truman puts it:

Depending on the circumstances and the relative importance of these factors in a given situation some groups will enjoy comparatively effective access, and others will find difficulty in securing even perfunctory treatment. As conditions change, as some of these influences become more and others less potent, the fortunes of group claims upon the legislature will rise or decline. (Truman 1951, 350)

This statement clearly reveals the connections between changes in the balance of influences among interest groups and changes in the legislative process.

Following Truman’s ideas, Latham reconceptualised the nature of public policy as the “equilibrium reached in the group struggle”. As he put it, “what may be called public policy is actually the equilibrium reached in the group struggle at any given moment, and it represents a balance which the contending factions of groups constantly strive to weight in their favour” (1952, 390). Latham’s contribution is that he introduced Truman’s ideas into policy studies and reconceptualised the nature of public policy accordingly. Dye extended Latham’s idea by revealing the underlying impetus for changes in policy: “changes in the relative influence of any interest groups can be expected to result in changes in public policy; policy will move in the direction desired by the groups gaining influence and away from the desires of groups losing influence” (2008, 23). In brief, policy changes when interest groups lose or gain influence.

Putting the theoretical resources of policy as a product of group equilibrium into the Chinese context, the existing literature has examined the dynamics underlying local diversities in the implementation of migrant children’s schooling policy. Taking a financial perspective, Mok, Wong and Guo (2011) argue that the fiscal decentralisation of the Chinese public administration system leads to a gap between the promises of the central government’s policy and local governments’ actual execution. Focusing on the local educational contexts, Wang (2016) reveals that diverse local conditions with respect to the attitudes of government, the capacity of the educational system, and the number of floating children mutually contribute to variation in local policy implementation. Similarly, Liu, Liu and Yu (2017) found that apart from the local contexts and participants (such as governments and schools), the policy design (including goals, targets and tools) and its interactions with the policymaking contexts and policymakers and enactors mutually shape the implementation of the central government’s policy.

The extant policy study resources offer a unique perspective to examine the formation and underlying power relations of the new forms of quasi-state schooling for migrant

children in Shanghai. Yet these theoretical resources cannot be applied directly to our research context. A direct reason is that the existing literature mainly focuses on the policymaking phase, but our research adopts a policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012) perspective to reconceptualise the linear development from policymaking to policy implementation to policy evaluation, and to examine the whole policy trajectory. More importantly, the theoretical resources of policy as a product of group equilibrium were put forward in the US context, in which an important organisational form of social groups is the formal interest group. Yet in the Chinese political context, social groups do not often present themselves as formal interest groups, although the individuals in the same group do share the same interests. As shown by our empirical data, while being widely considered a social group, rural-to-urban migrants have not established formal interest groups through which to influence public policy. Migrants are at a disadvantaged position in the dynamics and tensions in the political practice. While (some of) their voices can still be heard by the public through mass media and be included in the policy agenda by the government, migrants, like other disadvantaged social groups, can hardly engage in policymaking processes, which are dominated by the government (Yu 2018).

To this end, the term “equilibrium” that the extant studies use cannot simply be “applied” in the context of our study, as “equilibrium” contains notions of harmony and balance that are not in keeping with what is indicated in our data. In this study, we use the idea of temporary policy settlement instead, which suggests a temporary consensus between groups (Gale 2001). Accordingly, this study considers the formation of the interim quasi-state school system for migrant children as a temporary settlement in policy enactment reached through the interaction of the individual and collective actors, such as the district municipal department of education, UIP schools, state schools, and migrant families, instead of formal interest groups. This helps to reveal the unequal power relations invested and realised in the formation and function of the quasi-state school system, as we will detail in the following sections.

