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The Impact of Frequent School Transfers within Cities on Migrant Children's Peer Relationships and School Social Work Reconstruction Approaches

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Abstract: Existing research on migrant children in China has focused primarily on the initial rural-to-urban transition, neglecting the repeated school transfers and residential relocations that many of these children experience after arriving in cities. This paper identifies a distinct phenomenon - "invisible left-behind" - characterized by the repeated severance of peer relationships due to high-frequency intra-urban mobility, resulting in psychological and social isolation comparable to that of left-behind children despite co-residence with parents. Through conceptual analysis, the paper delineates three mechanisms by which frequent mobility undermines peer relationship formation: temporal compression of friendship development, cumulative identity labeling as "perpetual newcomer," and self-limiting avoidance behavior driven by anticipated rejection. It then analyzes the cascading consequences for school belonging, self-identity, and emotional well-being. Drawing on ecological systems theory , social support theory, and resilience theory, the paper proposes a four-level school social work intervention framework - individual, interpersonal, environmental, and systemic - that addresses the problem at multiple ecological levels simultaneously. The framework emphasizes proactive preparation for mobility, transitional peer support structures, institutionalized newcomer integration, and cross-system coordination. The paper concludes with implications for school social work practice and policy advocacy in the Chinese context.

Keywords: Invisible Left-Behind; Migrant Children; Peer Relationship Disruption; School Social Work; Intra-urban Mobility

1. Introduction

China's rapid urbanization has produced a massive population of migrant children - estimated at over 35 million - who accompany their parents from rural areas to cities. For more than two decades, researchers and policymakers have concentrated on the challenges of this initial migration: access to education, cultural adaptation, and social integration [1]. A silent transformation has been underway, however, that existing frameworks fail to capture. Many migrant children do not stay put after arriving in cities. Driven by parental job instability, rising rents, and restrictive school enrollment policies, they move again and again - changing schools, changing neighborhoods, and repeatedly starting over.

This phenomenon of intra-urban repeated mobility has received little scholarly attention. When it is discussed, it is often framed as an economic necessity or a family strategy for upward mobility. The psychological and social costs - particularly the repeated disruption of peer relationships - remain largely invisible. This paper argues that such invisibility is itself a problem. Migrant children who experience frequent school transfers live with their parents, so they do not fit the classic "left-behind" category. Yet their social worlds are as unstable and lonely as those of children separated from their families [2]. They are, in a real sense, left behind within the city.

I term this condition "invisible left-behind." The invisibility operates on three levels: first, to outside observers - teachers, neighbors, even researchers - these children appear normal because they have intact families; second, the damage occurs in the internal, unobservable realm of peer relationships and self-perception; third, the dominant narrative of migration as upward mobility masks its hidden costs[3].

This paper makes three contributions. Conceptually, it introduces and operationalizes "invisible left-behind" as a distinct analytical category. Theoretically, it integrates ecological systems theory, social support theory , and

resilience theory to explain how repeated mobility disrupts peer relationships and what kinds of interventions might repair them. Practically, it proposes a macro-level school social work framework that moves beyond piecemeal, project-based services toward systematic, multi-level strategies.

2. The Phenomenon of Invisible Left-Behind

2.1 Beyond the First Move

The standard narrative of migrant children's adaptation follows a linear trajectory: arrival, shock, coping, and eventual integration. This narrative assumes stability after the initial move. But for a substantial subset of migrant children, stability never arrives. Consider the typical case: a child moves from a rural village to an urban periphery school, spends one semester there, then transfers to another school because her father found construction work across the city. Six months later, the landlord raises the rent, the family moves again, and the child enters her third school in two years.

This pattern is not rare. Research on student mobility has shown that frequent school changes - defined as three or more transfers - are associated with significantly higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement [4]. Similar dynamics operate in China's migrant population, though systematic data are lacking. What is clear is that each transfer resets the social clock. Friendships that took months to build are left behind. The child enters a new classroom where established cliques have already formed, where teachers do not know her history, and where she must once again prove herself.

2.2 Distinguishing Invisible Left-Behind from Related Concepts

The concept of invisible left-behind is related to but distinct from several existing terms. left-behind children - those who remain in rural areas while parents work in cities - face parental absence, which produces well-documented emotional and behavioral problems. invisible left-behind children live with parents but experience peer absence. the source of deprivation is different, but the outcome - loneliness, low self-worth, difficulty forming stable attachments - is surprisingly similar.

