

photo by Xinning Huang

Inaccessible High School : The Plight of 150 Thousand Floating Teenagers

T01 Social Responsibility

Shinyway Education

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"I am willing to go to any school, only if it's a high school." said Hao.

Although he is always the top student in his class, he can hardly see any possibility of entering a high school.

There are nearly 150 students in Hao's grade, but less than 20% of them can go to high schools (including private ones).

In Guangzhou, like Hao, there are still 150,000 more migrant teenagers suffering from the barrier of household registration ("hukou") system. They grow up in cities but are regarded as members of the rural population, and therefore cannot access to education in urban areas. They're called "floating population", because they are not officially considered as citizens of their living city.

According to *Blue book on migrant children*, the number of floating population in China has reached 247 million and that of floating teenagers has reached 34.26 million. If we narrow the range to Guangzhou, a main destination for many floating population, FOUR out of NINE students are considered floating teenagers.

However, owing to the high school entrance examination ("Zhongkao") policy, only 8% of them can get into high schools, whereas the remaining 92% are forced to make a big decision at the age of 15 or so: to attend Vocational schools which are stereotyped as schools for "losers", to go back to their hometown, or just hunt for a job to support their families

The current study environment puts much emphasis on scores. Not only schools, parents, but also many students themselves, long believe going to high school is the best way out. When their roads are blocked by the policy, how do they react?

To further study their attitudes, we went to 3 middle schools (including 2 private schools and 1 public school) to carry out our surveys. This report is based on questionnaires , interviews . and more than 20 hour's field observation.

The following three sections will analyze the education plight from 3 perspectives :
schools , parents, and students.

Schools : Implicit and explicit screening

In Guangzhou, the high school entrance examination ("*zhongkao*") result is the most significant index to evaluate a middle school. As for the schools we observed, however, most of their students cannot go to public high schools. Thus, students that can attend high school are thought to bring honor to the schools. The variance in teachers' expectations on students often turns into implicit and explicit screening.

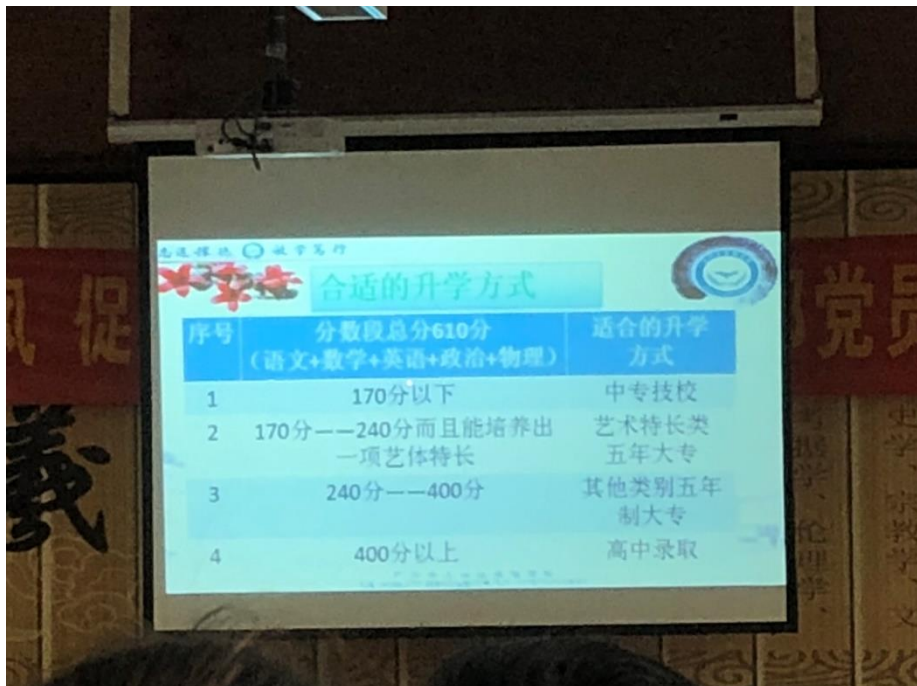
Implicit screening

Many Chinese believe “better diploma leads to bigger success”. Grades define most teachers' stereotypical impressions of students -- "good student" or “*you deng sheng*” is often used to describe students with high grades. Conversely, “bad student” or “*cha sheng*” is used to label students who have difficulty in studying. From daily quizzes, mid-term to final exams, students are ranked and compared again and again. They are bound by their scores and ranks.