### The Birth of Three Quasi-State Forms of Schooling

As stated earlier, the 2003 national policy proposed to supervise and support the unregistered informal private (UIP) schools gave local government the power to regulate UIP schools, and set an obligation for it to financially support these schools so that they can be utilised to solve the migrant children’s schooling problem. This policy allowed for considerable discretion in the local government, establishing its dominant position in the field: it has discretion in setting the school registration criteria (to make them either loose or restrictive); it is also responsible for providing UIP schools with financial support, yet there is no requirement that establishes the minimum amount of this support. The spirit of the 2003 national policy matches the interest of the UIP school owners, that is, to register and to stay open. After the schools have registered, their operational expenses, including student tuition fees, teachers’ salaries, and facilities are covered by the local government.

As a result of the local government's interference, many UIP schools have been turned into quasi-state schools. Our empirical data identifies three unique types of quasi-state schools in Shanghai: government-purchased private schools, government-controlled private schools, and senior secondary state schools recruiting migrant children in junior secondary stage. These schools differ in their legal status, leadership structure, and funding sources, as we will detail in the following section.

### **Government-Purchased Private Schools**

In some situations, the district municipal department of education (MDE) managed to purchase UIP schools from their owners. In such instances, it continues to invest in order to help the school to register as a private school (with the local government as the de facto owner). The former school owners will have a choice to leave or stay on and work as the headteacher instead of the owner. If the owners choose to leave, the district MDE will nominate leaders from local state schools to become the headteacher and deputy headteacher. After the transformation, the schools are under direct control of the local government, and the government funding becomes the sole financial resource of the school, which is calculated based on the number of students it has recruited. The school cannot charge students tuition fees and it should follow the state-school student recruitment criteria. In terms of the curriculum, the school teaches the same range of compulsory subjects as state schools.

Before the government's takeover, many UIP schools used to be the owner's "enterprise", bringing them considerable profits. A senior management team member in School P describes the owner's reluctance when facing the government's purchase of the school:

Before being purchased by the government, he [the owner] could earn hundreds of thousands per year through many ways, such as operating a canteen inside the school. However, after the transformation, as a headteacher employed by the government, he could only earn around a hundred thousand per year.

Despite their reluctance, the owners have had to come to a compromise with the MDE since they do not have the financial ability to act alone and ensure their schools meet the registration criteria. The district MDE is aware of the financial difficulties of the owners, hence they can coercively purchase schools. As Officer J (Baoshan District MDE) reports:

We know that they [the owners] have no choice but to compromise, since they do not have the financial ability to get the schools to meet the registration criteria. As you might know, improving the campus houses needs a huge amount of money, which they cannot offer, but we government can and are glad to offer.

The government's purchase at least compensates the owners for their early stage investments in the school while at the same time offering them a job as the headteacher, which in truth is not a bad outcome for a failing investment.



## **Government-Controlled Private Schools**

In some cases, the district municipal department of education (MDE) is unable or unwilling to purchase the UIP schools for a variety of reasons. For example, some MDEs are unable to purchase all the buildings of the UIP schools because of budget limitations, or may feel that certain UIP schools will automatically vanish since there is a tendency for them to lose their students. In other cases, the owner has developed personal relationships with local notabilities and has therefore managed to maintain independence and not be purchased by the government. In such cases, the MDE does not replace the private owner, but still offers financial investment to help the school to register. After being registered, the school's sole financial resource is government funding, which is calculated based on the number of students it has recruited, as in the government-purchased private school. It cannot charge students tuition fees and has to follow the state-school recruitment criteria and teach the same compulsory subjects as state schools.

As in the government-purchasing situation, in the government-controlled situation the owners of UIP schools have no choice but to reach a compromise with the government due to their limited financial capacity. Yet, they remain the owners of the registered school, hence being able to nominate the headteacher and retain partial control of the school. Since the government is unable or unwilling to purchase the school, it has to compromise with the owners in order to make them cooperative and, eventually, realise its goal—placing these schools under a degree of government control. As a result, district MDEs respect the owners' discretion and do not intervene in the schools' internal affairs, except in funding and student recruitment affairs. As Officer L (Minhang District MDE) comments, “the taking over is a way of cooperation between the government and the private owner”.

