

The Dilemma and Identity Construction of Migrant Labors' Children in the Process of Urbanization

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Abstract: In the process of urbanization, the number of migrant labors' children is constantly huge, but their identity has not been recognized by society, and they themselves lack the independent will to integrate into the society. Many factors hinder the identity construction of migrant labors' children in the city. This paper adopts qualitative and quantitative research methods and collects data from interviews with migrant children mainly in Niushipu, Shenzhen, and data from the Blue Book of Migrant Children: Report on the Education Development of Migrant Children in China (2021-2022). This paper will analyze the realistic predicament of migrant labors' children from three aspects: "System gap: household registration social security is not up to standard, high entrance examination threshold", "Information gap: weak media retrieval ability, weak awareness of rights protection", "Psychological gap: lack of identification of label identity, marginal situation hinders integration". In addition, under the situation of marginalization, their identity construction is analyzed from two perspectives: the identity of migrant labors themselves and the other theory of urban residents.

1. Introduction

As early as 2018, the urbanization rate of China's permanent residents reached 59.58 percent, nearly 50 percentage points higher than in the early days of the founding of New China. China's urbanization has always been characterized by a low starting point, large scale, and fast speed, and it has been realized in a short period through the rapid expansion of urban construction land. With the development and expansion of cities, many rural residents and their children flooded into cities, and the urban population expanded rapidly. Statistics from the Ministry of Education show that in 2014, the number of children of rural migrant labors receiving compulsory education reached 12.9473 million, which is a huge number and is still increasing yearly. However, such large-scale agricultural population transfer and permanent population urbanization have not allowed these migrant labors to truly integrate into the city, and the household registration system is the primary institutional gap they must face. The study shows that by 2021, 46.7 percent of the population will be urban, meaning that more than 200 million migrant labors will have failed to obtain an urban hukou in 2020. The institutional gap directly affects the social integration and identity of migrant labors' children. Even though many migrant labors' children were born and grew up in cities, they are still unable to integrate

into the city. At the same time, they are unfamiliar with the countryside and are in an awkward position of sandwich layer.^[1]

The plight of the children of migrant labors needs to be solved urgently. Whether they are discriminated in education, unable to enjoy fair medical security, or receive insufficient attention in daily life, these negative factors will affect the healthy growth of migrant children. Migrant children grow up in an environment characterized by exclusion, discrimination, and bullying, which distorts their urban identity construction and impedes their cultural adaptation.^[2] (Wu Shuang, Qin Qiwen, 2008) Their healthy development is linked to the level of China’s human resources in the next 20 years. Understanding the plight of migrant children, analyzing the plight, understanding them and helping them better social integration can improve their current situation.^[3]

2. System gap: The Social Security of Household Registration is not up to Standard, and the Entrance Examination Threshold is High

2.1 Point Line is Increasing Year by Year, and Class Status Hinders Enrollment

The children of migrant labors are a big category of the floating population, and their education has always been the focus of public concern.^[4] At present, China has put forward two major policies to solve the difficulty of migrant children entering school, namely, the "points admission system" and the "materials admission system". Taking Shenzhen as an example, the points-based school system was adopted as early as 2013. Factors such as migrant labors' personal quality, work experience and living conditions will affect their points, which will indirectly affect their children's chances of attending school.

The points enrollment system itself is a policy to facilitate the enrollment of migrant children without urban household registration. However, with the increase of floating population year by year and the implementation of policies such as household registration reform and population dispersal, the points line of urban enrollment is increasing year by year. (Chen Daorange, 2022) Many children of migrant labors are unable to enter primary schools because their parents cannot reach the designated points, and the children of migrant labors are even forced to return to the place of residence to readjust to the new environment.

