

# The Current Situation and Improvement Path of Family Education Support for Preschool Migrant Children

Cuiping Shan <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Preschool Education, Jiangsu Second Normal University*

\*Corresponding author. Email: scpagz@163.com

## ABSTRACT

With the continuous advancement of urbanization and industrialization, the proportion of the floating population in China has increased year by year, and the trend of "familyization" has become increasingly apparent. This phenomenon forced those migrating pre-schoolers to accompany their parents to live and study in changing cities. Since it is widely acknowledged that parents serve as the children's first teachers, the familial factors exert a profound and fundamental effect on education. However, the majority of the migrant parents are forced to make a living, thus providing limited yet inadequate educational assistance for their children. Jiangsu is one of the three major gathering places for the floating population, and the comprehensive level of preschool education is at the forefront in China. This study selects migrant pre-schoolers in Jiangsu Province as the research participants. It not only presents the status and developmental dilemma of these families when offering educational support, but it also proposes scientific paths from multiple perspectives so as to build a comprehensive family education supporting system for migrant children.

**Keywords:** *Preschool migrant children, family education, social support*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 20th century, the proportion of the floating population in China has increased year by year, and the trend of "familyization" has thus become apparent. Preschool children, as an emerging and fast-growing social group, have also followed their parents into changing cities. According to relevant data, there are 6.28 million migrant children aged 0 to 5 <sup>[1]</sup>, rendering it challenging to promote pre-school education. Family is considered both the starting point and the continuous force to consolidate the foundation of early education and lifelong education. Therefore, family educational support is an indispensable part in the growing process of children. This is especially significant for children aged 3-6 who have been experiencing the golden period for human development, including one's lifelong physical, intellectual, psychological, and moral health. <sup>[2]</sup> Chen pointed out that as children's first teachers, parents have exerted a profound and direct influence on children's formation of character and morality. However, for pre-school migrant families, the majority of migrant parents are forced to make a living, so they may provide limited and inadequate educational assistance for their children.

The Yangtze River Delta is one of the three major gathering places for the floating population, <sup>[3]</sup>and the comprehensive development level of preschool education in Jiangsu Province is at the forefront in China. <sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, this study selected 505 preschool migrant children in Jiangsu Province as the primary research participants and recruited the local children as the reference at the same time. This case study aims to investigate the difficulties currently confronted by preschool migrant families when providing educational support to their children by means of questionnaires and interviews. As a result, suggestions are made to build a complete family education support system for preschool migrant children.

## 2. THE DEVELOPMENTAL DILEMMA OF MIGRANT FAMILIES IN PROVIDING PRESCHOOL EDUCATION SUPPORT

### 2.1. Deviations in the concept of family education support

The concept of educational support refers to an ideology where certain values and societal attitudes are

established and maintained when assisting the object of support. In this study, educational support relates to the educational perspective that the migrant families have adopted to assist the educational progress of their preschool children. The scientific educational support functions positively not only in the development of children’s physical and mental wellbeing but also in the construction of a family education support system. According to statistics (see Table 1), both local and

migrant parents recognized the crucial role of preschool education in children's future development, but compared with those migrant parents, local parents attach significantly more significance to preschool education ( $p=0.004<0.05$ ). Also, local parents have considerably higher educational expectations towards their children than migrant parents ( $p=0.000<0.001$ ) as they encourage their children to obtain a postgraduate degree or higher before the age of 30.

**Table 1** The general situation of family education support expectations and importance of preschool migrant children

|                                       | household registration status | N   | M    | SD   | t         | F      |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|------|------|-----------|--------|
| Educational support pressure          | <i>migrant</i>                | 505 | 2.77 | .887 | 3.279**   | 3.028  |
|                                       | <i>native</i>                 | 525 | 2.60 | .874 |           |        |
| educational expectations              | <i>migrant</i>                | 505 | 5.40 | .770 | -4.324*** | 7.105  |
|                                       | <i>native</i>                 | 525 | 5.59 | .620 |           |        |
| The importance of preschool education | <i>migrant</i>                | 505 | 1.31 | .506 | -2.868*   | 22.405 |
|                                       | <i>native</i>                 | 525 | 1.41 | .681 |           |        |

Further qualitative interviews revealed that migrant families anticipated their children to obtain a decent education, but they lacked a necessarily correct educational concept. To illustrate, they expect their children to gain a penetrating insight into scientific and cultural knowledge in kindergarten. From their perspective, preschool education enables their children to win at the starting line and thus become the people capable of seizing the opportunities and escaping from tragic fate in the long run. In general, parents’ educational supporting behaviors are inextricably intertwined with their deeply rooted educational concepts. Under this relevant awareness, migrant parents are inclined to acquire the book knowledge in advance, memorize ancient poems, write Chinese characters, and even practice complex arithmetic, thereby unconsciously depriving children of entertaining time and integrated development. It is obviously not conducive to the cultivation of children's quality learning and the formation of personality. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children's cognitive development is sequential and staged, requiring us to respect this vital

law. [5]Accordingly, children aged 3-6 are in a critical period of development in many aspects such as thinking, morality, and physical growth. The excessive emphasis on the acquisition of curriculum knowledge can stifle children's intellectual and personality enhancement, thus hindering their overall physical and mental development.