Explicit screening

In some private schools, the implicit selection often turns into explicit diversion. In T school, for example, Students of grade 9 will be rearranged into different classes according to their scholastic performance. They are divided into Zhongkao class, college class, and secondary vocational class. By this mean, school can concentrate excellent students into key classes and give them best resources.

“Teacher told us, students who got 400 in the final exam would go to class 4; those who didn't get 200 would go to class 1.” Qiu, a girl who was very sure she would go to class 3, told us.



(A teacher from T school is illustrating 4 different paths for graduates on parents meeting.

Which path to take is directly correlated to students' scores. *Photo by Xinning Huang)*

At this time, students' paths to higher education will become explicit labels. Teachers no longer emphasize exam result in college and vocational classes, but only ask them not to make trouble. These students' education future will be decided a year before most students make their own decisions.

“The channeling of migrant students to vocational school is thought to be an inferior alternative for academic “failures” in China’s examination-driven education system.¹”

Due to people’s long-term prejudice on vocational school, these students are unable to see their future. Many choose to skip classes and hung around with “hooligans”.

¹ Minhua Ling , *Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools* (2015)

“It’s really hard to manage the students in vocational classes. They have no goals. This arrangement (class diversion) is an injury to students, also the teachers.” said Mr. Wang, a teacher from T school.

Parents: Lack of Positive Support

Although most of the parents we interviewed are not highly educated, they are all eager to send their children to high school. In their opinions, going to high school and university means "getting a diploma" and "getting a good job".

On the contrary, they believe that *“students go to vocational school have no future.”* A father said, *“I know nothing about vocational school; but if my daughter fails to attend a high school, I HAVE TO send her there.”*

However, parents are usually unable to offer their children positive help.

“If you are capable of attending high-quality school, we will support you in our best. If you can’t, you just study at those (relatively low-quality) schools”.

These words show the attitude of parents toward the study and future of their children implicitly: all I can do is support you financially; your study is your own business.

Busy job and lack of free time define parent-child time: almost zero. Owing to fewer and fewer communication, parents and children feel it difficult to comprehend each other anymore.

Further, *“My education level is even lower than my daughter, how can I help her with her study?”* Due to their low level education, parents feel powerless to guide the study path of their children.

Based on the above reasons, many parents are unwilling to participate in the co-planning of their fifteen-year-old children's future: few parents obtain education information initiatively; future is all on the hand of their children.

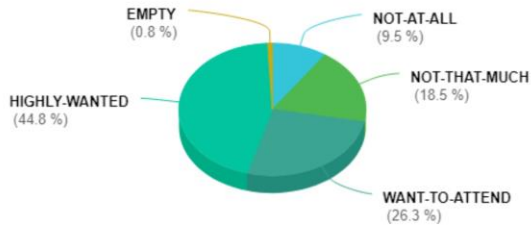
Students: falling confidence

Students are becoming hopeless, but their emotional and practical needs are neglected.

Parents themselves, as workers who came from rural area, received a low level education. Most of them believe “Education is the only way to take off the hat of the poor.”, but how to change their fate through education? They have no idea. These people, including parents and children, are stepping into a loop that they could see the shining advantages of high school education, but they are not capable to reach it. According to the survey we carried out in 3 schools, 44.84% of students showed their strong will of receiving high school education, but 47.49% students predicted a low possibility for them to enter high school. Surveys in different grades also prove that students are gradually losing confidence on themselves.