Table 1: Average monthly income and growth rate of migrant labors by industry

Industry	2021	2022	Growth Rate
Total	4432yuan	4615yuan	4.1%
Manufacturing	4508yuan	4694yuan	4.1%
Construction	5141yuan	5358yuan	4.2%
Wholesale and Retail	3796yuan	3979yuan	4.8%
Transportation Warehousing and Postal Service	5151yuan	5301yuan	2.9%
Accommodation Catering	3638yuan	3824yuan	5.1%
Resident Service Repairs and other Service	3710yuan	3874yuan	4.4%

Stable payment of social security contributions and their soft skills are important points in the points-based enrollment system, but a migrant labor mother in Niushipu, an urban village in Shenzhen, said that "many people do not have a degree, cannot find a good job, where there are economic conditions, they have to not pay social security." According to the survey report on Migrant Labors in 2022, only 13.7% of migrant labors have college degrees or above, and the highest proportion is junior high school education, more than half of them. Lack of education will not be able to enter large

enterprises, naturally, there is no way to ensure the stable payment of social security. (Yan Yanhua, Yao Keyan, 2023) In addition, many migrant labors understand the local enrollment policy early to allow their children to enter public schools and take the form of self-payment of social security in a fake name to ensure continuous payment. (Cao Ang, 2022) However, the study found that until 2022, the average monthly income of migrant labors is only 4,615 yuan, and the per capita living area is 22.6 square meters. Such economic status and housing assets make it difficult for them to have additional capital to invest in social security payment. As shown in Table 1.

Family conditions, social status, talent policies and so on have gradually stratified the migrant population. The points-based enrollment system has not fundamentally solved the problem of educational equity. On the contrary, it has indirectly become a tool for social stratification, and those children of migrant labors below the point line have become unfortunate victims in this process.

The existence of the point line subtly divides urban residents and migrant labors into groups. It is easy for the children of residents with local hukou to enter public schools, but for migrant labors, the level of the point line is enough to affect their children's future. "No one talks about points in public schools, and the teachers never mention it," said a migrant child in the urban village of Niushipu in Shenzhen. Obviously, the interviewee still divides the group of migrant labors' children and the group of local residents in public schools, and the discussion of topics among different groups is different, and the local hukou or not, the level of points is enough to affect the positioning and recognition of self-identity of migrant labors' children.

2.2 Population Dispersal Leads to Secondary Mobility, and the Educational Resources of Migrant Labors' Sister-Schools are Poor

The policy of population depopulation was promulgated to alleviate the "big city disease", which caused population expansion in some big cities.

Limited access to local household registration has had to be restricted, but this has not reduced the influx of migrants. On the contrary, it has prevented the children of migrant labors who have lived there for a long time from attending regular schools. To ensure that their children's education is not affected, many migrant labors who have long been rooted in the city have to carry out secondary migration, and such backflow has caused many negative effects on the children of migrant labors growing up in the city. (Han Jialing, 2021) On the one hand, they need to be forced to leave the city they have been living in since childhood; on the other hand, there are differences in education policies in different regions, textbook versions and learning progress, and returning students need to adapt to the convergence of new courses and changes in social environment, all of which will affect the enthusiasm of migrant labors' children in learning.

In the Blue Book of Migrant Children: Report on the Education Development of Migrant Children in China (2021-2022), the first generation of migrant children was interviewed, and it was found that many returnee children suffered a decline in academic performance because they did not adapt to the environment and were bullied by the indigenous people in school. "They went straight back to Beijing to work when they failed to enter [high school] after graduation from junior high school." The interviewee Zhengzheng (pseudonym) is one of a generation of migrant children born around 1988 who are still living in big cities as migrant labors 20 years later.

Mobility is not only reflected in migrant children, but also in the migrant children's schools they attend. The special status of migrant labors is fully considered in the operation mode of migrant labors' children schools, but their teachers and education quality cannot be compared with that of public schools. As far as the operation mode is concerned, the original intention of its establishment is to facilitate the children of migrant labors to have a normal school environment in the city. For migrant labors, they are more flexible in the system and more friendly in the atmosphere. (Han Jialing, 2023)

"In migrant children's schools, they can say hello to the principal for late delivery, or they can pay a sum of money every month." Some parents point out that migrant schools are significantly more cost-friendly to migrant labors with limited incomes. At the same time, migrant schools also provide students with additional "services" that are humane, such as students can enter school before 6 am and leave school after 8 PM, which coincides with migrant labors' working hours. To solve the problem of migrant labors not being able to pick up and drop off their children at school on time. However, in terms of resource matching, even migrant children's schools in the same area are inferior to public schools. The most important point is that their teachers are not stable enough. Most of the teachers here are foreign labors with great mobility and change every semester, which is not conducive to the physical and mental development of students in the process of growth. On the one hand, they need to adapt to different teachers' teaching methods; on the other hand, frequent change of teachers will make them lack security. Xiao Catfish (not her real name) in Niushipu, Shenzhen, said her math performance had been improved by an older, responsible teacher, and then degraded by a "dirty, irresponsible" one.(Li Yue, 2022)^[5-19]

The children of migrant labors, some of whom are enrolled in public schools, have better access to educational resources than migrant children in private schools, but at the same time they have a narrower perspective than the children of urban residents who are already there. At the same time, when they enter public schools, they are often unable to truly integrate into the local population and are even labeled as "poor students", a stigma that seems to have become a normal phenomenon.

