

Migration and Education in China: Determinants of the Educational Outcomes of Migrants to Beijing

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Abstract

This project examines the educational disparities faced by second-generation Beipiao in Beijing, with a particular focus on the challenges faced in accessing quality education and the impact of the college entrance examination system. By illustrating the role of the household registration system in maintaining these inequalities, the study highlights an important but under-explored issue in the context of China's rapid urbanization. Through a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews, the study sheds light on the systemic barriers to education and social mobility for children who have "drifted north". The study provides valuable insights into the psychological and social implications of these disparities and contributes to a deeper understanding of educational inequality in urban China.

This study also explores the relationship between the household registration system and the college entrance examination. It finds that students from different household locations face different challenges and inequalities in the college entrance examination. For example, some provinces have a large candidate base but receive enrollment quotas that are much lower than their candidate numbers as a proportion of the national total. Candidates in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai have significantly better chances of gaining admission to local universities than those from other provinces, and such local protectionism in enrolment violates the constitutional principle of equal opportunity in education. In addition, the difficulty of the college entrance examination varies by region, and there are differences in educational resources and admission scores in different regions, leading to unequal educational opportunities. The study also found that household registration and residential background had a significant impact on the chances of enrolling in key universities, and that students with rural household registration were significantly less likely to enroll in key universities than students with urban household registration. These findings further confirm the complex relationship between the household registration system and the college entrance examination, and its role in exacerbating educational inequality.

The study's conclusion emphasizes the urgency of addressing the educational inequalities brought about by the household registration system (Hukou). It calls on policymakers to reassess existing policies and work together to create a more inclusive educational environment. The findings have far-reaching implications for policymakers, educators, and urban strategists, prompting them to consider ways to break down systemic constraints and unlock the potential of this generation.

Keywords: educational inequality, household registration system (Hukou), internal migration, second-generation migrants, Beijing's immigrant population, college entrance examination (Gaokao), social mobility, urban education system, qualitative interviews, quantitative data analysis

1. Introduction

In the center of China's bustling capital, the second generation of Beipiao — the children of internal migrants

who have moved to Beijing in search of better opportunities — are engaged in a silent struggle. This study explores the educational disparities these children face, particularly the systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing a quality education. These barriers significantly affect their future prospects, especially as they relate to the Gaokao, China's key college entrance exam.

Beijing, a city where historical grandeur contrasts with modern progress, offers opportunities for most young people. The Gaokao, a gateway to higher education and social mobility, poses unique challenges for second-generation immigrant, whose access to educational resources is limited by the household registration system. The Hukou system (The household registration system) links citizens' access to services to their registered place of birth, preventing many migrant children from fully participating in the urban education system (Xu and Wu, 2022).

This study contributes to the growing literature on educational inequality by examining the intersection of the Hukou system and the college entrance examination. Previous research has shown that the household registration system limits the social mobility of rural residents (Zhou, 2019), but this study fills a gap in the current literature by focusing specifically on second-generation internal migrants in Beijing. In this study, we used a mixed-methods research approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges of educational access for second-generation Beipiao migrant children.

This approach combines quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews to reveal the systemic barriers affecting these children's educational outcomes. Quantitative data included statistical analyses of college entrance examination admission scores, differences in the difficulty of examination papers for students from different household registers, and surveys on the distribution of educational resources. Data including students' performance, family background and household registration information were collected to assess the impact of the household registration system on educational opportunities. For the qualitative part of the study, in-depth interviews and case studies were conducted to collect the personal experiences and perspectives of second-generation Beijiao children and their families. The interviews included students, parents, and educators, and aimed to understand their perceptions and experiences of educational inequality. Through these interviews, we were able to reveal how the household registration system affects students' educational experiences in practice and how they cope with the challenges associated with the college entrance examination.

In addition, this study analyzed policy documents and related regulations to understand how the Hukou system and the Gaokao policy interact with each other to create restrictions on the educational opportunities of second-generation of Beipiao children, causing educational inequality at both the macro and micro levels and to provide an empirical basis for improving the educational prospects of these children.

2. Literature Review

The household registration system (Hukou) and the college entrance examination system in China have been extensively studied for their impacts on social mobility and educational inequality, particularly in the context of internal migration. Families from rural areas moving to cities like Beijing in search of better economic opportunities — commonly referred to as Beipiao families — encounter significant barriers that affect their children's access to education. These barriers, often institutional, disproportionately affect the second generation of migrant families, reinforcing socioeconomic stratification.