## **Senior Secondary State Schools that Recruit Migrant Children in Junior Secondary Stage**

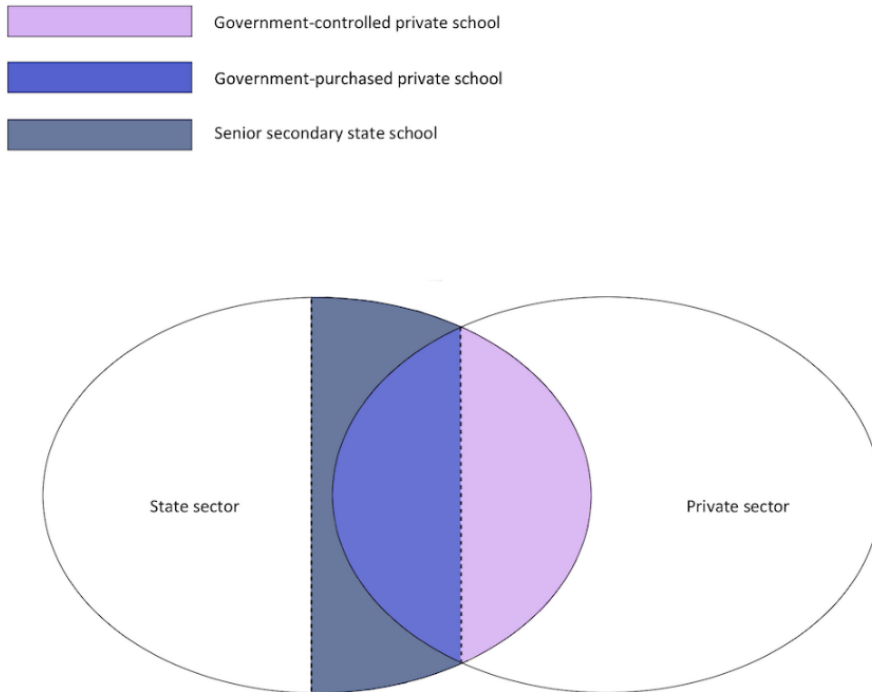
Unlike the two forms of schooling that share a common origin in the UIP school, the third type of school is indeed a state school. What makes them different to regular state schools is that as senior secondary schools serving young adults, these schools are not responsible for students in junior secondary level. These schools recruit migrant children to expand their market share. Taking School L as an example, the reason why it started to recruit migrant children from 2003 onwards was to create extra income, as its headteacher reports:

During that period [2003], there were 27 teachers in our school. However, owing to the lack of adult students, nearly half of the teachers have no work to do, wasting human resources. As a result, the teachers' income was relatively low. Under this situation, our former headteacher came up with the innovative idea of recruiting migrant children to produce extra income.

When School L started to recruit migrant children, it attracted a large number of students, since state schools have better reputations generally than UIP schools. Its popularity among migrant children in return reminded the district MDE of its value in solving the migrant children's schooling problem. The MDE then recognised and supported the school's irregular student recruitment strategy by providing funding to cover the educational expenses for migrant children in this school. In return, the school must follow the regular state-school student recruitment criteria and curriculum. With the MDE's involvement, recruiting migrant children has been transformed from a "market action" into a "state action", as summarised by the headteacher of School L, who considers this form of schooling a win-win model for migrants, government and the school.

### The Characteristics of the "Interim Quasi-State School System"

"Our school has the legal status of a private school, yet is under the control of government, while it cannot enjoy the same benefits as state schools." This comment by the owner of School R summarises the conflicted identity of the interim quasi-state school system, as will be elaborated in detail in this section. Figure 1 outlines the structure of the interim quasi-state school system, as well as its relationship with the state school system. This system is characterised by an integration of three aspects: belonging to the state sector, offering quasi-state education and having an interim nature. While the three aspects can be identified in all three types of schools, each of the aspects is more or less noticeable in the different types of schools.