3. Information Gap: Media Retrieval Ability is Weak, and Awareness of Rights Protection is Weak

3.1 Rely on Media Entertainment, Media Literacy Overall Weak

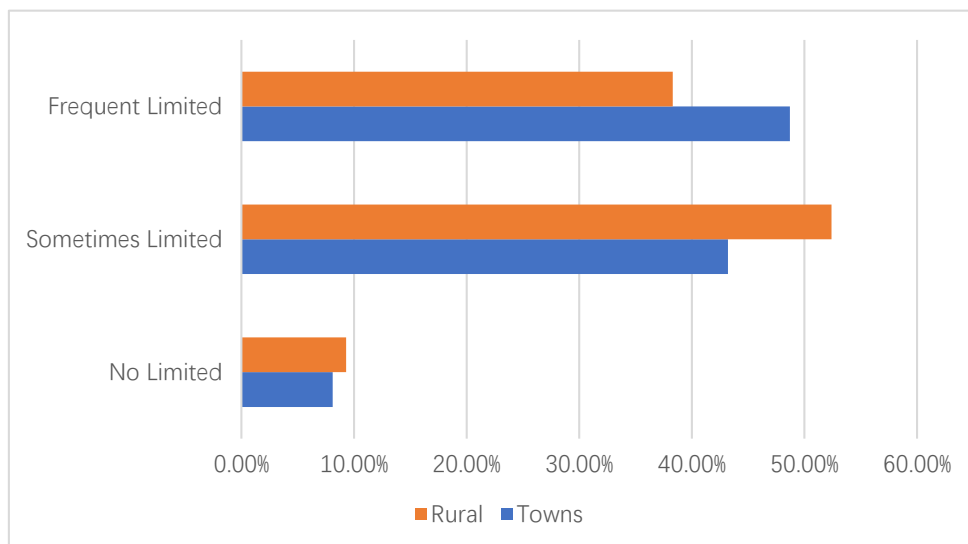


Figure 1: Parents' restrictions on online time of urban and rural juvenile netizens

Although the children of migrant labors migrate to cities with their parents, they still retain their original habits in life. Take media use as an example. As their parents are busy with work and absent for a long time, the children of migrant labors lack control and supervision, and obviously use electronic devices for a longer time than urban children, and use only one device, and tend to be more entertainment.^[20] According to the "2023 Data Protection Book for Chinese Minors", the Internet equipment of rural minors is relatively single, the long-term Internet is more prominent, the proportion of leisure and entertainment applications is higher, and the proportion of learning and

information applications is lower. The proportion of rural minors playing games and watching short videos on the Internet is 6.0 percentage points higher than that of urban minors. While urban minors use online learning, search engines and news more frequently than rural ones. (Chu Xiaokun, Song Qi, Ye DeHeng, 2023).As shown in Figure 1.

In many cases, their children's media literacy is deeply influenced by their parents. Migrant labors do not have a high educational level and have no dialectical attitude towards media use. They often equate "playing mobile phones with" using media ", thus preventing children from accessing media or indulging them in watching short videos or playing games. However, migrant labors themselves have misunderstandings about the media, and they can't really guide their children to use media correctly. At the same time, they can't accompany their children regularly and quantitatively due to long hours of work, which further makes their children rely on the Internet to obtain satisfaction and sense of security. This is a vicious circle.^[21]

Good media use environment and habits can benefit children throughout their lives. A Hao (not his real name) from Niushipu, Shenzhen, likes to communicate with his father. His father has his own opinions on news and often discusses the main points of current events with him, which indirectly cultivates his more critical view of media than his peers. School, as the main channel for migrant labors' children to learn, can guide children to treat network media correctly to a certain extent. A Hao first met network programming in the online course organized by the school in 2020, "but instead of teaching us how to do it, we were told that there was a game to fight against the virus." With the right guidance and his own interest, he began to learn programming by himself. The network was no longer superficial entertainment and began to establish more connections with the outside world. Hao was able to take the first step without the encouragement of his father and the support of family conditions. The computer he used for programming is the old thing his father used to listen to music in his early years, which has been used for 11 years. "It is very old, but the configuration is still very good".^[22]After all, such cases are rare among the children of migrant labors. More children of migrant labors still lack high media literacy and fail to truly analyze the advantages and disadvantages of media in depth. At the same time, urban children are using application media to enhance their cognition of the world and absorb a large number of effective knowledges from the outside world. Urban parents strictly control their children's use of media.

