

The Role of Sunflower Community Services in Promoting the Psychological Development of Migrant Children

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Keywords: Migrant children; Community services; Social capital; Cultural capital; Self-efficacy

Abstract: With the deepening of urbanization in China, migrant children face a dual lack of social capital and cultural capital, which has led to psychological development problems such as low participation and weak self-efficacy. As an important support arena outside the family and school, community services play a crucial role in alleviating these issues. Based on Bourdieu's theory of capital and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, this study systematically analyzes the mechanisms and practical pathways through which the "Sunflower Community" promotes the psychological development of migrant children. The findings show that Sunflower Community significantly enhances migrant children's social capital and cultural capital through structured social activities, emotional cognition courses, and parental empowerment, thereby improving their self-efficacy and social competence. Parental involvement has a positive impact on intervention outcomes, and community services provide an effective mental health support platform for migrant children. However, challenges remain in practice, including uneven service coverage, insufficient continuity of interventions, and weak collaboration between families and schools.

1. Introduction

With the intensification of population mobility between urban and rural areas in China, the number of migrant children has continued to grow. According to data from the Seventh National Population Census [1], by 2020 the population of migrant children in China had reached approximately 71.09 million, accounting for nearly one-quarter of the total child population. Migrant children have become an important social group in Chinese society. However, due to the household registration system, unequal distribution of social resources, and cultural adaptation barriers, migrant children often face significant psychological and social adjustment problems.

After entering cities, migrant children frequently experience low levels of participation and self-efficacy in schools and society due to a lack of effective social capital and cultural capital. These psychological issues not only affect their academic performance but may also have long-term consequences for their social identity and future development.

Against this background, community services, as an important source of social support beyond families and schools, have gradually attracted attention. Compared with traditional school and family education, community services provide social interaction, educational support, and psychological counseling, making them an important intervention pathway for migrant children's mental health.

Grassroots innovative practices represented by the “Sunflower Community” actively explore ways to help migrant children overcome psychological developmental difficulties through capital accumulation and psychological support. Therefore, this study raises the following research question: How does the Sunflower Community promote the psychological development of migrant children in Shanghai?

Through this research, the study aims to provide theoretical support and practical references for mental health interventions for migrant children, promote policy improvement, and offer more effective intervention pathways and solutions for society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theories of Social Capital and Cultural Capital

2.1.1 Social Capital Theory

Social capital is an important concept proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, who defined it as the sum of resources linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [2]. In the context of migrant children, the lack of social capital is reflected in weak connections with local urban communities, resulting in insufficient support systems when facing social challenges. Bourdieu further pointed out that the accumulation of social capital contributes to individuals’ social adaptability, particularly through the establishment of strong and weak ties that facilitate social integration and access to resources [2].

Due to family migration and institutional restrictions related to the household registration system, migrant children often lack connections with local communities, which limits their opportunities for social participation. Accumulating social capital can effectively enhance migrant children’s social adaptability by expanding social networks and increasing social support, thereby helping them better integrate into new environments. However, migrant children’s social relationships are often limited to relatives and people from their hometowns, resulting in a relative scarcity of social capital within urban communities, which in turn affects their mental health and social functioning. A case study of Community L found that social workers were able to establish sustainable social support systems for migrant children by strengthening both “bonding” and “network-based” social capital, significantly improving their social integration and educational outcomes [3].

2.1.2 Cultural Capital Theory

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital holds that cultural knowledge, educational background, habits, and skills possessed by individuals constitute their cultural capital, which plays an important role in social interaction and education. Cultural capital can be divided into three forms: embodied cultural capital, institutionalized cultural capital, and objectified cultural capital [2].

Migrant children often face a shortage of cultural capital, particularly in urban settings, where they lack the cultural knowledge and skills necessary to adapt to new environments. Many migrant children experience significant cultural adaptation difficulties in both learning and daily life, which are closely related to their family cultural backgrounds. Xiao Yibei pointed out that migrant children generally lack both explicit and implicit family cultural capital, manifested in limited educational resources, weak family support, and inefficient parent–child interaction [4]. Social work interventions can effectively promote the accumulation of cultural capital.