**Figure 1:** Interim quasi-state school system for migrant children

### **Belonging to the State Sector**

After having purchased or gained control the UIP schools, the district municipal departments of education (MDEs) take some measures to import the operational norms of the state sector into these schools. As the headteacher of School T observes, “Nowadays, the whole school internal management and teacher training mechanisms are following that of the state schools.” A direct way of doing this is to take over the school leadership by nominating leaders from local state schools to become the headteacher and deputy headteacher. If the former private owner chooses to stay and work as the headteacher, the MDE would then send an inspector to supervise the owner. “After my school got registered, I lost the control of my own school,” reports the owner of School R with helplessness and frustration. Furthermore, the schools are now required to teach the same range of compulsory subjects as state schools, using the Shanghai version of textbooks. When recruiting teachers, the schools have to follow the criteria of the local state schools, which require teachers to have the Qualified Teacher Status. In addition, the MDE provides specific funding to improve the schools’ facilities to narrow the gap between these schools and state schools. For example, the headteacher of School Q reports that:

The government has provided our school with funding to build a computer room, music room, science laboratory, general technology room, plastic playground, basketball court, and to purchase all the PE [physical education] facilities including volleyballs and basketballs. In Pudong district, a school can receive ¥800,000 on average, all received at once.

Moreover, unlike some private owners who want to make a profit by reducing costs, which can lead to a shortage of teaching and learning resources, the MDE does not expect to make a profit from the school. Once all the transformation works have been done, the MDE treats these schools as part of the local state-school system when regulating the migrant children's school recruitment. As Officer K (Pudong district MDE) reports:

The enrolment criteria of these schools follow that of the state school. When allocating migrant children, we treat these two types of schools as the same. That means which school the child will attend depends on which school has openings, not on the nature of the school.

### Offering Quasi-State Education

The state sector's ownership of quasi-state schools is weak compared to regular state schools. As for the government-purchased/controlled private schools, their legal status remains private. In other words, the MDE does not treat them as "real" state schools. This can be identified in many aspects from the resources it allocates to the schools to its attitude towards the schools. Compared to their state-school counterparts, the funding the schools can receive, which is calculated based on student numbers,<sup>3</sup> is inadequate. This amount of money can merely support the basic teaching activities without providing extra resources for the students to do a range of extra-curricular activities and for the teachers to undertake professional development training, as the state schools do. Moreover, unlike their counterparts in state schools and regular private schools, the teachers in quasi-state schools have not been included in the civil servant (*Bianzhi*) system<sup>4</sup> and the official teacher professional development project; neither can they be awarded a professional title (*Zhicheng*).<sup>5</sup> As a result, all the interviewed teachers and headteachers do not consider their schools as a real state school, nor do they consider themselves as real state schoolteachers.

As for senior secondary state schools for adult students, their official aim is not educating junior secondary stage students. The government is unable to provide such

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<sup>3</sup> The amount is ¥6,000 per student for one academic year.

<sup>4</sup> In China, a state schoolteacher would normally receive civil servant status (*Bianzhi*), which is offered to employees in government departments, state-sector enterprises and social service institutions (such as schools and hospitals). This particular status is linked to particular welfare benefits, including the awarding of the local household registration (*Hukou*).

<sup>5</sup> An example of a professional title is "(Assistant/Associate) Professor" in higher education. Without a professional title, it can be hard for teachers to get their former professional experiences recognised by their new employer.

schools with quotas to hire teachers with civil servant status to educate the extra number of migrant students. The schools have to hire teachers without civil servant status, who in general have less professional capability than the teachers with civil servant status. As a result, the education that migrant children receive can hardly be understood as being as good as it is in regular state schools.

### **The Interim Nature of “Quasi-State” Schools**

The term “interim” was used by two headteachers, one school owner, and one government officer in their interviews. In the view of district MDEs, the increasing educational need for places for migrant children is an acute social issue at present, but there is a possibility that it may reduce in intensity in the future because of the floating nature of migrant populations and the instability of government policy on migration. As Officer K (Pudong District MDE) notes:

We used to call these children “floating children” [Liudong Ertong], which means this group is always floating. There is no guarantee that they will stay in a place for a stable period. ... Their need for schooling is also affected by the policy. For example, in the last two years with the establishment of the strict state-school enrolment criteria, fewer migrant children would enrol in the state school.