In the long run, the information gap becomes larger and larger, and the gap between the two groups also becomes larger and larger. The information gap brought by the media further divides the social class between children.

3.2 Do not Pay Attention to Social Welfare, Family Health is not Guaranteed

According to the results of the 2018 National Floating Population Health and Family Planning Dynamic Monitoring survey, when asked whether "you have established a resident health file in the local area", only 46,389 of the 169,989 samples said "yes, it has been established", while the rest of the samples said "no, but have heard of it", "no, have not heard of it", "unclear". Among them, "not built, but heard of" accounted for 20.64%. Although some of the rights and interests provided by the government are exclusive public services related to the household registration system (Li Fufu and Guo Xiaoye, 2013), in general, migrant labors do not understand the policies and their own welfare and have poor information cognition and insufficient awareness of rights protection compared with residents in the same city. It is the basic right of every resident to establish a resident health file, which can cover the main health problems and health service records of migrant labors, and better help the community in personnel management, confirm the distribution of occupational diseases and monitor the health of migrant labors themselves. (Xu Guohui, 2010) In cities with highly mobile population, standardizing the establishment of health records for migrant labors who sign labor

contracts can effectively prevent occupational diseases of migrant labors, ensure that migrant labors can obtain corresponding medical and health benefits, and provide targeted treatment for diseases so that the human, material, and financial resources of public medical and health institutions can be rationally utilized.

When migrant labors do not have extravagant hopes for their own basic health and medical rights, they also have blind information about the health benefits their children can enjoy. At the same time, they lack good living habits and basic health knowledge, and family health cannot be guaranteed, which further worsens the living conditions of migrant labors' children. Although the Ministry of Health has carried out the work of tuberculosis protection and immunization program for migrant labors and their children, by 2015, the single vaccination rate of the children of migrant labors in the original immunization program has reached and maintained above 90%, but this is far from solving other chronic diseases encountered by migrant children in the process of growing up. The conservative idea of "serious illness dragging" is still rooted in migrant labors. Research shows that when asked whether they have had a physical examination, most migrant children will ask "What is a physical examination?" Even if the school arranges the physical examination according to the policy requirement, migrant labors will refuse the child to attend because of the cost. A survey of migrant children under the age of seven in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, found that 81 percent had never had a medical check-up, and 84 percent of migrant labors' parents felt they did not understand the importance of regular check-ups for their children. Under the same blue sky, migrant children cannot enjoy the same medical security as their urban counterparts.

The "Health Assistance Program" developed by the Beijing Cooperative Social Work Development Center has helped nearly 30,000 migrant children undergo free health surveys in 2016. Data show that more than 80 percent of these children have health problems of varying degrees. Chronic diseases, such as chronic rhinitis, gastritis, and keratitis, are the most common among them. This is related to their daily hygiene habits and parents' lack of attention to scientific diet. Research has found that some migrant labors' families share a towel and a washbasin for a long time, which is easy to breed bacteria and expose their families to potential virus damage and cross-transmission.

Most migrant children are in the place of residence to pay the new rural cooperative medical insurance, this kind of insurance policy is very different in each region, often need to go back to their place of residence, to save time and money, parents generally only send children to nearby clinics, the disease can only be alleviated cannot be eradicated, and even miss the best treatment period. The inequality of medical insurance indirectly deepens the dual opposition system between urban and rural areas. The proportion of national medical and health investment in rural areas is not high, migrant labors do not know enough about the medical insurance policy in different places, and the health of migrant children is not guaranteed, which causes great uncertainties for social human resources in the next two decades. (Chinese Labour Bulletin, 2023)

