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DECISION SCIENCES INSTITUTE**Subjective Well-Being of Children of Migrant Families in Schooling Alternatives of Urban China**

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ABSTRACT

Organizational labor forces in countries that include China, the OECD and U.S. continue to be increasingly composed of workers who migrate across country regions or from other countries. Since their children will enter the next generation of labor forces, it is increasingly relevant to assess the educational experience of these children. Background studies of both children and adults indicate the importance of assessing subjective well-being (SW-B) to overall health and human capital. This study reports results of an initial assessment of SW-B in children of migrant family in an urban center of China across school type, grade and gender differences.

KEYWORDS: Human Capital, Subjective Well Being, Migrant Work Forces, Developing Countries.

INTRODUCTION

In countries including China, the U.S. and OECD, organizational labor forces are increasingly composed of workers who either migrate across regions of the respective country (e.g. rural to urban) or migrate from contiguous or geographically close countries. This is now well recognized as generating high priority welfare issues for migrant workers, their families and society in general. At present, the majority of migrant workers have entered semiskilled or skilled occupations in labor forces. However, the next generation can be anticipated to evidence mobility across a broad range of occupations many of which will be professional due in no small part to educational opportunities in their country of residence. As such, it is increasingly relevant for those who study human capital and productivity in organizational work forces as well as overall well-being to consider the competencies that develop in the education of children of migrant families.

Of course, each country has contextual differences that are important to defining issues and appropriate policy (e.g. Asis 2006 in the Philippines; Liang & Chen 2007 in China; Dreby 2010 in the U.S.), however, China is a case of particular interest because of the large migrations that have occurred in the relatively short period of time since the economic reform in the 1980s. In 2008, it was reported that 225 million individuals migrated from rural agricultural areas to urban areas since 1980 (Lai et al 2014).

In China, the majority of available studies of the educational experience of children of migrant families contrast what are designated as “left behind” children in China’s *hukou* system

for generating assignment to schools¹ with children who complete a similar curriculum in either rural or urban schools (e.g. Ye & Murray 2005). An important difference between children in the “left behind” category and other children is that they separated from their parents who are migrant workers and live with members of their extended families (e.g., grandparents: *nainai* and *yeye*) and attend school in the initial geographical location of their parents. While the emphasis on contrasts of educational-related outcomes of “left behind” children with other children can be easily understood as a welfare priority, we would suggest that the study of children who now reside with their parents and attend urban schools merits more attention than it has received. Even when children are allowed to reside with migrant families, their educational assignments and experience may commonly differ from those of children of non-migrant workers. Such differences are likely to arise from factors such as differences in the qualities of schools that children of migrant families are assigned to and as a consequence of the general demands in adjustment that migrant families face.

Many children of migrant families are assigned to private schools in their urban areas of residence because the extraordinary number of migrant work families in China has strained the country’s educational resources in state schools. Generally private schools in these cases have fewer resources and less well-trained teachers than state schools. As such, there are bases to anticipate that the educational experiences of children of migrant families that reside in urban centers may differ from both those of children of non-migrant families and those of “left-behind” children.

As China advances in its development and social policies (including modifications of the *hukou* system) there will be increasing numbers of children who live with and attend schools where their parents work relative to “left-behind” children. The results of policy towards such children are likely to have enduring effects on human capital, labor force productivity and growth and development.² Since this is early in the academic study of the welfare of children in migrant families who are located and schooled in urban centers of China, this study has an opportunity to give important direction to policy as well as generalizing our understanding of relevant issues in the education and general well-being of children in this category across countries.

As noted by other authors, issues in schooling clearly extend beyond academic achievement (e.g. Berry et al 2006; Chen et al 1997; Coll et al, 1996; Wong 2004). In addition to measures of educational attainment, it is now well recognized in many countries that children’s self-reported subjective well-being (SW-B) is a coordinate measure of the quality of educational and socialization experience that has ramifications for psychological functioning in adulthood.