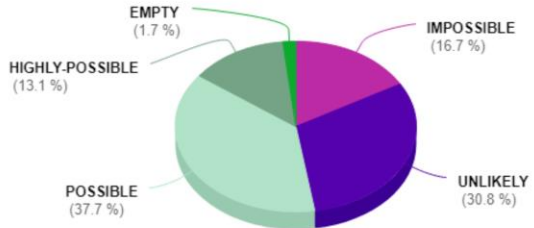
In addition, their teachers see many of these students as “hopeless ones”, putting no effort on them. During the past few years in school, students simply and mechanically received knowledge from book. They could not fully digest it and turn this knowledge into their possessions. They seldom received career introduction course. When they encounter major selection, they have no idea on how to make a career choice.

Willingness for Respondents (15 Years Old Teenagers) to Attend High School



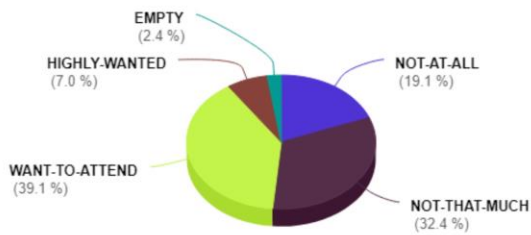
GROUP 1

Predicted Possibility by Respondents (15 Years Old Teenagers) to ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL



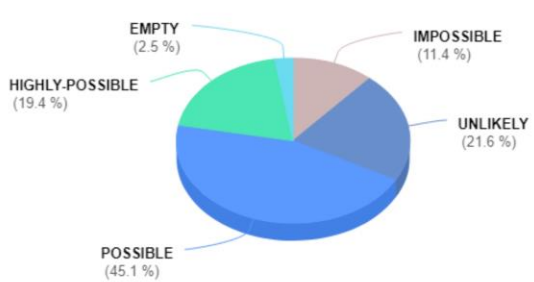
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Willingness for Respondents (15 Years Old Teenagers) to Attend Vocational School



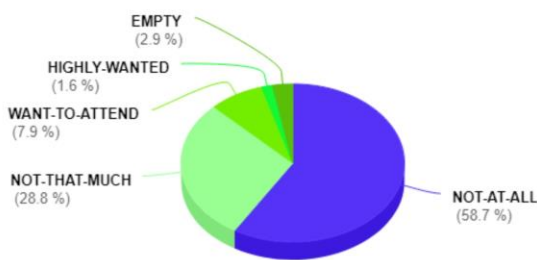
GROUP 1

Predicted Possibility by Respondents (15 Years Old Teenagers) to ATTEND VOCATIONAL SCHOOL



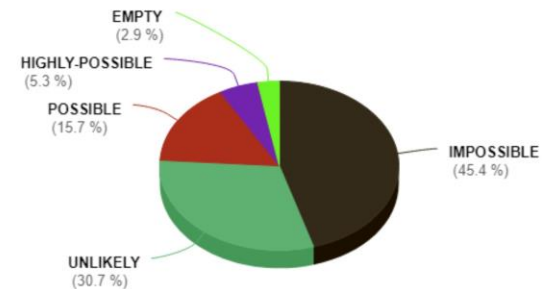
GROUP 1

Willingness for Respondents (15 Years Old Teenagers) to GO TO WORK



GROUP 1

Predicted Possibility by Respondents (15 Years Old Teenagers) to GO TO WORK



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Compared with their peers, they would face a choice that could change their life much earlier than their peers. If they fail in the high school entrance exam, several ways would be presented in front of them—professional high school, technical school or entering the society and working. Over 50% of students were still unclear about their future choice.

Conclusion

The result seems to be depressing: Under the current education policy, at least 85% of migrant teenagers will be excluded from high school education, which is long considered as the best way for Chinese students. What's worse, their parents can't give them constructive suggestions, while their schools impose implicit and explicit labels on them, directly making decisions for them.

Thus, it's very crucial for more people to notice the plight of these floating youths. They need to be supported and guided. If they are continuing being neglected, they will gradually lose the power to create a better life for themselves. They want to have a bright future, just like every one of us does.

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