2.2 Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy, proposed by psychologist Albert Bandura [5], refers to an individual’s belief in their

ability to successfully perform specific tasks or cope with challenges. Bandura argued that self-efficacy plays a key role in learning, motivation, emotional regulation, and social interaction. Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to adopt positive attitudes toward challenges and demonstrate stronger adaptability, while low self-efficacy may lead to avoidance behaviors and emotional problems.

In the context of migrant children, a lack of self-efficacy is a common issue. Due to cultural adaptation barriers and insufficient social resources, migrant children often lack confidence in their abilities, which negatively affects their mental health and social participation. Studies have shown that social support, educational programs, and emotional cognition training can effectively enhance migrant children's self-efficacy and help them better adapt to new environments [6]. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy provides a theoretical foundation for this study by explaining why the accumulation of social and cultural capital can promote psychological development and social adaptation among migrant children.

2.3 Common Psychological Problems of Migrant Children and Their Causes

Due to unstable family structures, frequent changes in living environments, and weak social support networks, migrant children constitute a highly vulnerable group in terms of mental health development. A large body of empirical research shows that, compared with local resident children, migrant children are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, and oppositional behaviors, often accompanied by behavioral maladjustment, emotional regulation difficulties, and social withdrawal [7]. These psychological problems are not isolated but result from the interaction of multiple structural factors.

At the micro level, family instability is one of the primary factors affecting mental health. Migrant families often face economic pressure, low parental educational levels, and insufficient parent-child interaction. In particular, long-term parental labor migration may deprive children of adequate companionship, leading to insecure attachment and undermining basic emotional security [8].

At the school level, migrant children frequently change schools, teachers, and peer groups during enrollment and transfers, often occupying marginalized positions within schools. They are more likely to experience distant teacher-student relationships, academic adjustment difficulties, and peer exclusion, further intensifying feelings of loneliness and self-denial [9].

In addition, long-standing structural inequalities such as household registration discrimination and unequal resource allocation restrict migrant children's access to public services, community participation, and cultural identity formation. This weakens their social support systems and identity construction pathways, placing their psychological development in a persistently disadvantaged position. Without effective psychological intervention and emotional support, these issues may extend into adolescence and even affect adult social adaptation and psychological stability. Ecological systems theory emphasizes that children's development depends on the coordinated functioning of family, school, and community systems. Migrant children often grow up in contexts where these support systems are deficient or imbalanced, making systematic mental health protection mechanisms and interventions particularly necessary [8].

2.4 Community Service Intervention Models and Practical Pathways

In recent years, as concern for migrant children's mental health and social integration has increased, social work interventions and community support have become key pathways for promoting their development. Numerous studies indicate that using communities as platforms to integrate family, school, and social resources and establish coordinated service systems is an effective approach to achieving psychological reconstruction and social adaptation among migrant children.

In practice, social workers typically adopt comprehensive service models by implementing community education programs, parent–child support activities, psychological empowerment courses, and social skills training. For example, a case study of Community L demonstrated that social work interventions enhanced both bonding and network-based social capital, significantly improving family interaction, peer relationships, and community belonging among migrant children [3]. Community education services not only expanded children’s learning and interaction spaces but also became important outlets for emotional expression and psychological support.

Xiao Yibei’s study of Project C in Chongqing further emphasized cultural capital cultivation as the core of social work intervention [4]. By promoting parent–child co-learning, weekend classes, and family education workshops, social workers enhanced families’ participation in education, strengthened support functions within family structures, and improved migrant children’s psychological resources and cognitive confidence.

Wang Ying et al. proposed an intervention mechanism centered on government–community–enterprise collaboration, highlighting the role division among government agencies, community organizations, and enterprises in community development, resource integration, and institutional coordination to achieve cross-sectoral systematic intervention [10].