2.1 Impact of Household Registration on Educational Inequality

A prominent area of research focuses on how the hukou system exacerbates educational inequality by restricting access to public services, including education. Studies emphasize that the household registration system remains a major institutional mechanism that perpetuates disparities between urban residents and migrant families. Zhang and Min (2020) illustrate how the hukou system limits children of migrant families from enrolling in local public schools, denying them access to high-quality education typically available to urban residents. This systemic exclusion reinforces existing inequalities and makes it difficult for migrant children to compete academically with their urban counterparts.

In line with socioeconomic status (SES) theory, socioeconomic background plays a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes (Li, Xie, & Zhao, 2018). Migrant families often come from lower SES backgrounds, and research consistently shows that children from these families face disadvantages in accessing high-quality educational resources. Higher SES families, on the other hand, can supplement public education with private tutoring and extracurricular activities, which significantly boosts academic achievement (Wang & Wu, 2019). This disparity highlights the interplay between institutional barriers like hukou and the broader effects of socioeconomic inequality.

2.2 Migration and Social Capital

Research on the social capital of migrant families further illuminates the challenges they face in accessing

educational resources. Drawing on social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993), studies suggest that social networks and connections play a crucial role in providing families with access to information and opportunities. For Beipiao families, the lack of formal urban hukou restricts their integration into local social networks, limiting their ability to engage with the educational system and reducing their access to crucial resources. This lack of social capital further compounds the disadvantages these children face, hindering both their academic performance and long-term social mobility.

Existing studies also explore how immigrant choice theory (Borjas, 1990) relates to internal migration within China. Migrant families' educational attainment is influenced not only by their socioeconomic background but also by their integration into urban environments. The children of migrant families, particularly those who migrated at a young age, often struggle to adjust to their new educational environments. In this context, the combined lack of social and institutional support exacerbates the educational inequality they face, reinforcing the systemic barriers that limit upward mobility.

2.3 Policy Impacts on Educational Access

The Chinese government has implemented various policies aimed at addressing urban-rural disparities, with mixed success. The nine-year compulsory education law, for instance, was introduced to universalize access to education, but its inconsistent implementation across regions has resulted in continued inequalities between urban and rural populations (Zhang & Min, 2020). Rural students, especially those from migrant families, remain disadvantaged due to the differential application of education policies that favor urban residents. The hukou system acts as an additional barrier, making it difficult for migrant children to benefit from these policies.

Human capital theory (Mincer, 1958) is frequently employed to understand the role of education in improving individual productivity and earnings. Education, in this view, represents an investment that can enhance social mobility. However, as recent studies highlight, the transferability of human capital is often constrained by institutional factors such as the hukou system. Migrant children, despite gaining access to urban schooling, may not receive the same quality of education as their urban peers due to systemic exclusions and limitations on resources. This mismatch between potential and opportunity reflects the broader difficulties that migrant families face in translating educational investment into tangible social mobility.

2.4 Intergenerational Transmission of Educational Attainment

Research also points to the role of family background in the intergenerational transmission of educational success. This transmission (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) underscores the importance of parents' educational levels in shaping the educational outcomes of their children. Migrant families, often characterized by lower levels of parental education, face additional challenges in providing their children with the necessary support for academic success. These families are less able to offer the kind of educational resources and expectations that are crucial to academic achievement, further entrenching the cycle of inequality.

In light of globalization, the concept of education for global citizenship has gained increasing relevance. Scholars and organizations like UNESCO argue that education systems must adapt to the diversity brought by migration and provide inclusive opportunities for all students (UNESCO, 2015). The children of Beipiao families, as part of a growing population of internal migrants in China, represent a unique challenge for educational systems that are still adapting to these demographic shifts. Ensuring that these children are equipped with the skills and opportunities to participate in an increasingly globalized world requires significant reforms in both policy and practice.

3. Hypothesis and Variables

Two sets of hypotheses are offered, the first for general scores and the second, for subject specific scores. The two dependent variables are as follows:

- 1) Overall college entrance examination scores (scoring range from 0 to 750).
- 2) Mathematics subject college entrance examination scores.