Migrant children in the conventional sense are defined by their non-local household registration status. The invisible left-behind are a subset of migrant children, distinguished by the frequency and involuntary nature of their moves [5]. A migrant child who transfers once and then stays may experience initial adjustment difficulties but can eventually build stable friendships. A child who transfers repeatedly never reaches that stable state.

Floating children is a term sometimes used to emphasize the temporary, unsettled nature of migrant children's lives. But "floating" suggests a kind of aimlessness that does not capture the structural forces - housing markets, labor conditions, enrollment policies - that drive repeated moves. Invisible left-behind points to these structural drivers while naming the subjective experience of social disconnection.

2.3 the Structural Drivers of Repeated Mobility

Why do some migrant children move so frequently? Three intersecting factors are particularly important. First, occupational instability - migrant parents are concentrated in industries characterized by temporary contracts, seasonal work, and frequent job changes. Each new job may require relocating to a different part of the city. Second, housing market dynamics - in many Chinese cities, rents have risen faster than migrant wages, forcing families to move repeatedly in search of affordable housing. Third, school enrollment policies - even within the same city, transferring schools is often difficult due to documentation requirements, district boundaries, and quota systems. Parents may be forced to choose between a long commute and a school transfer.

These drivers are not choices made lightly. Parents who move frequently are usually trying to maximize family income or minimize housing costs. But the cumulative effect on children's peer relationships is devastating, precisely because it is unintended and unrecognized.

3. Mechanisms of Peer Relationship Disruption

3.1 Temporal Compression of Friendship Development Friendships Take Time to Develop

Research on Child Development Suggests That Moving from Superficial Acquaintance to Mutual Trust and Emotional Support Typically Requires Several Months of Regular Interaction. in a Stable School Environment, This Timeline

Is Manageable. for the Frequently Mobile Child, However, the Available Time Is Often Shorter than the Required Time. If a Child Transfers Every Six to Eight Months, She Never Gets past the Initial Stages of Friendship Formation. She May Learn Many Names, Sit with Different Classmates at Lunch, and Participate in Group Projects, but She Rarely Finds a Close Friend Who Knows Her Beyond the Surface.

This temporal compression has a qualitative dimension as well. Deep friendships are built on shared experiences - inside jokes, after-school hangouts, mutual help during difficult times. The mobile child misses these cumulative experiences. Each time she enters a new school, she starts from zero, while her classmates have months or years of shared history [6]. The gap is not merely a matter of time but of social memory.

3.2 Cumulative Identity Labeling the Second Mechanism Is Labeling

Every transfer marks the child as "the new kid." this label carries certain expectations: the new kid is unfamiliar with school routines, does not know the social rules, and may be different in accent or behavior. for a child who transfers once, the new kid label fades after a few weeks as classmates get to know her. for the child who transfers repeatedly, however, the label never fully fades - and worse, it accumulates. she is not just new; she is "always new." classmates may consciously or unconsciously decide that investing in a relationship with her is not worth the effort because she will soon leave again .

This labeling operates at the level of peer ecology. In any classroom, students manage a limited supply of social attention. They allocate it to those who are likely to remain in their social network. The frequently mobile child is perceived as a poor investment. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy: because classmates expect her to leave, they do not include her; because she is not included, she has no reason to stay even if her family could.

3.3 Anticipatory Self-Limitation

The third mechanism operates from the inside. After experiencing friendship loss multiple times, many mobile children develop a protective strategy: they stop trying. Why invest emotional energy in relationships that will inevitably be severed? Why risk the pain of saying goodbye again? This anticipatory self-limitation is rational from a short-term emotional perspective but disastrous for long-term social development [7].

The child who adopts this strategy does not wait to be excluded. She excludes herself first. She sits alone at lunch, avoids group activities, and gives minimal answers when classmates try to talk to her. Over time, her behavior confirms the very outcome she fears - she becomes isolated not because others reject her but because she has stopped reaching out. The tragedy is that this strategy, born from past pain, creates future pain.

These three mechanisms - temporal compression, cumulative labeling, and anticipatory self-limitation - reinforce each other. Time pressure makes labeling more likely; labeling increases the child's sense of being different; that sense triggers self-limitation; self-limitation confirms the label. The result is a downward spiral that becomes harder to reverse with each transfer.

4. Consequences of Peer Relationship Disruption

4.1 Erosion of School Belonging

School belonging - the sense that one is accepted, respected, and valued as a member of the school community - is fundamentally a relational construct. It depends on having people to eat lunch with, to work with on group projects, to confide in when upset. For the frequently mobile child, these relational anchors are missing. She may attend school every day, complete her assignments, and follow the rules, but she does not feel that the school is "hers."