Furthermore, establishing child-centered participation mechanisms is an important strategy in social work intervention. Encouraging migrant children to actively express their needs and concerns enhances their sense of control over their environment and strengthens their subjectivity, thereby improving self-efficacy and social adaptability. Overall, as the support system closest to migrant children’s daily lives, community services possess advantages such as high-frequency contact, low access barriers, and strong resource integration capacity. Their systematic and professional development has been shown to effectively promote psychological security, social belonging, and cultural identity construction among migrant children, serving as an important pathway from “integration” to “rootedness.” However, many community interventions still face challenges such as insufficient human resources, uneven professional capacity, and inadequate long-term funding, highlighting the need for further innovation and institutional safeguards.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- 1) Services provided by Sunflower increase migrant children’s social capital and enhance their self-efficacy.
- 2) Services provided by Sunflower increase migrant children’s cultural capital and enhance their self-efficacy.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a case study approach to explore in depth how Sunflower Community services promote migrant children’s psychological development by enhancing social and cultural capital. The case study method allows for detailed descriptions and comprehensive analysis of individuals or groups. Specifically, this study employs observation and in-depth interviews to collect data on migrant children’s psychological development, emotional cognition, social competence, and self-efficacy within community services.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

3.2.1 Observation

Observation is one of the primary data collection methods in this study. The researcher conducted

field observations at the Sunflower Community by participating in children's daily activities and courses, collecting data on their social interactions, emotional expressions, and levels of participation. Observations were conducted in natural settings to avoid interfering with children's normal activities and behaviors.

3.2.2 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews constitute another major data collection method. Interviewees included parents, volunteers, and staff members responsible for Sunflower Community services. The interviews aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of community services on migrant children's mental health, particularly changes in social capital, cultural capital, and self-efficacy.

Parent interviews focused on children's sense of participation, emotional changes, and improvements in social skills, as well as parents' perceptions and evaluations of community services. Interviews also explored parents' concerns and expectations regarding their children's mental health and the role of community services in parental education.

Volunteer interviews focused on volunteers' experiences interacting with migrant children, particularly how they promoted emotional management and social interaction through teaching and tutoring. Volunteers also shared observations and feedback regarding improvements in children's self-efficacy.

Administrator interviews examined the operational model of Sunflower Community services, course design goals and philosophies, and how community services help migrant children accumulate social and cultural capital and promote mental health.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Emotional Problems and Improvements Among Migrant Children

Observations at the Sunflower Community revealed that migrant children commonly experience difficulties in emotional regulation. When first joining community activities, some children were reluctant to participate and exhibited significant emotional fluctuations. For example, during picture-book classes, some children showed anxiety and withdrawal when facing challenges. Parents and volunteers noted that these emotional issues were closely related to uncertainty and adaptation difficulties in urban life.

Sunflower Community's course design places particular emphasis on emotional cognition, especially in picture-book classes, where children learn to recognize and understand emotions through storylines and character interactions. Emotional cognition is a core theme in the early stages of the curriculum. Teachers use picture books and emotional role-playing to help children identify different emotions and learn appropriate ways to express and regulate them. This design effectively improved children's emotional self-management abilities and reduced emotional problems. A volunteer teacher stated: "Emotional cognition courses help children improve self-control and social confidence. Especially during conflicts, children now actively seek solutions rather than showing avoidance or extreme reactions."

During classroom observations, a newly arrived migrant child was initially unwilling to participate in activities. Volunteers and teachers guided the child to engage in auxiliary tasks, such as distributing leaves and paper, to help them gradually integrate into the classroom.

As the courses progressed, children became more proactive in classroom activities, particularly in emotional recognition and expression exercises, showing increased confidence and comfort. Volunteers also played a crucial role as sources of psychological support. Beyond teaching, they served as emotional supporters for children. Volunteer E noted: "We often encourage children to

express their emotions and help them organize their thoughts. When they feel emotionally unstable, we provide extra care and patience.”