The independent variables and the corresponding hypotheses are as follows:

Independent variables:

- (1) Migrant status: Refers to whether the student is a descendant of internal migrants and whether they face educational opportunity limitations related to the household registration system.
- (2) Ethnicity: The ethnic or racial group to which the student belongs, particularly the distinction between the Han majority and ethnic minorities.
- (3) Socioeconomic status: A comprehensive measure based on factors such as family income, parental education level, and occupation.

(4) Gender: The social gender of the student, i.e., male or female.

Hypotheses:

I. Migrant status: Migrant students may score lower than local students in overall and subject-specific college entrance examination scores due to the educational opportunities and resource access limitations they face.

II. Ethnicity: Students from ethnic minority backgrounds may score lower than Han students in overall and subject-specific college entrance examination scores, which may be related to cultural differences and access to educational resources.

III. Socioeconomic status: Students from families with higher socioeconomic status may perform better in overall and subject-specific college entrance examination scores because they have access to more educational resources and support.

IV. Gender: Female students may outperform male students in language subjects, whereas in subjects like mathematics and physics, gender differences may be less pronounced or trend in the opposite direction, possibly due to differences in learning styles and preferences.

4. Data and Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to explore the educational experiences of non-Beijing nationals studying in Beijing. The qualitative component, central to this research, is grounded in semi-structured interviews with seven participants from non-Beijing families, including a diverse range of individuals: one parent of a third-grade student, one parent of a junior high school student, two junior high school students, one senior high school student, one prospective freshman, and one university graduate. These participants represent different educational stages, providing a broad spectrum of experiences within Beijing's educational system.

The interviews were conducted both online and offline, depending on participants' availability and preference. All sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent, ensuring that ethical guidelines were followed. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, allowing flexibility for participants to share their unique perspectives while maintaining consistency across the topics covered. This approach is particularly advantageous as it enables the interviewer to explore unanticipated issues that may emerge during the conversation, thereby yielding richer, more nuanced data. The semi-structured format also helps to balance the depth of personal insights with the need for comparability across different interviews, making it a suitable choice for this study.

As an interviewer, I positioned myself as a non-Beijing student studying in Beijing, which fostered rapport with the participants. This shared identity helped to build trust and encouraged participants to be more open about their experiences, challenges, and suggestions. By adopting a stance of mutual empathy, the interviews became a collaborative process where interviewees felt comfortable discussing sensitive issues regarding their educational journeys in Beijing. Such positioning also allowed me to reflect on my own experiences as a researcher, deepening my understanding of the issues at hand.

The interview data were processed using grounded theory as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990). This approach was adopted to systematically analyze the data and develop theoretical insights directly from the participants' experiences. The analysis proceeded through three stages:

1) Open Coding: The audio recordings were transcribed into textual data, yielding over 40,000 words of interview content. Key themes and patterns were identified, and segments of the text were assigned initial codes. These codes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories.

2) Axial Coding: Relationships between the identified categories were explored to uncover underlying structures, such as cause-and-effect dynamics or associations between different educational challenges faced by non-Beijing students.

3) Selective Coding: In this final stage, I integrated and refined the categories into a coherent narrative or "story line." A core theme was developed, and its validity was assessed against the original data to ensure it adequately represented the participants' experiences.

The semi-structured interviews, while invaluable for capturing detailed, personal narratives, were supplemented with quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive analysis. Quantitative data were collected on participants' family backgrounds, academic performance, and household registration (Hukou) status. This sample was relatively small, but care was taken to ensure that it reflected a diversity of perspectives. Nevertheless, the limited sample size constrains the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of non-Beijing nationals. A larger sample would provide more robust quantitative insights and enhance the reliability of statistical inferences. Semi-structured interviews offer several advantages, particularly in qualitative

research. First, they provide flexibility, allowing the researcher to probe deeper into participants' responses while still maintaining a structured framework. This method is ideal for exploring complex, sensitive topics, as it allows participants to express their thoughts in their own words, leading to more authentic and comprehensive insights. In this study, semi-structured interviews enabled participants to share their personal educational experiences in depth, offering detailed accounts of how institutional barriers, such as the Hukou system, influenced their academic journeys. Moreover, this method facilitated the emergence of unexpected themes that might not have been uncovered through more rigid questioning.

The rapport established between interviewer and participant, particularly when the interviewer shares common experiences, as was the case in this study, further enhances the depth and quality of the data collected. By positioning myself as a fellow non-Beijing student, I was able to build trust, encouraging more candid discussions. This shared perspective is particularly useful in research where empathy and understanding can help participants feel comfortable discussing personal and potentially sensitive issues.