The loss of belonging has behavioral consequences. Children who do not feel they belong are less likely to participate in class, less likely to help classmates, and more likely to disengage from academic work. Over time, this disengagement becomes cumulative. The child falls behind academically, which further marginalizes her from peer groups organized around shared academic activities. The school becomes a place of failure rather than a place of growth.

4.2 Fragmentation of Self-Identity

Who am I? For most children, the answer is constructed through stable social mirrors - feedback from friends, recognition from teachers, membership in groups. The frequently mobile child lacks these mirrors. Each time she enters a new school, she must reconstruct her social identity. In one school, she might be known as

"the quiet girl from Anhui"; in the next, as "the new kid who is good at math"; in the next, simply as "the one who never talks" [8].

This fragmentation is not merely confusing; it is damaging to self-worth. The child may come to believe that she has no stable identity - that she is whatever the current environment needs her to be. Alternatively, she may cling to a negative identity ("I am the kid no one wants to be friends with") because it is at least consistent. Either way, the capacity for a coherent, positive self-concept is undermined.

4.3 Emotional and Behavioral Distress

Loneliness is the most direct emotional consequence of peer relationship disruption. But loneliness rarely travels alone. It is accompanied by anxiety - the fear of entering yet another new classroom, of being watched and evaluated by strangers. For some children, anxiety manifests as withdrawal: they become silent, avoid eye contact, and shrink into the background. For others, it manifests as irritability or aggression: they act out because negative attention is better than no attention

These emotional responses are often misinterpreted by teachers. A withdrawn child may be labeled "shy" or "slow." An aggressive child may be labeled "difficult" or "troublemaking." In neither case does the label capture the underlying cause: repeated, unprocessed grief over lost friendships. The child is not acting out of character; she is acting out of pain. But without someone to recognize that pain, the behavioral problems escalate, and the child becomes further alienated from the very people who could help.

5. A Four-Level School Social Work Intervention Framework

5.1 Individual Level: Rebuilding the Child's Capacity for Connection at the Individual Level, the Goal Is to Help the Mobile Child Develop the Skills, Beliefs, and Emotional Resources to Initiate and Maintain Friendships despite Repeated Disruption.

5.1.1 Social-Cognitive Retraining

The child's anticipatory self-limitation is not irrational given her history, but it is self-defeating. School social workers can help the child recognize the pattern - "I stop trying because I expect to be hurt" - and experiment with small, low-risk social actions. The goal is not to erase past pain but to create new behavioral options.

5.1.2 Narrative Reconstruction

The child's story about herself - "I always lose friends" - is factually accurate but therapeutically limiting. A different narrative is also true: "I have made friends in every new school. That means I know how to do it." Shifting the emphasis from loss to competence can build self-efficacy. This is not false optimism; it is a genuine reframing of the same facts.

5.1.3 Pre-Move Preparation

When a transfer is foreseeable, the social worker can help the child prepare psychologically. This includes rituals for saying goodbye to current friends, planning how to keep in touch (if possible), and rehearsing strategies for making friends in the new school. Preparation does not eliminate the pain of moving, but it reduces the sense of helplessness.

5.2 Interpersonal Level: Creating Transitional Peer Supports

5.2.1 Buddy System

Each incoming mobile child is assigned a trained peer buddy - a classmate who has volunteered to show her around, eat lunch with her, and introduce her to others. The buddy relationship provides an immediate social anchor, reducing the anxiety of the first days. Over time, the buddy may become a genuine friend, or the buddy may serve as a bridge to other friendships.

5.2.2 Peer Support Groups

Groups for mobile children serve a different function. In these groups, children who share similar experiences of frequent transfer can talk about their feelings, share coping strategies, and simply know that they are not alone [9]. The group provides a safe space where the child does not have to explain herself. The sense of "shared fate" reduces isolation and builds a collective identity that can sustain individual members through difficult transitions.

5.3 Environmental Level: Transforming Classroom and School Culture

5.3.1 Institutionalizing Newcomer Integration

Instead of leaving the reception of new students to chance or individual teacher effort, schools can create systematic welcome procedures. A "Welcome Week" with daily inclusion activities, a rotating "class welcoming officer" responsible for orienting new students, and a standard

protocol for introducing newcomers to classroom routines - these practices signal that welcoming is a shared responsibility, not an extra burden.

