



Educational aspirations of Chinese migrant children: The role of self-esteem contextual and individual influences



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between educational aspirations, contextual influences, and self-esteem in a large group of Chinese children who had migrated with their families from rural to urban settings. A total sample of 2491 migrant students (mean age = 14 years) from 15 elementary and middle schools in Zhejiang, China participated in the study. Through the structural equation modeling, it was found that social support from family and school, and self-esteem had direct and positive effects on migrant children's educational aspirations, above and beyond the influence of low socioeconomic status. Self-esteem also partially mediated the effects of school and family support on educational aspirations. The association between family support and educational aspirations was stronger among elementary school students than among middle school students. These findings highlighted the critical role of contextual and individual factors in shaping Chinese migrant children's academic prospects.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a sensitive developmental period for exploring future opportunities and goals (Beal & Crockett, 2010). Educational aspiration, which refers to how much education that an individual aspires to attain, is a key developmental milestone for achieving upward mobility (Gil-Flores, Padilla-Carmona, & Suárez-Ortega, 2011; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Khattab, 2003; Tseng, 2006). For children participating in the migratory process, empirical evidence from the Western societies have acknowledged the importance of educational aspirations in children's academic achievement and occupational choices (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Regarding the determinants of educational aspirations, past research has also shown that contextual factors, namely family and school exert influential impact on children's aspiration formations and educational attitudes (Eccles, 1993; Khattab, 2003; Maltais, Duchesne, Ratelle, & Feng, 2015), while other research pointed to the pivotal role of self-agency in one's future-orientated cognition (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Di Giunta et al., 2013; Harter, 2012). Nevertheless, little is known about the dual impact of the contextual and intrapersonal factors on educational aspirations among socioeconomically disadvantaged children in non-Western societies such as China.

The main objective of this study is to explore the contextual (i.e. family and school) and individual (i.e. self-esteem, gender, and age) determinants that matter for the formation of educational aspirations among China's rural to urban migrant children. This study also investigates the mediating effect of self-esteem, and the moderating effects of gender and age in the relationship between family and school social support and educational aspirations.

Educational aspirations are of primary importance in creating and maintaining inequality in educational attainment (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Given the high priority in closing achievement gap for educators and practitioners, understanding the contextual and individual factors that shape educational aspirations of Chinese migrant children would provide useful information on how to capitalize on social support and personal agency that accumulate educational assets among children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in China and beyond.

1.1. Theoretical frameworks of educational aspirations

Research on educational aspirations has been investigated under a dominant sociological framework of status-attainment model (Sewell et al., 1969). The status-attainment model emphasizes the crucial role of social class status and the unique effect of socioeconomic indicators (i.e. family income and parental education) on children's educational achievement and aspirations. The model considers children to be the recipients of the environmental influences, and views their educational aspirations to be reflections of societal perception (Gil-Flores et al., 2011). Although subsequent studies have established the strong link

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between family background and educational aspirations, a sole focus on the predetermined socioeconomic factors ignores children's appraisals of self that actually play a powerful role in their aspiration formation (Han, 2012; Harter, 2012; Maltais et al., 2015).

A more recent psychological framework of expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1993; Simpkins, Fredricks, & Eccles, 2015; Eccles [Parsons] et al., 1983) proposes to address the influence of both the contextual and intrapersonal factors on individual educational choices. According to expectancy-value theory, adolescents' educational aspirations are shaped by the immediate contexts, including family and school. These contextual influences on their educational choices are based, in part, on their evaluations of self-worth and motivational beliefs (Eccles, 1993). However, very few studies have investigated the relative effect of family and school influence on children's educational aspirations and less is known about why and how such relationship operates. In addition, given that much of the existing research is limited to middle-class European American samples, it is not clear, how these relationships unfold for Chinese migrant children, whose sociocultural environment is distinct from the Western children.

1.2. Educational aspirations in the Chinese migration context

China's internal migration provides an unparalleled scientific opportunity to study the resilience factors that can override the hurdles of low socioeconomic status, and contribute to educational success and ambitions of migrant children. Starting from the late 1980, a series of social and economic reforms have been transforming China from a planned economy with agricultural traditions to a market-oriented economy. It was estimated that 220 million migrant workers moved from the rural inland to the eastern coastal centers for contract labor jobs in factories, service sectors, and construction sites (Pong, 2005). With the rising prominence of household migration, a total of 30 million migrant children are growing to be a substantial segment of China's urban population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The large-scale rural to urban migration has given rise to a series of social and policy challenges including the provision of education (Kwong, 2004; Pong, 2005). Migrant children with rural residential status are often at risk for being excluded from the local public school system. Consequently, they are more likely to attend privately run migrant schools or low-quality public schools, which have poor infrastructure, underdeveloped curriculum and teaching facilities (Ding, 2004). Yet for children participating in the migratory process, gaining more quality education has been viewed as a significant advantage to succeed in the labor market and transition to adulthood (Jordan & Graham, 2012).