However, this method is not without its limitations. The relatively small number of participants restricts the extent to which findings can be generalized. Additionally, the transcription and coding process can introduce subjectivity, as interpretation of the spoken word may vary. Despite these challenges, the richness and depth of the qualitative data offer valuable insights into the educational experiences of non-Beijing nationals, making this method well-suited to the aims of this study.

5. Findings and Discussion

The investigation of high school entrance exam scores reveals important insights into how demographic and socioeconomic factors affect academic outcomes. The dataset includes key variables such as age, race, gender, religion, and economic status, providing a solid basis for examining their impact on student performance.

The impact of economic status on educational outcomes is well documented, especially in the context of test performance. Data from this study show that students categorized in the highest economic status category scored an average of 442.60, while students from lower economic backgrounds scored an average of 350.75. This apparent 91.85-point gap suggests that affluent families typically provide their children with better educational resources, such as private tutoring or extracurricular activities, which significantly improves academic performance (Wang & Wu, 2019).

Additionally, interviews conducted with students revealed that those who were supported by their parents, who invested time and resources in their education, tended to perform better. For example, one interviewee shared that his parents were very supportive of his studies and allowed him to spend approximately 10 hours per week on extracurricular academic activities, further improving his performance. This is consistent with the findings of Li, Xie, and Zhao (2018), emphasizing the critical role of family support and economic resources in shaping educational outcomes.

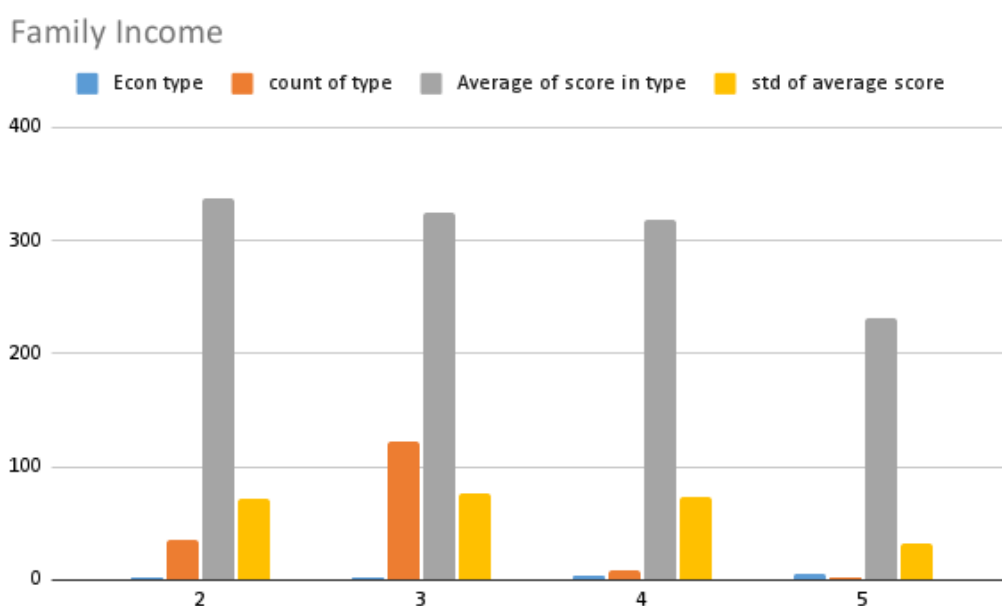


Figure 1.

Ethnicity plays a significant role in academic outcomes, with disparities evident between the Han ethnic majority and minority groups. In this study, the Han ethnic group serves as the baseline, and their academic performance generally surpasses that of minority groups. For instance, students from the Bulang ethnic group have an average score of 329.95, which is significantly lower than the Han average by over 100 points. This considerable gap underscores the need to address educational inequalities that may arise from cultural or linguistic differences and systemic barriers that minority students face (Zhou & Cheung, 2017). Such disparities suggest that minority groups often encounter challenges related to accessing quality education and overcoming biases within the educational system, requiring targeted interventions to promote equity in academic achievement (Liu, Liu, & Zeng, 2017).

