Poverty and Educational Inequalities: An Ethnographic Case Study of a Migrant Children's School in Beijing

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration of Original Authorship

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all materials from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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Abstract

As globalisation progresses, China's rapid economic development has brought numerous urban job opportunities, and attracted many rural migrant workers to cities in search of better employment and higher wages. This shift has brought attention to the education of their accompanying children, known as 'migrant children.' This study investigates the educational experience of migrant children in China from two perspectives: the role of parents in their children's educational experiences and the experiences of migrant children in schools and classrooms. The research was carried out using qualitative ethnography in a private nine-year compulsory school for migrant children in Beijing, focusing on data collected from 21 migrant children. It highlights the critical role of migrant parents in accessing educational experiences and provides a comprehensive view of the entire process, from school choice to academic achievement and educational as well as career aspirations for migrant children. The findings reveal the complex challenges faced by migrant children in their education, stemming from family, housing, teachers, schools, peers and the community. Moreover, the study discusses the adaptation strategies of migrant families and their children within Beijing's educational environment. The results emphasise the need for policies that not only address access to education but also focus on the quality and equality of education provided to migrant children. This research deepens the understanding of the complicated relationships among migration, education, and social equality in China and aids in adapting Western theories to Chinese contexts to broaden their applicational scope.

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CONTENT

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Left-behind and migrant children

1.1.1 Context to the problem: left-behind and migrant children

In the last three decades, China's rapid economic development and urbanisation have attracted millions of residents in the rural areas to migrate to urban cities looking for better employment opportunities (Chang et al., 2019; Yu, 2017). During the process of urbanisation and modernisation, large numbers of internal migrant parents, constrained by financial difficulties (long working hours, low wages) and a lack of social services, have opted to leave their children behind in rural hometowns. These parents are often too busy to care for their children and cannot afford the high costs associated with raising children in urban areas (Duan & Zhou, 2005). Thus these children are called Left Behind Children (LBCs) and have to live with one parent or with relatives, typically their paternal grandparents (Bai et al., 2018). Defining LBCs as minors "under the age of 18 whose parents have migrated for work", estimates based on the data from China's Sixth Population Census in 2010 indicated there were about 61.02 million rural LBCs. However, a revision by the State Council of China (2016) reported a significantly lower figure of 9.02 million LBCs. This number was reduced following a narrower definition that considered only those children under 16, whose parents both migrated for work, or one parent migrated while the other lacked caregiving capabilities. The definition shifted once again in 2020 to include children aged 0-17 who cannot live with their parents due to their migration across townships or streets for at least six months, revealing a population of 66.93 million LBCs (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023). Meanwhile, as cities offer better educational resources and social facilities, an increasing number of rural migrant workers are choosing to bring their children along (Zhang et al., 2019). These population, though holding rural household registrations, are engaged locally in non-agricultural sectors or live away from their rural homes for more than six months a year. These individuals are typically referred to as "migrant workers" (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024a). Those children who live with their parents in their destination cities, as

opposed to remaining in their rural homes as per the household registration system (Hukou), are categorised as Migrant Children (Yu et al., 2005).

Long-term tracking data on the numbers of Left-Behind Children and Migrant Children in China is difficult to find due to varying definitions that may encompass several categories of children. It is undeniable that a large number of children in China grow up experiencing prolonged separations from one or both parents. According to a report of annual educational statistics (Ministry of Education in China [MOE], 2018), the definition of Migrant Children includes those from different provinces and other districts/counties within the same province. Additionally, there is a significant group known as the children of migrant workers. These are rural children registered in a province (region, city), or county (district) outside their own, who accompany their parents to urban areas to receive compulsory education (MOE, 2019a). In 2020, the definition of Migrant Children was refined to include children aged 0-17 among the migrant population. The transient population refers to those separated from their household registration for more than half a year, excluding intra-city movements (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023). The concept of Left-Behind Children is a combination of rural and urban LBCs, specifically referring to those registered in rural areas (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023), so in this research, all LBCs are considered to be from rural areas. The focus of this study is mainly on the children of migrant workers, including those who were previously classified as rural LBCs – it was because the early migrant population primarily originated from rural areas. As a result, Migrant Children were typically identified as coming from these rural areas, and Left-Behind Children were also predominantly viewed as children from rural settings.