With this understanding of migrant children’s educational needs, the government treats the quasi-state schools as an “emergency mechanism” for solving the urgent problem of floating children, rather than as regular schools that serve the long-term education needs of a stable social group. The government’s attitude is reflected in the following observation by the owner of School R:

What is strange is that when the district MDE gathers the private owners together for a meeting, it seldom talks about education. What it always talks about is that the owners cannot do this and cannot do that, for the sake of campus safety. ... What I can feel is that the MDE does not have motivation to support us to be excellent in teaching. It merely wants us not to cause any trouble.

The same respondent concludes that “‘interim’ is how the government treats us. It hopes to gradually shut our schools down—although it never directly says this, we can feel it.”

The interim nature is embodied in a series of actions (or non-actions) that the district MDE takes towards the schools. The main aspect is that it does not prepare a long-term development plan for these schools. When asked about the government’s future plan for these schools, Officer L (Minhang District MDE) expresses his uncertainty:

For this type of schools, from a long-term perspective, it is just an “interim mechanism.” Yet this interim mechanism might not terminate soon. This kind of school might gradually vanish when there is not much of a floating population in this region.

It seems that the MDE does not have a clear plan; instead, it is always waiting for possible changes to the current situation. In other words, “no plan” is the plan. A supporting institutional arrangement for this “no plan” is the rule of yearly registration: schools have to re-register every year, which gives the government annual discretion to terminate these schools.

Facing the uncertainty of the school’s future, the headteacher of School T expresses his worries:

What is not sure and what I always want to find out is, for how many more years can we exist? This is a crucial question, because the answer to it will determine whether the government should increase the financial investment to build campus houses and to improve its facilities. But there is just no answer to this question.

Since 2014, because of the restrictive schooling policy for migrant children in metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the school enrolment criteria have become hard for many migrant families to attain (Yu 2020). As a result, it is increasingly difficult for the quasi-state schools to recruit enough students. These schools are facing the possibility of closing down in the near future. “My school is at the edge of extinction”, reports the headteacher of School Q, adding

in September 2013, we recruited 37 students. In September 2014, the number enrolled dropped to 20. And in this year, I am not sure whether we are able to recruit this number of students, owing to the strict school enrolment criteria established by the government.

Facing the same difficulty, the headteacher of School R expects that his school can only survive for another two or three years.

Unlike the other two forms of schooling, the interim nature of senior secondary state schools can be described as a “buffer mechanism” for the district MDE to regulate the migrant children’s school enrolment. When the regular state schools cannot recruit all the migrant children, these schools can help to recruit the extra students; when there is less demand for migrant children’s schooling in certain periods, these schools can then return to adult education. In his opening sentence of our interview, the headteacher of School L reports that “recruiting migrant children is an interim work for our school”. This headteacher reports that:

Our school is an “interim mechanism” for migrant children’s schooling. If [in the future] the state schools have enough capacity to absorb all the migrant children, then our mission is accomplished, and we can return to the adult education sector. Yet before the arrival of this day, we should still work hard to recruit migrant children, to help the district MDE overcome the problem of migrant children’s schooling.

## The Low-Cost and Inferior Schooling Approach and the Principle of Social Justice

### Towards a Low-Cost and Inferior Schooling Approach

“After the transformation, the quality of teaching in these schools has been improved. ... However, if compared to regular state schools, I am afraid there is still a gap” (Officer K, Pudong District MDE). The weak foundation of many quasi-state schools in their UIP period is one reason for the current disadvantages of these schools. Yet, another key reason is the willingness of the local government to make available a low-cost and inferior form of schooling.