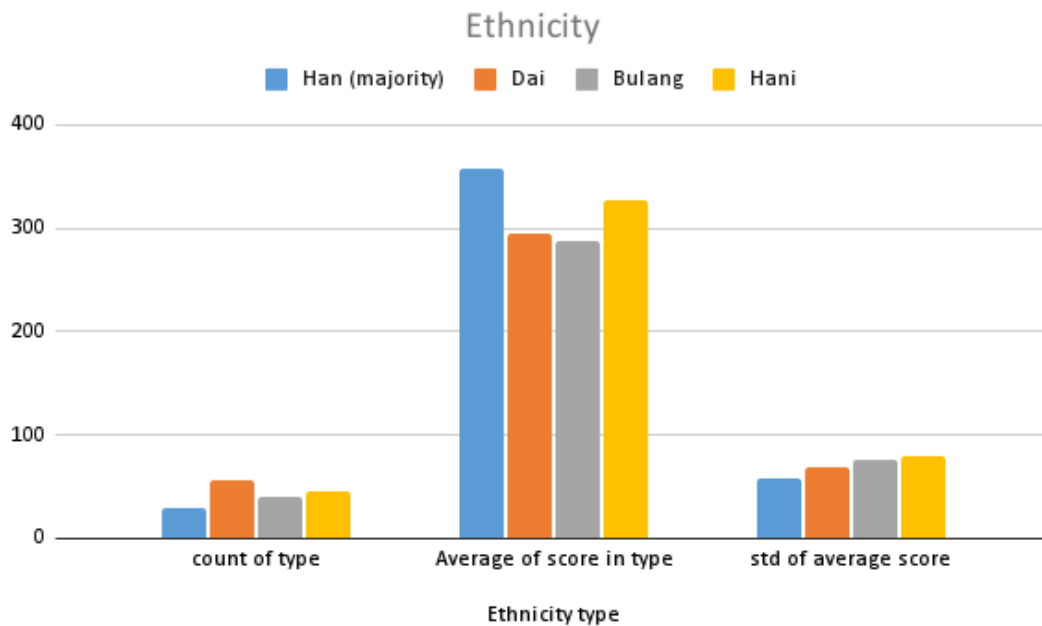


Figure 2.

Gender differences are also apparent in academic performance, with female students outperforming male students by an average of 11.13 points in high school entrance exams. The average score for female students is 442.60, compared to 431.47 for males. This trend mirrors broader educational research, which frequently reports that girls tend to excel in standardized testing environments. As noted by Wang and Wu (2019),

Girls are more likely to adapt to the structured nature of schoolwork and demonstrate higher levels of academic discipline, which can translate into better standardized test performance.

Several factors may contribute to this gender gap, including differing social expectations, classroom behavior, and study habits that are more conducive to academic success for female students (Chen & Fan, 2019). Girls may face stronger social pressures to excel academically or may engage more consistently in behaviors that align with classroom expectations, ultimately influencing their academic performance. Additionally, as noted by Zhang and Min (2020),

The educational system may inadvertently favor traits like organization and compliance, which are often more encouraged in female students

further contributing to their higher achievement.