**2.2. A superficial phenomenon of family education participation**

Table 2 demonstrates the disparities between local and migrant parents in terms of three kinds of family education engagement, including cognitive participation, emotional participation, and behavioral participation. It can be seen that the scores of local parents in all three dimensions are significantly higher than those of migrant parents ( $p=0.000<0.001$ ). Local parents have engaged most in providing children with emotional assistance, which was followed by behavioral participation and cognitive participation. For mobile parents, they also had the highest emotional participation, while behavioral participation was the lowest.

**Table 2** Family education participation of preschool migrant children

| educational participation | household registration status | N   | M     | SD    | t          | F      |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|-------|-------|------------|--------|
| cognitive engagement      | <i>migrant</i>                | 505 | 29.72 | 7.773 | -11.404*** | 16.818 |
|                           | <i>native</i>                 | 525 | 34.82 | 6.490 |            |        |
| emotional engagement      | <i>migrant</i>                | 505 | 31.77 | 7.930 | -11.899*** | 40.536 |
|                           | <i>native</i>                 | 525 | 37.02 | 6.046 |            |        |
| behavioral engagement     | <i>migrant</i>                | 505 | 29.02 | 8.773 | -12.535*** | 15.765 |
|                           | <i>native</i>                 | 525 | 35.32 | 7.253 |            |        |

In this study, the score of emotional participation is the highest among the three dimensions, indicating that migrant parents are more concerned about their children's emotions. However, in-depth interviews revealed that merely those explicitly expressed emotional changes can be noticed, such as crying and conflicts with others; parents can be hardly sensitive enough to the child's emotional needs. According to the research, 46.2% of migrant parents failed to think from their children's perspective; 32.3% are unclear about their children's performance in kindergarten; 30.5% are unaware of their children's emotional changes. He and others pointed out children's academic achievement can be essentially impacted by emotional comfort and understanding from their migrant parents. <sup>[6]</sup>Since preschool children are vulnerable to experience mood swings, irritability, anxiety, and depression, being emotionally supported is of positive significance for migrant children to overcome difficulties in the future growth process.

In addition, behavioral participation entails parents participating in creating various activities and necessary conditions for their children's development. Migrant parents have the lowest level of participation in educational behaviors, as evidenced by the fact that 45.4% of migrant parents never or rarely take their children to travel to historical sites, museums, or other cultural attractions; 77.9% never or rarely participate in community activities; 52.4% seldom communicate with teachers about their children's performance in the kindergarten; 32.8% seldom create a positive learning environment for their children, such as prohibiting children from watching TV or playing with mobile phones during studying time. Furthermore, this case study demonstrated that compared with mothers, fathers in migrant families interacted less with their children and also participated less in children's lives and learning. This is potentially hazardous as fathers function effectively in children's formation of gender awareness which should be substantially enhanced in the critical childhood period. Therefore, the role of fathers in society is no longer confined to supporting a family; instead, they are expected to engage in their children's development in an all-round manner. <sup>[7]</sup>

### ***2.3. Unbalanced regional development in family education supports***

The study found that the overall level of family education support for preschool migrant children in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province was higher than that in Nantong. This regional imbalance concerning the family education support for migrant children might be attributable to the impact of economic imbalance.

#### *2.3.1. Unbalanced economic development*

Economic development is the foundation and premise

of educational progress. The research objects of this study are from Nanjing and Nantong in Jiangsu Province, which belong to the new first-tier and second-tier cities in China, respectively. According to Zhu, who systematically compared the economic strength of 26 cities in the Yangtze River Delta, the GDP values of Nanjing and Nantong in the first three quarters of 2018 were 87 million and 58 million, respectively, with the total GDP of Nanjing being higher than that of Nantong. <sup>[8]</sup>Yang pointed out that economic development can effectively promote educational progress as the higher the level of economic development, the stronger the city's development momentum, the bigger the government's investment in education, and the greater the support for education. <sup>[9]</sup> According to Liu and other researchers, the comprehensive development of preschool education can often be established in those well-developed cities. <sup>[10]</sup> This study also came to the same conclusion, reflecting the instinctive association between the advanced level of preschool education and the family education support. Cities with a more developed level of economic development pay more attention to the development of preschool education, thereby encouraging parents to be continuously involved in improving the quality of their children's education before receiving formal schooling.