4. Psychological gap: Lack of Identification of Label identity, Marginal Situation Hinders Integration

4.1 Lack of Emotional Satisfaction, More Psychological Sub-Health

According to the White Paper on the Development of China's Vocational Education (2022), more than 70% of the existing 30 million vocational school students come from rural areas and have experience of mobility. Therefore, understanding this sample of students can better grasp the overall psychological state of the children of rural migrant labors. The HOPE School, a public welfare organization founded by Liang Zicun in 2016, has helped 20,000 vocational school students in Guangdong Province with psychological counseling to improve their self-cognition and social

cognition over the past seven years. When HOPE School's social labors conduct in-depth interviews and get along with vocational school students, they find that vocational school students generally "underestimate themselves" and "crave attention." (Zhao Jiajia, 2023) In *Unequal Childhood*, Annette Larue mentioned that parents from working class and poor families are concerned about their children's food and daily living. Although migrant children are "together" with their parents, their communication is mostly about basic daily life, and they seldom pay attention to their children's spiritual needs and emotional deficiencies. "Boredom" is a word mentioned by the migrant children more often. They do not want their parents to talk with them only about eating, sleeping, paying attention to safety, and doing homework. They hope to discuss their hearts and future more. (Xiao Yan, 2022) According to a questionnaire survey of 1,518 migrant labors in the Pearl River Delta and Chongqing regions, which was participated in by Beijing Partners in 2013, 52% of the parents of migrant children rated themselves as unqualified parents who "spend less time with their children and communicate less". Migrant children cannot get enough emotional value from their parents, and they are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and confusion in life. (Yu Zhongning, 2023)

Vocational school students who come to the "HOPE School" to communicate because of long-term aphasia environment, cannot get enough attention and recognition from parents and teachers, the expression of fragmentation phenomenon, lack the ability to tell a complete story, and even have a negative attitude towards themselves, "do not believe that they have the ability to achieve something". Most of the feedback from vocational school students collected by the social labors of HOPE School mostly contained self-deprecating remarks, such as "I don't believe that I am worthy of love", "why do you care about us garbage", "I feel dirty", "I really want to learn, but I can't keep up, so the teacher scolded me in class", and so on. They have been in an oppressed environment for a long time, they are not noticed, and being laughed at and bullied is the normal situation for mobile teenagers. (Aris Chan, 2009) In the interview, social labors found that most migrant labors' children would not fight back but suffer silently in the face of bullying. They believed that "it is useless to fight back", and even frustrated education from childhood would make them feel that being criticized is their own fault, poor learning is their own problem, and obesity is wrong. As time goes by, this group will show two extreme phenomena: one part will become more cowardly and have low self-esteem in the continuous self-denial; the other part will become extreme self-protection in the attack, become more aggressive and become bullies. A study found that 40% of the migrant children have sleep problems, and the risk rate of depression is as high as 76%.

The children of migrant labors need a voice to affirm their integration into the new environment and help them actively integrate, instead of being constantly marginalized.

4.2 Marginalization of Identity and Limited Social Communication

The children of migrant labors are often marginalized in society, that is, living in a geographical environment with no city and no village, and facing the realistic dilemma that it is difficult to stay and return. On the one hand, they do not think they are "city people", on the other hand, their memories of their hometown are quite vague. Some scholars call these children "sandwich layer children". (Yuan Ruting, Shen Yang, 2017) With the continuous expansion of cities, prices rise, but the cheap labor force remains the same, many migrant labors must move their rented houses to the edge of cities again and again and adapt to the rapid development of cities through consumption downgrade. Most migrant families live in migrant population settlements far away from the city center, and their relationship pattern and interpersonal network are single. Migrant labors' children have no chance to contact with children from urban social backgrounds, which further increases the difficulty of social integration. In such a difficult environment, 67.39% of migrant labors still decide to stay in the city for three years or more, and 22.43% of them choose to stay because they hope that

their children will have a better life. But even if they continue to be marginalized, migrant labors' children are still unable to ensure their participation in the college entrance examination, and the participation right of urban college entrance examination is still biased toward the "household registration policy" and "talent policy". (Xiong Yihan, 2018)