First, because it treats these schools as an “interim mechanism” for solving the problems of access to schooling, the MDE does not provide them with sufficient and stable financial support. As Officer K (Pudong District MDE) observes, “since the metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai started to control their population size, the city government does not offer as much financial support [for quasi-state schools] as usual”. Due to the financial deficit, many schools lack teaching resources and physical infrastructure. A good example is School T, which does not have any music rooms, and as the headteacher reveals, “that means the school’s orchestra has to do their rehearsal outside in the playground. When it is raining, then they must cancel.” The financial deficit also limits the scope of the optional school-based courses, such as pottery, which is not on the national compulsory course list, yet is a common practice in the regular state schools in Shanghai.

Second, facing the situation of financial deficit, some schools have had to enlarge class sizes in order to obtain more funding, since the funding is calculated based on student numbers. Yet this practice has caused a new problem—oversized classes. In School T, the student number is 60 per class, while in regular state schools the number should be lower than 45 per class. Such overcrowding incurs complaints from migrant parents. Uang, a migrant mother, notes “there are too many students in one class, and the teachers do not have enough energy to take care of every child”. While Uang’s observation cannot be generalised to every teacher in each school, it resonates with the observations of most respondent parents and teachers.

Third, the quality of the teachers and of their teaching is one of the biggest problems in many quasi-state schools. As reported by all respondent school leaders, because of the low salary, the absence of civil servant status (*Bianzhi*) and professional title (*Zhicheng*), and insufficient professional development resources, it is hard for the school to attract capable job seekers who have strong professional capabilities. As the headteacher of School L reports:

The teachers without civil servant status do not have strong teacher professional capabilities and therefore have a negative influence on the quality of education. ... There is a gap between these two groups of teachers [with/without civil servant status] in terms

of their educational principles and their ability to realise the school's norms on teaching and management.

In addition, with no guarantee of their future, many teachers do not consider their jobs formal and sustainable, resulting in low motivation towards their responsibilities, as the headteacher of School T complains:

The senior leadership team is the biggest problem for me. They still consider this job as a "job with no future", believing that someday the school will be shut down, so there is no need for them to be highly motivated and have self-discipline towards this job. As a result, I have had to take care of all the daily management work, including revising the draft of the school daily news! The teachers are the same. I know that when I am not at school, some teachers are often late for classes, which is unbelievable in a state school.

Many teachers' low professional capability and motivation make it difficult for headteachers to formalise teaching routines as would be possible in state schools.

Finally, a low salary results in the instability of teachers, which has a negative influence on teaching quality and children's social and emotional development. The headteacher of School Q reports the following:

When a teacher starts working, it takes some time for him/her to be familiar with the children. Yet when s/he and the students get familiar with each other after a term, s/he might suddenly quit this job in the middle of the term. When this emergency happens, I have to hire some part-time teachers from extra-curricular educational companies.

The respondent added that this situation has a very negative influence on teaching and learning, as well as children's social and emotional development.

At both central and local levels, the government tends to treat migrant children's schooling as a "political task" with a solution necessary for social stability (with the indicator of "every child having a place to study"), rather than an "educational cause" for the proper development of human beings (with the indicator of "every child having access to a high-quality education"). Ministry of Education Officer A's statement is representative of this attitude:

The central government has attached importance to solving the problems of migrant children's schooling because this issue has a direct influence on our citizens' well-being, on social stability, on social harmony, on urban development, and finally, on the future of our socialism.

Here, his emphasis is on the benefits of enabling migrant children to access schooling in order to improve social stability and social harmony as a political task, rather than the migrant child's individual educational development. Accordingly, in the view of the local government, the quality of education for migrant children is not an urgent and serious issue when compared with the issue of school access, which is an ongoing



political task. This understanding is confirmed by the *National New Urbanisation Planning (2014–2020)*, which states: “For those migrant children who are not able to enrol in state schools, the local government should offer them free admissions to low-cost private schools through providing funding for these schools” (State Council 2014).