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- 1 The *hukou* system in China uses residency permits to divide Chinese citizens into urban and rural dwellers. A person’s *hukou* status determines his or her access to state services. A person with a rural *hukou* status is generally not eligible for state services in urban areas, because *hukou* is primarily inherited from one’s parents at the time of birth. Children born in urban areas to parents with rural *hukou* are similarly designated as rural *hukou* holders. As a result, children living in cities with rural *hukou* are not eligible for enrollment in urban public schools even if they were born within the urban district. Montgomery (2014) is among the authors that review the consequences of this system.
 - 2 For a consideration that can include migrant children’s education in these contexts, see Heckman & Yi (2012) and Fleisher et al (2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Wen and Lin (2012) studied schooling outcomes of children “left behind” who were enrolled in state schools when one or both parents were rural to urban migrants. In comparison to children of non-migrant parents, “left behind” children were found to be disadvantaged in health behavior and school engagement but not in “perceived satisfaction” with their general life situation. The authors emphasize the importance of family socio-economic status, socializing process and peer and school support to developmental outcome regardless of parents’ migrant status. Lai, Liu, Luo et al (2014) examined the academic performance of children in private schools exclusively for migrant children in Beijing and rural public schools in Shaanxi province. They report that although migrant students outperformed rural students initially (possibly because of the skill capabilities of workers who were able to migrate), the gap is increasingly closed because of poorer school resources and lower teacher quality in the private schools they were assigned to in Beijing. Chen, Rubin and Li (1997) studied the relationship between academic achievement and measures of social adjustment across different years. Their results generally support the reciprocal effects between academic achievement and social adjustment proposed by earlier investigators (e.g., Hinshaw (1992). Thus a deficiency or further advancement in one of the realms is likely to spill over to the other. These and other authors note the low levels of correlation between SES indicators and SWB. In contrast to inference in Wen and Lia (2012), this implies that SES differences independent of resources are unlikely to meaningfully modify SWB.

STUDY DESIGN: While general differences in academic achievement across state schools and the informal private schools that have been described have been reported in samples that include “left behind” children or urban vs rural locations, we are unable to locate any previous studies of that address SW-B in children of migrant families across school types in their urban locations, school grades and gender. Additionally, available studies have used a global measure of SW-B rather than one that is defined in sub – dimensions of SW-B. Directly, stated the study that will be reported provides an initial assessment of contrasts in the educational experience of children of migrant families that live with their nuclear families and attend schools in the urban setting where their parents work. We study sub-dimensions of SW-B and investigate key intervening variables in the type of school in which they are enrolled, their grade level and gender.

The Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS)

A long history has argued for supplementing economic measures of welfare with measures of subjective well-being (refs). In contrast to studies that infer subjective well-being from the absence of psychopathological symptoms, the World Health Organization (e.g., 1964) defined health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. Pavot, Diener, Colvin, and Sandvik, (1991) defined life satisfaction as a “global evaluation by the person of his or her life”. Cowen (1991) elaborated on this perspective in arguing that psychological well-being should be considered on the basis of positive indicators, including indicators like “basic satisfaction with one’s self and one’s existence or life satisfaction. Life satisfaction that can be measured as SW-B has been differentiated from other well-being constructs such as self-esteem (Terry and Huebner, 1995; Lucas, Diener, and Suh, 1996; Huebner, Gilman, and Laughlin, 1999) and positive affect (Lucas et al., 1996; Huebner, 1991c; Huebner, and Dew, 1996). Although there are now a large number of studies of life satisfaction of adults (Diener, 1994; Veenhoven, 1993 +newer ref), life satisfaction in children has more recently become the focus of empirical work.

Early children’s life satisfaction instruments were limited to unidimensional measures of global or general life satisfaction (e.g., Adelman, Taylor, and Nelson, 1989; Dew and Huebner, 1994). The MSLSS was designed to provide a multidimensional profile of children’s life satisfaction judgments in specific domains: self, living, school, friends and family

(Huebner 1991a and b). The SW-B measure that we use is a Chinese adaptation of Huebner's Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS: e.g., Seligson, Huebner & Valois 2003) that Chen, Rubin and Li (1997) and Chen and Fleischler (2008) have reported construct validity for.

PROCEDURE: Using a Chinese translation of the MSLSS, we examine children's subjective well-being across two types of educational facilities that children of migrant families are enrolled in: privately-run schools limited to children of migrant families and public schools that are also limited to these children. The differences in school type that these children are examined across gender and three grade levels.