#### *2.3.2. The capital imbalance of floating households*

In terms of family economic capital, Suo pointed out that the occupations of the floating population are mostly dirty and hard manual labor, and their social status is relatively low in 2011. <sup>[11]</sup> Nowadays, the trend of "employment upgrade" for the floating population is obvious. Most of the current occupations are self-employed, enterprise employees, factory workers, etc., and a number of floating population are engaged in high-paying and stable occupations such as teachers, lawyers, and managers. Social status is gradually improving. However, due to the different levels of regional development, there are significant differences in the capital of floating households. The survey shows (Table 3) that the overall investment in children's education of preschool migrant families in Nanjing is significantly higher than that of migrant families in Nantong, including investment in learning kindergartens, learning costs and interest class costs ( $p < 0.05$ ). The total annual income of pre-school migrant families in Nanjing is 100,000-150,000 yuan, while that of Nantong pre-school migrant families is 50,000-100,000 yuan. Migrant parents in Nanjing spend about 1,000-2,000 yuan each year to purchase learning resources, such as children's books, audio-visual materials, crayons and other school supplies, which is twice as much as the annual cost of migrant parents in Nantong. The annual investment cost of Nanjing mobile parents kindergarten is 8,000 yuan, while the annual investment cost of Nantong mobile parents' kindergarten is 5,000 yuan. Nanjing migrant parents

spend about 2,000-3,000 yuan each year for their children to attend interest classes, while Nantong migrant parents spend only 500-2,000 yuan for their children's interest classes each year. It can be seen that the overall level of

family education investment for preschool migrant children in Nanjing is higher than that of preschool migrant children in Nantong.

**Table 3** Comparison of investment in family education for preschool migrant children in Nanjing and Nantong

| education investment    | city name | ( N ) | ( M ) | ( SD ) | t        | F      |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------|-------|--------|----------|--------|
| school supplies cost    | Nanjing   | 166   | 3.03  | 1.340  | 6.459*** | 2.627  |
|                         | Nantong   | 339   | 2.28  | 1.159  |          |        |
| kindergarten investment | Nanjing   | 166   | 2.30  | 1.109  | 3.353**  | 52.919 |
|                         | Nantong   | 339   | 2.00  | .656   |          |        |
| Interest class fee      | Nanjing   | 166   | 3.56  | 1.708  | 8.470*** | 22.964 |
|                         | Nantong   | 339   | 2.25  | 1.350  |          |        |

In terms of family cultural capital, various studies have demonstrated that parents' educational level has exerted a substantial influence on their children's educational achievement. <sup>[12]</sup> This study also confirms that the higher the parent's education level, the higher the level of support for migrant children. Based on the survey result, the education level of the floating population in Nanjing is higher than that in Nantong. This is mainly because the new first-tier cities have established strict and demanding talent introduction criteria; also, the floating population with a relatively high educational level is more willing to pursue a career in cities with superior economic development, resulting in higher educational opportunities for their children.

### 3. SUGGESTIONS

#### 3.1. government level

##### 3.1.1. Formulating reasonable policies to promote educational equity

In order to satisfy the educational requirements of all pre-school children in a city, each local government should clarify its main responsibilities and implement the "integration of pre-school education into the public service system" proposed in the "Outline of Education Planning". <sup>[13]</sup>The basic needs of education should be adhered to the principle of " the government of the inflowing area". At the same time, after being incorporated into the early education plans in diverse regions, the preschool education of migrant children should also be listed as an indicator for the balanced assessment and evaluation of preschool education in all counties and districts so that those migrant children can be ensured to receive appropriate early education.

##### 3.1.2. Increasing financial investment and expanding inclusive resources

On the one hand, it is necessary not only to establish an education compensation mechanism for

disadvantaged children but also to provide certain financial subsidies to pre-school migrant families in financial distress by forming a government-led investment guarantee mechanism that shares the living costs with migrant families. <sup>[14]</sup> On the other hand, it is imperative to adjust the financial investment policy so that investments in preschool education can be more geared towards communities where migrant children live, thereby improving their cultural environment and education quality. <sup>[15]</sup>

#### 3.1.3. Broadening education channels and encouraging migrant parents to re-educate

The improvement of the family education support can be inseparable from the parents' endeavor to consciously overcome their deficiencies. Research shows that compared with family economic status, the educational attainment of parents has a greater impact on the academic achievement of migrant children. <sup>[16]</sup> Therefore, encouraging migrant parents to undertake re-education or continuing education is an effective strategy to improve their family's education level, which will benefit both generations of migrant families. Accordingly, the government and all sectors of society should strongly promote the development of continuing education of the floating population. Through the establishment of adult schools and regular parenting training, the floating population can be actively inspired to utilize their spare time to participate in learning and constantly strengthen themselves.