Shaped by the central government’s attitude and policy, what has been formed is a low-cost and inferior schooling approach. Under this schooling approach, quasi-state schools are used as an “emergency mechanism” for solving the problem of access to schooling, rather than as regular schools that serve the long-term education needs of a stable social group. Putting this principle into practice, local governments have established a large number of schools with basic study resources at a relatively low cost, instead of creating a number of schools offering good education that would require a massive investment. The outcome of this schooling approach is the realisation of migrant children’s access to schooling, but at the expense of a potential reduction in the standard of education they receive.

Interestingly, in the government-purchased/controlled private school’s licence, the section “Aims of the School” states “providing primary education mainly for children from rural-to-urban migrant labourer families”,<sup>6</sup> which limits the school’s recruitment scope to migrant children from “labourer” backgrounds. It is unusual in China that the government sets limits on a school’s recruitment scope in terms of students’ socio-economic backgrounds. The headteacher of School R comments that the formulation of the language of the school’s licence is ridiculous, as it reflects the MDE’s discrimination towards these schools and their pupils, denying them quality education. In addition, the MDE requires that these schools establish a loose teacher-class ratio, “equipping at least 2 teachers for 1 class”. Yet in the state schools, the teacher-class ratio requires “at least 2.8 teachers for 1 class”. This clearly demonstrates the MDE’s tolerance of an inferior teaching standard in the quasi-state schools. Related to this is the fact that the MDE has not included this type of school in the league table, which may reflect the MDE’s unwillingness to supervise and improve the academic performance of these schools.

### **How Far Is It from Equality of Outcome?**

In a global migration context, varied forms of educational provisions for migrant children coexist in practice. While educational systems in the recipient countries and areas are becoming increasingly inclusive, migrants, especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, are still facing difficulties accessing quality education due to cultural differences, local protectionism, and restrictive schooling policies (Lee 2014; Nyland et al. 2016; Olneck 2011). In terms of which type of educational provision achieves the best quality education, there is not a unified and generalisable standard to make such a judgement. Yet a key dimension of educational quality in the global context of migration is equivalence, which highlights that migrant

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<sup>6</sup> The information presented here was obtained from one of our respondents (the headteacher of School R). The school’s licence is issued by the MDE.

and local children should have equivalent educational resources and opportunities for development towards the social justice objective of equality of outcome.

From the perspective of social justice, distributive justice refers to “the principles by which goods are distributed in society” (Gewirtz 1998, 470). The conventional conception of distributive justice is classically defined by Rawls as follows: “[T]he subject matter of justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions ... distribute fundamental rights and duties” (1972, 7). The policy regulating the development of UIP and quasi-state schools in China is informed by the principle of distributive justice, and more specifically, an equality of opportunity objective that emphasises access to education. Treating quasi-state school education as a certain type of social good, policymakers at central level emphasise providing education for as many migrant children as possible, yet may overlook questions about the quality of that education by tolerating potentially unequal educational experiences in and through these schools. From the perspective of the objective of equality of outcome, providing migrant children with equal opportunity to access education is just the beginning. This means the majority of migrant children should enrol in regular state or private schools to access equal educational resources and opportunities as their local counterparts. The equality of outcome objective also highlights transforming the low-cost forms of schooling into regular channels of schooling, in the state or private sector, to offer migrant children equivalent educational opportunities to those offered by regular schools.

## Conclusion

Developing the theory of policy as a temporary settlement of interests (Dye 2008) in the Chinese context, this article complements the existing literature on policy enactment. It deconstructs the power relations underlying the formation of three new forms of quasi-state schooling for migrant children in urban China. The findings reveal that the formation of the quasi-state schools is not a result of unilateral top-down government policymaking. Instead, it is a result of the temporary settlement of struggles among unregistered informal private (UIP) schools, state schools, district municipal departments of education (MDEs), and migrants, resulting in the marginalised positionality of the quasi-state schools in the local school system. In this process, the district MDE always holds the dominant position, since it monopolises the two main resources for the UIP and state schools: it determines whether the UIP schools can exist and whether the senior secondary adult schools can continue recruiting migrant children; it also offers funding for these schools. Yet holding the dominant position does not mean the government does not need to make compromises. The main compromise that it has made is the huge amount of financial investment. At the same time, the schools are not always in a passive position. In the formation of the third form of schooling (the adult schools), the schools were the initiator.