"If you don't have a Beijing hukou, you can't even go to high school," said Feng Feng, 17, who is studying in ninth grade. "At most, you are half (a Beijinger)." Her situation is representative of the plight of many of the children of migrant labors who live with them. Such self-labeling sets them apart from the urban population in the first place, and the psychological gap is often more difficult to bridge than the institutional gap. While the wealth gap is accompanied by a divide between urban and rural children, a survey in Beijing shows that there is an "us" and "them" attitude among migrant children. In the process of identity construction, 37 percent of migrant children believe that their social status is lower than that of urban children, and "they can eat and live much better than us". 58% of migrant labors' children said they "dislike or even hate" local children, subconsciously distinguishing themselves from urban children. Autonomous willingness greatly affects whether migrant children can integrate into the new social environment. (Chang Yang Xiyu, 2023) A successful social integration is not only a successful survival in the new environment. It requires migrant groups to actively understand the local cultural background and education policies, actively expand local interpersonal relationships, establish close ties with residents, and ultimately define their self-identity as "local people".

The subjective "psychological gap" hinders migrant children from actively integrating into urban society, and makes migrant children unconsciously set limits on themselves and define themselves as non-urban children. Both the activity area and the communication object are limited to a certain range. Research shows that migrant children will consciously avoid some entertainment equipment belonging to community public places, but using these facilities should be their rights and interests, "they think that it is not the place they should go". This kind of labeling also comes from the exclusion of some urban parents, migrant children are often stigmatized as "bad children", and urban residents have a stereotype of them, thinking that all migrant children are "foul-mouthed" and "steal and rob", and do not allow their children to play with them. In 2018, the National Floating Population Dynamic Monitoring Survey on Health and Family Planning surveyed the social circles of migrant labors and found that 22.88% of migrant labors rarely socialized with others, while 44.39% socialized with other migrant populations. Migrant labors' social circles largely affected their children's social environment. The circle of friends of migrant children is limited to migrant children, which is not conducive to cultivating the sense of identity of the migrant children in the city they live in. The 2022 migrant labors' inspection report found that migrant labors' overall sense of social integration has increased in recent years. 45.7% of migrant labors consider themselves "locals" in the cities they live in, but the number is still less than half, and there is still a need for improvement.

5. Conclusions

Children of migrant labors live in aphasia for a long time because they have a single social circle, lack of emotional communication with their parents, and are ignored by teachers at school. They face multiple dilemmas, such as educational discrimination, unfair medical insurance, information lag and social exclusion, which are like an invisible gap separating migrant children from their urban counterparts. The system-based gap permeates education and health care, and these dilemmas cannot be solved by one or two policies and are expected to require constant revision in the next decade. In education, the lack of local household registration is the main barrier preventing migrant children from entering and studying. The government should downplay the correlation between household registration policy and enrollment and study, and actively allocate funds to public schools to help

them accept more migrant children. In terms of medical care, migrant labors, as the main force of social development, should enjoy their medical security in the cities where they live, and the medical rights of migrant labors' children should also be transferred from rural areas to urban areas. The government has exercised reasonable regulation and urged local cities to share the burden of rural medical services. The group differences generated by this system emphasize the unequal class and social status of the two sides all the time.

Among them, the system gap intensifies the psychological gap of migrant children, even if the children of migrant labors born in the city do not define themselves as "locals", but they do not belong to the countryside, this vague identity makes them lose the identity of rural people, but also lose the identity of city people. The identity has a great role in promoting social integration, but the identity largely depends on the self-will of migrant children. Whether migrant children recognize their identity as "locals" in their hearts, whether they hope to learn about urban culture and living habits, and whether they are willing to expand local interpersonal relationships and participate in local activities will affect the progress of their social integration.

Migrant children as a whole show the phenomenon of self-deprecation, they envy urban children to have a better growth environment but also hate their innate sense of superiority, they unconsciously distinguish themselves from urban children, "we" and "they" often appear in the group. Urban parents also have prejudices and misunderstandings about migrant children. Urban residents regard migrant children as "others". On the one hand, they think migrant children lack parental discipline and are typical "bad children". On the other hand, they do not welcome migrant children's integration, believing that they seize the educational resources of local children and increase the pressure of educational competition. Stereotypes and hostile attitudes on both sides further increase class division.

The psychological gap encountered by migrant children can not only be closed by the government improving the system but also need the community carrying out relevant psychological activities to give migrant children a certain amount of attention and care so that they believe that they are worthy of love and enhance their self-recognition through the affirmation of others. When migrant children learn how to care for themselves and get along with the society, even if the structure of the society cannot be changed, they can still find a way out under the self-identity and respect of others.

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