For the study, we were given access to state and private schools as major alternatives in school types for children of migrant families in China in one of the major destinations for migrant workers (the Shanghai metropolitan area). In this area as well as other urban centers, assignment to schools is by residential location and space and availability rather than parental background and/or pretesting of children³. One of the alternatives is a government run (state) school, a second is a private run school for migrant workers children only⁴. A total of 682 male and female students in U.S. equivalent grades of 3 to 5 in the schools comprise the study sample.

For each school, one of the co-authors initially met with head teachers, informed them of the study intentions and offered each a draft of study questionnaires. Feedback from head teachers was used to modify content and organization where appropriate. Adjusted questionnaire were then given back to the head teachers, and passed to class teachers in different year groups who conducted the survey in class.

RESULTS

Measure Reliability

Sub-scale-reliability was assessed for each of the measured SW-B sub-dimensions with Cronbach's coefficient alpha and item-sum reliability. For self, $\alpha = .801$, family $\alpha = 0.824$, school $\alpha = .774$, friends $\alpha = .801$ and living $\alpha = .738$. Although the sub-dimension reliabilities are lower than for the established instrument, we recognize that the Chinese SLSS is a

3 In Beijing, alternatives in placement include lotteries for placement in different schools as is the practice in many U.S. cities. The majority of urban centers including Shanghai follow the procedure described here.

4 As observed above, common Western differences between the school types are at least questionable in their application to China since the government run schools are thought to be as well or better funded than the type of private school available to children of migrant families. There are two types of private schools in China, one of them is like those in the U.S. They have high tuition and usually provide better educational experiences than public schools. The second type of private school is more like an informal school. Children unable to attend public schools are organized locally, mostly in suburban/rural areas. The resultant schools tend to have limited number of qualified teachers and lower quality teaching facilities. For migrant parents, the best choice for them is to let their children attend a government school. This is difficult for some of them, because of distance and other requirements. While the requirements differ in various districts of Shanghai, parents usually have to provide evidence of stable employment and long-term accommodation that migrant family commonly do not have.

contextualized translation, and consider these levels adequate for an initial study. We further examined the factorial structure of the measures of sub-dimensions in principal components analyses. For sub-dimensions of self, friends and school, a single component accounted for more than two-thirds of the item variances in items. For sub-dimensions of living and family, a single component accounted for more than .50 of the respective item variances.

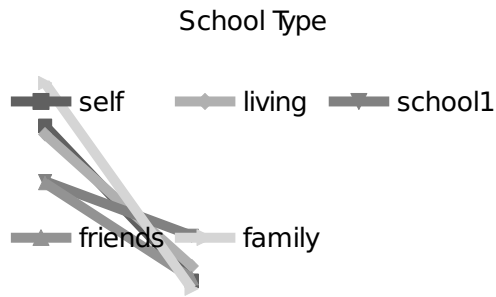
MANOVA Results

Results were initially analyzed in a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the sub-dimensions of the subjective well-being scale measured as dependent variables and type of school (Public vs Private), gender and grade level as independent variables. Main effects of school type and grade were uniformly significant for the multivariate test statistics ((Wilks Lambda: School type ($F=6.344$, $p<.001$), Gender ($F=3.121$, $p<.01$), Grade ($F=1.896$, $p<.05$)). In interactions among independent variables in the MANOVA results, only Grade x School type attained statistical significance (Wilks Lambda: $F=1.812$, $p=.05$). Students in grade 5 of public schools had significantly higher scores ($p<.05$) on the combined SW-B measure than any of the other Grade x School type levels. Figure 1 presents the levels of SLSS subscales for each of the independent variables. Univariate analyses of variance for each sub-dimension were then examined.

Figure1: Effects of School Type, Grade Level and Gender on Sub-dimensions of the Children's SW-B Measure.