This article conceptualises an “interim quasi-state school system” with three characteristics, namely, belonging to the state sector to a degree, offering quasi-state

educational provision, and being interim in nature. First, all three forms of schooling are not typical of state school education, yet all to some degree belong to the state sector. With strategies such as nominating the headteacher, providing government funding as the sole financial resource and importing operational norms of state schools, the MDE has managed to include these once private-sector schools into the state sector. Second, the education that these schools offer can be described as “quasi-state education”. That is to say, their degree of belonging to the state sector is limited in terms of financial capability, teaching resources, and teacher quality, which, taken together, are reflected in their symbolic legal status of not being regular state schools. Finally, considering the floating nature of the migrant population and the instability of government policy, the government treats the quasi-state school system as an interim mechanism for solving the schooling problem of floating children, rather than as a regular system designed for long-term education.

The quality of education this interim quasi-state school system offers can hardly be considered equal to that of traditional local state schools. To be more specific, the funding these schools receive, which is calculated based on student numbers, is inadequate, resulting in a lack of teaching resources and physical infrastructure. In order to obtain more funding, the schools have tried to enlarge class sizes, yet this has caused a different problem: oversized classes. In addition, the low salaries, absence of civil servant status (*Bianzhi*) and professional title (*Zhicheng*), and insufficient professional development resources associated with these schools limit their ability to attract excellent teachers. This situation further results in an unstable supply of teachers, which in turn has negatively influenced teaching quality and children’s social and emotional development.

What can be identified from the empirical analysis is the central and local government’s willingness to allow a low-cost and inferior form of education provision. Under this schooling approach, the government establishes a large number of schools with basic teaching resources at a relatively low cost, instead of making a massive investment and creating a number of schools offering good education. It follows the distributive social justice objective of equality of opportunity, which emphasises migrant children’s access to education, yet overlooks the objective of equality of outcome. As a result, this schooling system does not guarantee the migrant children a “good” education while realising their right to education. The existence of this isolated quasi-state school system also reinforces the state schools’ exclusivity as many migrant children cannot access them. Furthermore, with the establishment of these schools, the migrant children’s hardships become less problematic in terms of government discourse. As a result, the migrant children’s disadvantages in schooling have been reinforced yet in an apparently legitimate way.

With regard to future reforms, the local government should rethink the legitimacy of its low-cost and inferior schooling offering. There is a moral and ethical element to this question, given that education is a fundamental mechanism for the individual

development of all citizens. Despite its shortcomings, the interim quasi-state school system should not simply be eliminated, since the children in these schools will otherwise lose the chance for schooling locally. Recognising this practical dilemma, a pragmatic strategy for the local government is to keep the quasi-state schools, yet alter its low-cost and inferior schooling approach to improve its quality: first, it should enhance its financial investments to provide the schools with adequate qualified teachers, teaching resources and physical infrastructure. Second, the regular state schools' standard of student-teacher ratio (at least 2.8 teachers per class) should be applied to these quasi-state schools to cut down their class sizes. Third, the teachers in the quasi-state schools should receive equal treatment as state schoolteachers in terms of income and professional development. This way, the schools can attract and maintain excellent teachers. In short, the long-term goal should be to transform the quasi-state schools from being an interim mechanism for the fulfillment of a political task to being a part of the regular state-school system.

In this article, the analyses have enabled empirical explorations of three forms of quasi-state schools in the local context of Shanghai. There may be other quasi-state forms of schooling that we have not examined. Furthermore, the local contexts in other migrant intensive metropolitan areas (such as Beijing and Guangzhou) might be different from Shanghai. More work can be done to examine the diversified local policies and practices of quasi-state schooling for migrant children. These might be good starting points for future studies.

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