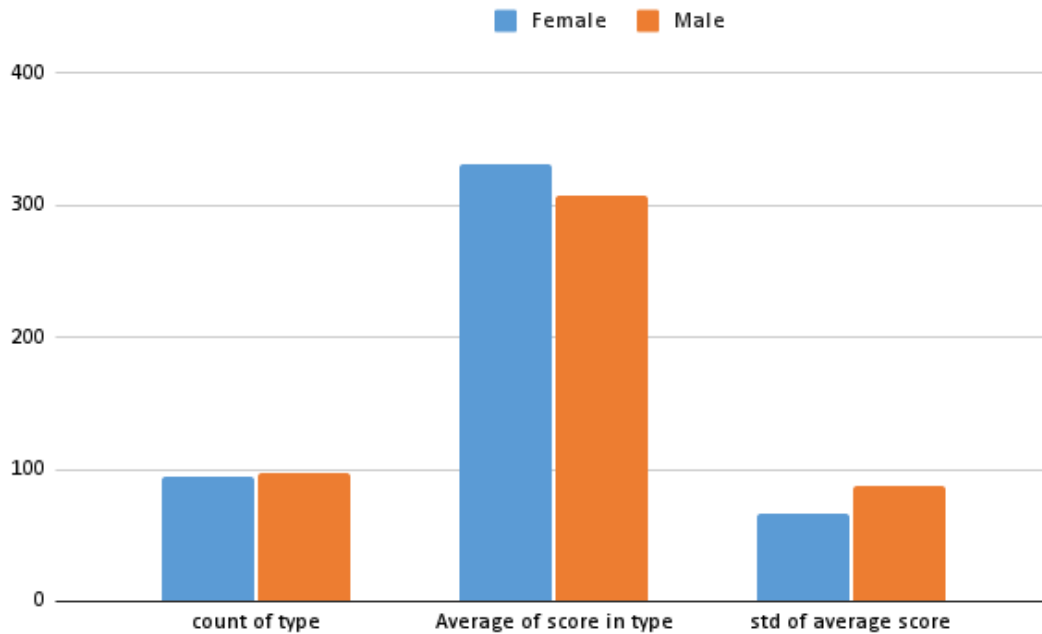


Figure 3.

Family-related factors further influence academic performance. Students from families where parents come from different ethnic backgrounds or practice different religions tend to have lower scores. For instance, students whose parents have different ethnicities score, on average, 350.75, while those from homogeneous ethnic backgrounds score significantly higher. Additionally, students from families with mixed religious practices show lower scores, averaging 359.35, compared to those from families with consistent religious practices.

Non-Beijing students experience significant inequities in accessing education in Beijing, which is reflected in the numerous barriers they face in accessing public schools. Due to strict administrative conditions and burdensome documentation requirements, many non-Beijing students are forced to choose private schools and face tuition fees of up to 70,000 yuan per year, in stark contrast to the free education offered in public schools. An example of this is Zhou Yi's father, who had to prepare as many as 27 documents to get his child into a public elementary school, but ultimately failed because he lacked a Chinese invoice. Educational inequality is further exacerbated by the variable quality of teachers in private schools, such as the irresponsible language teachers described by Song Haoran.

In terms of life, non-Beijing students encounter a range of challenges in life, whether they are educated in Beijing or in their domicile. Dong mentioned that if they return to their place of domicile to sit for the SSCE, they need to travel long distances, which takes up a lot of time and energy, and they have to adapt to different climatic conditions, all of which may affect their performance in the exams. In addition, frequent school transfers and living apart from their parents have also caused great inconvenience to the lives of non-BJ students.

In terms of prospects, non-Beijing students face more restrictions at the critical point of the college entrance examination. Universities in Beijing have lower admission scores for local students, while non-Beijing students need higher scores, making their access to quality higher education even more limited. Dong pointed out that Beijing University's admission score line for Beijing students is 30-40 points lower than that of non-Beijing students, a difference that highlights the inequity of opportunity in the college entrance examination.

The formation of educational inequity can be attributed to the lack of quality educational resources and uneven economic development. China's quality higher education resources are relatively insufficient and unevenly distributed, and compared with developed countries, the density of quality education resources in China is low, which leads to more intense competition for education resources. At the same time, due to the imbalance of regional economic development, high-quality educational resources tend to be concentrated in economically developed regions, which further exacerbates the unbalanced distribution of educational resources.

In the face of these challenges, non-BJ families generally maintain a positive and optimistic attitude. They believe that they can change the situation through their own efforts, as Ding Xiaoying (2018) said, by studying and working hard, they can obtain a Beijing Hukou, which will provide better educational opportunities for their

children. Non-Beijing parents create better educational environments for their children in various ways, such as arranging for their children's enrollment in Hebei or Tianjin or accompanying them to school in their domicile.

Educational inequality has far-reaching implications for non-BJ families in terms of school choice, quality of life and future prospects. Non-Beijing families have shown positive coping strategies and optimism in facing these challenges. The government needs to promote education equity as a major means of enhancing social justice. It is recommended that the government consider allowing non-Beijing students to sit for the college entrance examination in Beijing and set reasonable "thresholds" based on factors such as the family's tax status in Beijing and years of employment.

The sample size of this study is small, with only seven individuals, and the interview time was limited, so it was not possible to fully understand the experiences and feelings of the interviewees. In addition, there is a lack of long-term tracking to study the long-term impact of educational inequity on non-Beijing families. Future research could expand the sample size and conduct long-term tracking to obtain more comprehensive data and insights.

6. Conclusion

This study delves into the educational inequalities faced by the second generation of Beipiao (i.e., children of migrant workers), revealing that the household registration system (Hukou) is the main obstacle that leads to limited educational opportunities for this group. As a result of the Hukou system, many non-Beijing students are unable to enjoy the same educational resources as local students in Beijing, which not only restricts their access to public schools, but also forces them to choose private schools of varying educational quality or return to their Hukou to receive an education, thus exacerbating the cycle of educational inequality.