Families

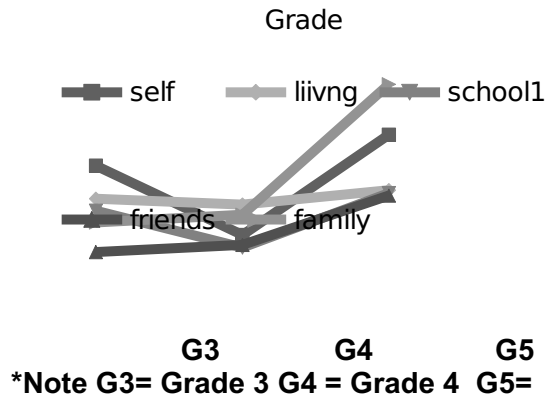
1(a) School Type



*Note 1=State school. 2= Private School

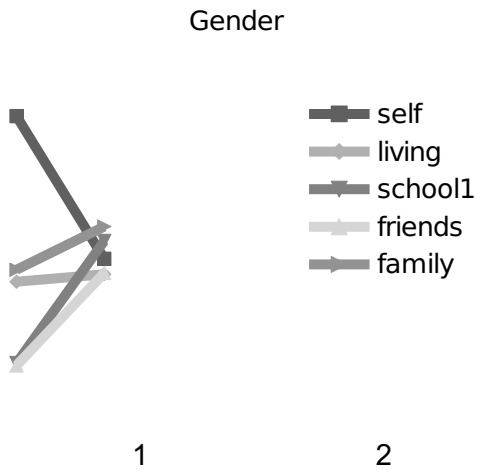
Grade 5

1(b): Grade



*Note G3= Grade 3 G4 = Grade 4 G5= Grade 5

1(c): Gender



Note: 1= Male and 2= Female

Univariate Results: In results of ANOVAs, each of the sub-dimensions although students in grade 5 had higher scores than students in grades 3 and 4. Effects of school type were statistically significant for family ($F=20.259$, $p<.001$), friends ($F=14.103$, $p<.001$) and self ($F=10.869$, $p<.001$). On all of these sub-dimensions of SW-B, the public school was higher than the private school. Only main effects of grade on family ($F= 6.569$, $p< .001$), attained statistical significance. The grade x school type interaction was significant for family ($F=5.502$, $p<.005$) and friends ($F=4.197$, $p<.02$). The main effect of gender was significant for friends ($F=12.197$, $p<.001$), school ($F=3.609$, $p<.06$) and self ($F=3.847$, $p<.05$). Females were significantly higher than males for friends and school type but significantly lower than males on self.

While corresponding differences between school types have been shown in measures of academic achievement (ref), this is the first time that differences in SW-B as a measure of well-being have been demonstrated across school types. Results for grade show a significant developmental trend that was evidenced for most sub-dimensions of SW-B. The trend indicates an increase from levels of G3 and G4 to the level at G5. The results for grade suggest the possibility of a developmental critical point in the SW-B of children that may merit more attention both conceptually and in policy design. The interaction between school type and grade indicates that while state schools outperform private schools across all grade levels, the differences are most pronounced at the level of grade 5. In gender effects, females are significantly higher than males on the more social dimensions of living, friends and family but lower on the internalized sub-dimension of self.

DISCUSSION

The study that we report is among the few that address children of migrant families that reside with their families in urban locations. Results begin to document factors that affect the level of SW – B of children of migrant families. These results confirm that informal private schools disadvantage children in subjective well-being of as well as in academic achievement. If, as results suggest, grade 5 is a developmental critical point, special attention may be appropriate to developing these dimensions in their educational experiences in grade 4. In the face of the unprecedented worker migrations of the post-Deng period, China has allocated substantial resources to the education of children. Most of the measures of the effects of this investment have been in educational attainment. A wide range of literature that has been reviewed indicates the importance of subjective well-being in children to their functioning as adults. This includes the quality of human capital they bring to labor markets. Results of the study that we report can give direction to policy for the development of SW-B as in both critical points and sub-dimensions that most sensitive to school type and gender differences. Subsequent studies can further inference offered from the results that we report by providing additional evidence of concurrent and predictive validity of the translated SLSS and migrant families and “left behind” children. More generally, the large-scale migrations of workers to urban areas in a number of countries make the study of SW-B of their children a research priority for reasons of their general welfare as well as their contributions in subsequent generations of the labor force.

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