

# Analysis of the Education of Migrant Workers' Children in China from the Perspective of Cultural Capital Theory

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**Abstract:** After the opening reform in China, many people flew into the cities searching for job opportunities with their school-age children. These migrant workers' children will face several issues and problems when they start their study trips. This paper uses Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory to explore this current situation and dilemmas of education for them. Specifically, academic achievement is one of the key points. Through research, it is found that the lack of cultural capital of migrant workers' families affects the children's grades. To promote the children of migrant workers to acquire cultural capital, the government should take corresponding measures to improve the educational environment for children of migrant workers. In addition, the government should mobilize social forces, organize migrant workers to participate in parent schools, and organize activities related to family education to help migrant workers' children better adapt to the new educational environment.

**Keywords:** Migrant Workers' Children; Cultural Capital Theory; Academic Achievement

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## 1. Introduction

Since the start of China's economic reform in 1970s, many people moved from rural areas to the cities searching for job opportunities, and many brought school-age children with them (Wang, 2019). This migration has contributed to urbanisation, but it has also brought many educational problems to the inflowing cities. According to *the Ministry of Education of China* (2020), there are 14.27 million school-age migrant children in China in 2019, accounting for 9.3% of the total number of students in school. Therefore, the issue of education for migrant workers' children has become a hot topic in Chinese education in recent years. In addition, many scholars have also conducted different studies on the cities to which migrant workers move, and studies have found that migrant workers mainly choose to work in China's large cities, such as Beijing (Goodburn, 2009) and Shanghai (Chen & Feng, 2019). As a result, a high proportion of children of migrant workers are distributed in these two cities. Wang (2019) notes that three out of ten children in Beijing are migrant children, while in Shanghai, four out of ten children are migrant children.

## 2. Literature Review

This article analyses this topical educational issue in relation to inclusion from my own professional practice experience. It uses cultural capital from Bourdieu's theory to explore the current situation and dilemmas of education for the children of migrant workers in China after they have entered the city, as this theory could help to explore the difficulties encountered by migrant children in moving to the city to study and explain the barriers in this process. Many scholars have studied the dilemmas facing the education of migrant workers' children in China. Wang & Holland (2011) suggest that children of migrant workers are more likely to change schools than local students in urban areas. High mobility can make it difficult for these mobile children to keep up with the curriculum and acquire knowledge. According to Wang & Holland (2011), if children of migrant workers come to the city in the first or second grade in primary school, they may have difficulty adjusting to the new learning environment. However, if they enter urban public schools in grade 4 or later, their attitudes, abilities and habits are likely to lag those of local students. Moreover, the different learning experiences and school environment may cause great difficulties for migrant children in adapting to a new urban school. The large differences in educational policies, educational environments, and other factors from province to province have made school curricula vary greatly from region

to region in China (Yuan, 2014). As a result, maladjustment becomes a major deterrent for the children of migrant workers. For them, various aspects of maladjustment prevent them from entering the age-appropriate grades in urban schools. This also makes them less competitive among their peers. As a result, different study habits and maladjustment become a cause of difficulties in enrolling migrant children in school.

### **3. Theoretical Analysis**

In the 1970s, the concept of cultural capital was firstly put forward by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *The Forms of Capital* (1986). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been used to explain the different academic achievements of children who come from different social classes. How the profitability of children from different classes and class sub-groups in the academic market corresponds to the distribution of cultural capital between classes and class sub-groups (Bourdieu, 1997). The cultural capital that children have in their families has a prominent impact on their academic achievement. Yang (2013) states that individuals have acquired different amounts and types of cultural capital from their families before they enter the school education system, and different cultural capital will be transformed into advantages or disadvantages in students' academic performance through the role of school education. Thus, in migrant families, cultural capital takes on characteristics different from those of the cultural capital of the average urban family. Compared to urban families, children from urban families with a favourable position have an absolute advantage in acquiring cultural capital. And for the children of migrant workers, access to cultural capital is to a considerable extent hampered. Differences in cultural capital led to difficulties in the process of cultural integration for children of different classes. The concepts of cultural capital in Bourdieu's theory can provide an explanation for the educational problems faced by the children of migrant workers.

#### **3.1 Embodied State in Cultural Capital**

This includes the cultural environment of the family, parents' expectations of their children's education, parenting styles and the dialogue and communication between parents and children. Although children were brought to the city by their parents, they live in a homogeneous state where the cultural differences and continuity between them and the city prevent them from renewing their cultural reserves. After migrant children entering the city, it is difficult for them to integrate or even conflict with the knowledge systems and behaviour habits with those in the urban schools, which are far away from their original life in nature and belong to the middle and upper classes, thus resulting in the lack of embodied state of cultural capital.

#### **3.2 Objectified State in Cultural Capital**

As the economic income of migrant workers' families is limited, their family expenses are mainly concentrated on the necessities of life. As a result, their cultural consumption is very low, resulting in a considerable lack of objectified cultural capital held by migrant households.

According to Bourdieu (1997), cultural capital in its objective form is not a fully 'materialised' capital that is unrelated to the process of physicalising. In other words, objectified cultural capital can only function in the process of being 'bodied' by the person. Most migrant families have very limited book collections. For migrant students, these books are far out of their reading repertoire and lack the process of being 'physicalised', thus failing to function as a form of cultural capital (Zhou, 2007). In contrast, urban households are more financially capable of purchasing cultural products for urban children that are closely related to their studies, and in this respect, children of migrant workers are significantly less likely to succeed in school than urban children.

#### **3.3 Institutionalised State in Cultural Capital**

According to Bourdieu & Richardson (1986), educational qualifications, as one of the objective manifestations of institutionalised forms of cultural capital, give cultural capital its original properties. Holding a qualification gives one a traditional, immutable, and legally guaranteed cultural value. Therefore, students who acquire higher education can be holders of cultural capital. Furthermore, by securing the monetary value of academic capital, it is possible to transform

cultural capital into economic capital (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986). This means that the monetary value of a particular academic qualification holder can be exchanged in the labour market. As a result, Chinese students strive for excellent academic credentials to achieve higher economic returns in the job market. This means that for the children of migrant workers, there is an equivalent financial reward for acquiring a high level of education. The education level of parents has a direct impact on the enrolment opportunities and grades of children. The more educated the parents are, the more able they are to take up the task of tutoring their children in learning, and the higher the requirements for children's education are also relatively high (Yang, 2013).

## 4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the difficulties encountered by children of migrant workers moving to the city and develops specific barriers based on cultural capital theory. To facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital by the children of migrant workers, the government should take corresponding measures to improve the educational environment for the children of migrant workers, such as providing continuing education services for migrant workers to familiarise them with the mainstream culture of the city, which is conducive to imparting cultural capital to their children in family education. As can be seen, the solution to this problem requires a combination of many forces, such as the level of family education, school, and society. Furthermore, the implementation of measures in the process of solving the actual problem requires further research.

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