Parental involvement played a key role in mental health intervention. Through regular parent education courses, Sunflower Community enhanced parents’ awareness and understanding of children’s mental health. Parents learned how to identify emotional changes and provide appropriate support and encouragement. One parent stated: “I used to focus only on my child’s academic performance, but now I understand that emotional health is just as important. I’ve learned how to communicate better with my child, especially when they feel frustrated.”

4.2 Accumulation of Social Capital and Cultural Capital

At Sunflower Community, migrant children’s social capital accumulation was primarily reflected in friendship formation. One parent remarked: “At first, he was a little scared, but after coming more often, he made friends here. Now he’s willing to participate in activities. Playing with peers is especially good, particularly on weekends when we’re busy.”

Sunflower Community prohibits mobile phone use and provides a large number of books, toys, and sports equipment. A table tennis table is placed at the entrance. The administrator explained: “We hope migrant children come here to do things other than using phones. At home, they mostly play on phones, but here they can play with friends. That’s very important.”

Building connections with other migrant children and forming a collective positively influenced children’s sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Community walls display certificates, artwork, and rules for co-constructed community management, particularly a reward and punishment system. The administrator noted: “We want children to feel that Sunflower is their own place. These rules also help with student management.”

In terms of cultural capital, Sunflower Community offers diverse courses and activities, including interest-based, art-related, and mental health courses. These programs effectively attracted participation and helped children build confidence, express themselves, and establish social connections. Art courses enabled children to express emotions through painting and music, enhancing self-identity, while social interaction activities improved communication skills. One parent commented: “Sunflower’s activities not only teach knowledge but also help children gain confidence through interests. These activities are very important for psychological growth.”

4.3 The Role of Volunteers

Volunteers played a vital role in the successful operation of Sunflower Community. Beyond teaching, they acted as supporters and guides in children’s psychological development. All volunteers were university students from relevant majors, focusing not only on teaching content but also on identifying emotional issues, designing interactive activities, and promoting social skills.

One volunteer stated: “In real teaching situations, we learned how to help children overcome social anxiety through positive interaction and encouragement, especially those initially unwilling to participate.” Volunteers were able to detect emotional changes in children and provide timely support, becoming an important factor in adaptation and confidence-building.

4.4 Challenges Faced by Sunflower Community

Despite its effectiveness in enhancing social and cultural capital and improving mental health and self-efficacy, Sunflower Community faces several challenges.

Institutions like Sunflower can only serve as supplementary support rather than primary agents; families remain the most influential factor. Parental participation remains limited, particularly in

parent workshops held during holidays. Additionally, due to changes in work locations and family circumstances, long-term intervention continuity cannot be guaranteed. The administrator explained: “We use a registration system, with childcare on weekday evenings and interest courses on weekends. However, not all children can persist. Family reasons, such as moving or returning to hometowns, often interrupt participation.”

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Using a case study approach combined with observation and interviews, this study explored Sunflower Community’s role in promoting migrant children’s mental health. Findings indicate that through structured social activities, emotional cognition courses, parental involvement, and volunteer support, Sunflower Community significantly improved migrant children’s social skills, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation. Children’s participation and confidence increased noticeably.

However, despite positive outcomes, Sunflower’s impact remains supplementary. Diverse family conditions influence service implementation and effectiveness.

This study has limitations. The sample is mainly drawn from Shanghai and may not represent migrant children elsewhere. Future research should expand geographic coverage to verify generalizability. Additionally, this study focused on short-term effects; longitudinal research is needed to assess long-term impacts of social and cultural capital accumulation on future adaptation and mental health.

Finally, while highlighting the importance of parents and volunteers, future research should explore ways to strengthen family–school–community collaboration and optimize community services to provide more precise parental education and comprehensive mental health protection for migrant children.

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