Previous research reported that the institutional and socioeconomic barriers, including lack of urban residential documents, and low levels of financial capital and parental education all had detrimental effects on migrant children's educational achievement and aspirations (Cheng, 2011; Koo, 2012). Migrant children were found to have higher dropout rates and more emotional and behavioral problems than their urban peers (Chen, 2014; Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2009). However, rather than seeing these vulnerabilities be caused by migrant experience in general, Xu and Xie (2013) suggested that the achievement gap between urban and migrant children could be attributable to differences in socioeconomic status. In addition, Wu (2014) also cautioned researchers against treating migrant children as a homogeneous group, and stressed the need to research social resources that may constitute their heterogeneity in their psychological adjustment (Wu, 2014).

Indeed, many migrant research studies tend to emphasize the dependency and vulnerability of children, while overlook the personal agency and resilience that many migrant children actually display in adverse migrant circumstances (Edsor, 2010). A small but growing body of research has documented a shift to a resource-oriented paradigm which views migration as potentially laying the foundation for children's psychological wellbeing and educational development (Dimitrova, Bender, & van de Vijver, 2014). Migrant experience is not universally traumatic or exploitative (Edsor, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Migrant children often play an active role in assessing their own situation, making positive decisions about their life trajectories, and negotiating challenges and opportunities (Edsor, 2010).

Ethnographic literature also provided compelling evidence that Chinese migrant children display high educational aspirations despite the negative impact of financial stress, family separation, and cultural barriers (Ming, 2014; Murphy, 2014; Woronov, 2009). However, scarce empirical research is available on the underlying mechanisms and conditions under which perceived social support from the family and school contributes to educational aspirations among Chinese migrant children.

1.3. The role of contextual influences

A review of the existing literature supports a robust association between proximal contexts and children's educational achievement and aspirations (Eccles, 1993; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Marjoribanks, 2005). Two of the most important proximal contexts are family and of school (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Han, 2012; Hill et al., 2004; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

Parental influence on children's educational choices has been extensively researched in the Western and Eastern contexts. Social support from parents, which entails socializing activities, communications, and interactions among parents and children, was found to be critical in motivating children's willingness to acquire more education (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). It is believed that a supportive family environment not only fuels educational and personal development but also acts as a buffer against emotional maladjustment among migrant children (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheaton, 1996; Tseng, 2006).

In Chinese culture, parents place high educational aspirations for their children since education is considered the only path for upward mobility (Fong, 2007). Chinese parents are actively engaged in many aspects of children's learning including monitoring homework, transmitting educational values, purchasing educational materials and paying for tutoring (Gu, 2008; Kim & Fong, 2013). Family social support contributes unique variance to Chinese children's self-esteem and academic outcomes (He, Wu, Huang, & Xiao, 2008; Wu, Palinkas, & He, 2010). Many Chinese migrant parents also start to view education to be a top priority in their migration decision (Gong, 2005; Ming, 2014). Despite limited education, financial constraints, and stressful working hours, Chinese migrant parents also managed to provide indirect academic support for their children such as emphasizing the importance of learning and relying on social networks for homework support (Murphy, 2014; Yuan, Fang, Liu, Hou, & Lin, 2013).

School functions as the primary site for social interaction and transmission of values and norms that bridge migrant children from home to the community (Han, 2012; Murphy, 2014; Wu et al., 2010). A school's endorsement of culturally sensitive pedagogy, and teachers' promotion of inclusion and diversity can increase migrant children's school engagement and maintain positive academic attitudes and self-esteem (Brown & Chu, 2012). Prior migrant research in China also noted that intimacy, emotional care, and low conflict in teacher-student relationship had a positive association with migrant children's school satisfaction and mental wellbeing (He et al., 2008). Conversely, migrant children's perception of a negative teacher-student relationship was related to increased misbehavior and somatization (Xie, Zou, & Li, 2007). One qualitative research conducted in Beijing indicated that migrant children reported to have a positive relationship with their teachers, and perceived their teachers to be helpful, kind and non-discriminatory (Guo, Yao, & Yang, 2005).

1.4. The mediating role of self-esteem

According to social learning and expectancy-value theory, self-appraisals of capacity predict education related choices, aspirations, and

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