5.3.2 Intentional Seating and Grouping Practices

Rather than allowing students to choose their own seats or groups (which tends to reproduce existing cliques), teachers can rotate assignments to encourage cross-group interaction. A simple practice - having students line up by birthday order to form new groups - can disrupt exclusionary patterns.

5.3.3 Cooperative Learning Structures

When students work together toward a shared goal - completing a project, solving a problem, creating a presentation - they have a reason to interact that transcends personal preferences. Over time, these structured interactions can develop into genuine friendships.

5.4 Systemic Level: Coordinating across Family, School, and Community

The most carefully designed school-based interventions will fail if the child transfers again before they take effect, or if the family does not understand or support the goals. Systemic-level strategies address the broader context in which mobility occurs.

5.4.1 Family Engagement

Many migrant parents do not realize how much frequent moves damage their children's peer relationships. School social workers can provide this information in a non-judgmental way, while also acknowledging the economic pressures that drive mobility. The goal is not to blame parents but to help them make informed trade-offs. When a move is unavoidable, parents can at least be aware of the cost and prepare their child accordingly.

5.4.2 Cross-School Coordination

When a mobile child transfers to a new school, her service record - including peer relationship assessments, intervention progress, and support plans - should transfer with her. This requires a regional information system that respects privacy while enabling continuity of care. Without such coordination, each transfer resets not only the child's social world but also the professional support she receives.

5.4.3 Policy Advocacy

School social workers, individually or through professional associations, can document the harms of frequent mobility and advocate for policy changes that reduce unnecessary transfers. Examples include "moving within the same district does not require school transfer" rules, rent stabilization policies that reduce housing-driven moves, and school enrollment reforms that allow children to remain in their school even if their family moves within a reasonable distance.

6. Conclusion

6.1 The Logic of Multi-Level Intervention

The four-level framework embodies a core insight: peer relationship disruption arises from the interaction of individual, interpersonal, environmental, and systemic factors, and must therefore be addressed at all levels simultaneously. Individual skills training alone is insufficient without environmental support; environmental changes risk being undone by the next move without family engagement; systemic advocacy cannot help the child struggling today without direct service. This distinguishes the framework from piecemeal approaches that focus on a single level. The full framework is greater than the sum of its parts, as each level amplifies the effects of the others.

6.2 Implementation Challenges and Limitations

Implementing this framework faces real-world constraints. High mobility may cut interventions short, requiring cross-school coordination that does not yet exist in most Chinese cities. Limited school social work capacity means strategies may need to be delivered by teachers or school psychologists without professional social work training. Cultural assumptions that frame frequent moves as aspirational require sensitive engagement, not criticism.

As a conceptual paper, this analysis has not been empirically tested. The mechanisms identified - temporal compression, cumulative labeling, anticipatory self-limitation - and the proposed framework require empirical investigation through rigorous methods in future research.

6.3 Summary of Contributions

This paper has introduced the concept of "invisible left-behind" to describe migrant children who experience frequent intra-urban school transfers - a phenomenon previously overlooked in the literature. It has delineated three mechanisms through which repeated mobility disrupts peer relationships (temporal

compression, cumulative labeling, and anticipatory self-limitation) and three domains of negative consequences (erosion of school belonging, fragmentation of self-identity, and emotional distress). Drawing on ecological systems theory , social support theory, and resilience theory, it has proposed a four-level school social work intervention framework addressing individual, interpersonal, environmental, and systemic levels simultaneously.

6.4 Practical Recommendations

For school social workers, the framework provides a checklist for designing comprehensive interventions: assess the child's mobility history, build peer support structures (buddy systems and peer groups), advocate for inclusive classroom practices, and engage families in understanding the costs of frequent moves.

For school administrators, the framework highlights the need to institutionalize newcomer integration (e.g., Welcome Week, rotating welcoming officer) and examine seating and grouping practices that may inadvertently marginalize mobile children.

For policymakers, the framework points to cross-school coordination and mobility-reducing policies as the most effective long-term interventions. Policies that allow children to remain in their school despite residential moves within a district would significantly reduce the harm documented in this paper.

6.5 A Final Reflection

The term "invisible left-behind" carries an implicit call. Invisibility is not inherent to the phenomenon; it is a failure of attention. These children sit in classrooms, walk through hallways, eat in cafeterias - they are visible. What is invisible is their experience: the quiet loneliness of the perpetual newcomer, the grief of friendships repeatedly lost, the slow erosion of hope that this time will be different. Making that experience visible is the first step toward changing it. This paper is an attempt to do that - to name what has been unseen, to analyze what has been unremarked, and to propose what might be done.

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