#### 3.2. family level

##### 3.2.1. Strengthening the role of fathers

On the one hand, migrant fathers are required to spend more time with their children, allowing them to better understand their children's interests and overcome their fear of expressing their fatherhood to them. On the other hand, it is of vital significance to raise awareness of parenting and recognize the importance of the father's

role, which is highly influenced by the trust of family members.<sup>[17]</sup> Also, fathers of preschool migrant children usually uphold a distorted view of education. In this regard, they can consult professional books on parenting theory or cooperate with kindergarten teachers and the community to improve their parenting awareness and develop appropriate parenting skills. It is undoubted that migrant mothers should afford fathers opportunities to participate so that the latter ones can understand the true thoughts of young children, thus building a close parent-child relationship.

### *3.2.2. Establishing a scientific concept of education*

Migrant parents can establish a scientific educational concept. First, parents should consider the impact of their own behavior and cognition on their children as parents are universally considered children's first teachers. Although formal education in kindergarten may compensate for lack of parental education support, the impact of parents' words and deeds on children's early education cannot be ignored. Moreover, the traditional way of education should be modified. To illustrate, rather than concentrating on a score report as a result of rote memorization, migrant parents should pay attention to the formation of children's quality learning, learning abilities, learning habits, and creative thinking patterns. As Einstein said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge, because knowledge is limited, and imagination contains everything in the world",<sup>[18]</sup> so obviously imagination is an important aspect of learning quality. Lastly, parents should form reasonable educational expectations and encourage children's diverse development. Rather than restricting the children in an existed growing template, the so-called realistic expectations should be set in line with the characteristics of children's individual development and their actual situation.

### *3.2.3. Paying attention to the input of educational emotions*

From a psychological point of view, children who have been ignored or neglected for an extended period of time may feel insecure and require the unconditional companionship and love of their relatives. Therefore, mobile parents should make an effort to spend their spare time with their children, such as playing games, telling stories, and enjoying outdoor activities. At the same time, it is necessary to listen to children's thoughts as children, especially vulnerable groups such since preschool migrant ones, have an increasing need to communicate as their cognitive ability improves with age.

### *3.3. Kindergarten level*

Kindergartens need to transition from a passive role

to active mode. This requires them to take the initiative to satisfy the requirements of migrant parents and perform more intensive family-engaging activities during a convenient time schedule instead of passively waiting for parents to participate in these extracurricular activities. Simultaneously, teachers can actively report children's current situation to the floating parents and address their doubts patiently and sincerely.

### *3.4. Community level*

Through reconstruction and expansion of the original places, the community may not only establish entertaining areas suitable for improving children's physical and mental development but also provide basic gaming materials for migrant children. In addition, certain experts and scholars can also carry out relevant educating and guiding activities on a regular basis to help migrant parents develop a positive attitude towards children and education.

### *3.5. The level of social power*

In order to jointly support preschool migrant children to receive proper family education, the positive role of the media should be emphasized to mobilize more social forces and arouse their awareness of supporting such vulnerable groups from all walks of life, thereby establishing strong educational support force. At the same time, efforts are made to expand social service organizations and mobilize a large number of caring people from the community to actively participate in volunteer activities. By adopting paired assistance and holding regular activities, family education support services can be provided according to the specific situation of children and their families.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study presents the development dilemma of preschool migrant children's family education support in a three-dimensional manner, proposes a scientific support path from multiple perspectives, and is committed to building a complete preschool migrant children's family education support system. As a disadvantaged group in society, preschool migrant children's family education issues are not only related to educational fairness, but also to social fairness. This requires all sectors of society to open up a warm mind, form a strong educational support force, give warmth and care to pre-school migrant children, and help them grow up healthily and happily in the city.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

Shan Cuiping critically reviewed the relevant literature, distributed questionnaires, and wrote this article. Cui Yue, a member of the research team, was

responsible for collecting the interviewing data and conducting the follow-up research. Professor Wang Xiaofen provided theoretical advice, discussed deeply with Shan on the difficulties encountered, as well as proposed the corresponding strategies to overcome the predicament of constructing family education support for preschool migrant children.

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