Key findings from the study suggest that socioeconomic status (SES) plays a critical role in shaping educational outcomes. There is a gap of up to 91.85 points in test scores between students from high-income and low-income families. In addition, minority students' academic performance is negatively impacted by the additional systemic barriers they face, providing strong evidence of pervasive inequality among non-Han groups. Although less influential, home environment and gender differences also had an impact on test scores, with parental education levels, family stability, and expectations playing an important role in shaping academic achievement.

This study concludes that access to educational resources is far from equal and that there is an urgent need for action to address this gap. Policymakers should push for reform of the household registration system so that non-Beijing students can more easily access public schools in cities such as Beijing. In addition, targeted support programs for low-income, minority, and underrepresented students, such as financial aid, tutoring, and cultural competency training for teachers, are necessary to ensure a level playing field. It is only through these reforms that we can hope to create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment for all students, ensuring that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to succeed.

In a large city like Beijing, the uneven distribution of educational resources and the restrictions of the household registration system have a particularly significant impact on non-Beijing students. Difficulties encountered by these students in their pursuit of education not only affect their academic performance but may also affect their future development and social mobility. Therefore, the government and the education sector need to work together to break down existing educational inequalities through policy reform and resource allocation to provide a fair educational opportunity for all children.

The findings of this study provide new perspectives for understanding the impact of educational inequality on non-BJN families and offer insights for policy makers to improve educational equity. Through reform and innovation, we can look forward to building a more equitable education system where every child can realize their potential.

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Appendix 1 Interview Scripts

Student 1: In the third year of junior high school, prepare for the high school entrance examination. Originally from Jiangxi, he is currently studying at a private high school in Beijing, but he needs to return to his hometown for the high school entrance examination. Due to his parents working in Beijing, they prefer their children to stay by their side. However, the teaching level of private junior high schools in Beijing is far inferior to that of Jiangxi Kilometer Junior High School. The learning intensity is not as high as in Jiangxi. This requires the child to put in more effort to prepare for the exam, otherwise they will be at a disadvantage among the candidates.

Student 2, 3: There are also two children whose situation is basically similar to the one above. One is his sister, who has already completed the college entrance examination and entered university. She faced the same dilemma as her younger brother during the college entrance examination: she wanted to stay with her parents without affecting her exam results. In the end, she chose the latter and went to Jiangxi alone to prepare for the exam. She emphasized that there is a lag in the information of exam questions from Beijing to Jiangxi, which forces her to make a choice. There is also a boy who is currently in his sophomore year of high school. I once went to the same school as the first two and chose to stay in Beijing for my studies during the middle school entrance examination. He emphasized that coming to a province with a completely different climate from Beijing a few weeks before the exam can easily make candidates uncomfortable with the local environment and affect the exam status.

Student 4: A child who has also attended the aforementioned school is in a relatively poor situation. His family's constant hesitation between returning home and staying in Beijing has led to their children constantly transferring and dropping out (at least six times within a year). This non-stop and unstable life has led to a sharp decline in the child's personality and attitude towards learning. Now he has dropped out of school and expressed that he no longer wants to go to school.

Student 5: This is the self-statement of an interviewee who has worked for a year: "I went back to my hometown to study in high school. My elderly grandparents accompanied me to study for the first two years. I can only come to Beijing to stay with my parents in winter and summer vacations. I often miss my parents at night. When I was in senior three, because senior three is a very important stage, my father gave up his job in Beijing and came back to accompany me until the end of my college entrance examination. I really appreciate his efforts."

Parent 1: Among the respondents, a parent found a good solution: "We don't have a household registration in Beijing, but we bought a house in Yanjiao, Hebei and obtained a household registration in Yanjiao. Yanjiao is 30 minutes away from my home in Beijing, very close, so my child can return to Beijing every day. Although it's a bit discounted, we can still see him every day, which is still worth it."

Parent 2: The last interviewee is the parent of the fourth child, and the information provided by him shares similarities with the information obtained during the interview with his child. From the perspective of parents, he emphasizes that regardless of any difficulties, he will maintain an optimistic attitude and do his

best to create good learning conditions for his children. He said, “The first is to provide material support. The second is to encourage more spiritually. The third is to help children relieve stress.”

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