In recent years, population mobility in China has become even more active, with the number of people on the move increasing significantly from 2010 to 2020. Over this decade, the migrant population grew by 69.7%, rising from 221 million in 2010 to 376 million in 2020, which represents 26.6% of the

total population (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023). The Table 1 below records the numbers of children affected by population mobility from 2000 to 2020 in China, including Migrant Children, rural Left-Behind Children, and urban Left-Behind Children. By 2020, the number of Migrant Children had risen to 71.09 million, a significant increase from 35.81 million in 2010, which indicated that there were 13 migrant children for every 100 children in 2010. The count of LBCs was 66.93 million, making a total of 138 million children affected by demographic shifts, representing 46.4% of the total population of children in China (298 million). This means that nearly half of the children in China are directly affected by population mobility. The percentage of Migrant Children rose from 12.8% in 2010 to 23.9% in 2020, indicating that one out of every four children in China is now a Migrant Child (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023). Today, it is not just children of low-educated migrant workers who are on the move; more highly educated individuals and their children are also joining this wave of mobility. China has fully entered an era of extensive mobility.

Table 1: Number of Left-behind and Migrant Children

Table 1: Number of Left-behind and Migrant Children (2000-2020) (million)

Year	Children of Migrant Workers	Rural Left-behind Children	Urban Left-behind Children
2000	19.82	26.99	3.1
2005	25.33	58.61	14.7
2010	35.81	39.7	15.21
2015	34.26	40.51	28.26
2020	71.09	41.77	25.16
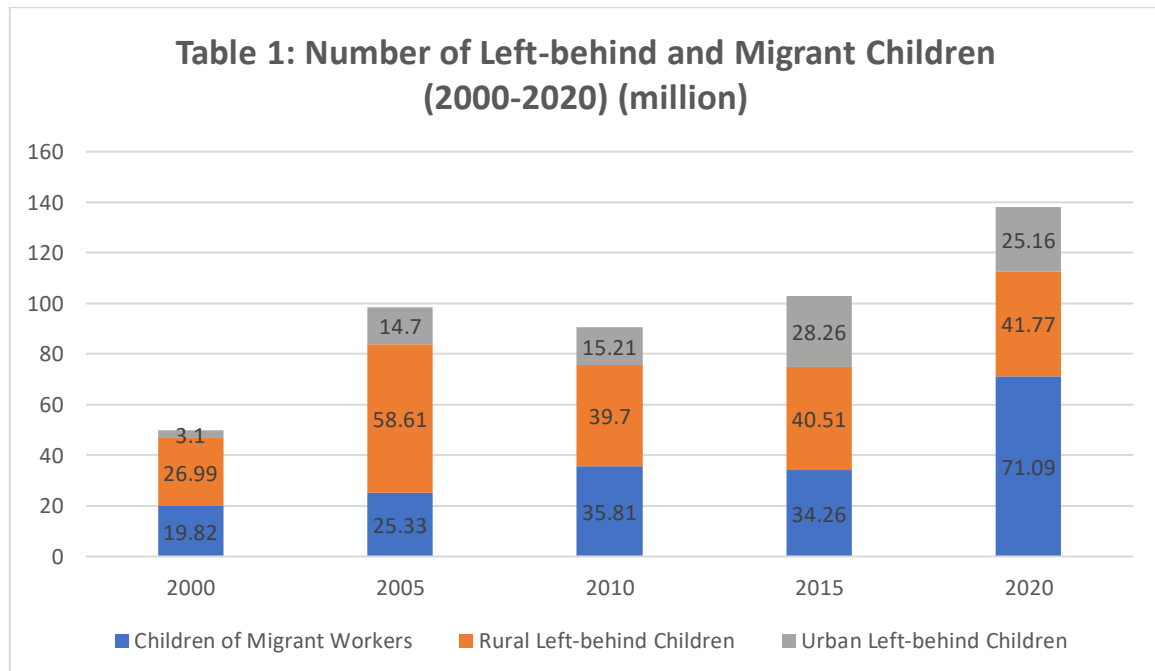
Source: (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2018)

Since 2009, the Ministry of Education in China has included statistics on the number of children accompanying migrant workers to urban areas for compulsory education (including primary and lower secondary schools) and those left behind in rural areas in its annual educational development reports. The data in the following Table 2. clearly shows the trends in the numbers of these two groups of children from 2009 to 2022. In 2022, there were 13.6468 million children of migrant workers in compulsory education. Over the past decade, the number of migrant workers' children increased by 3.68 million, while the number of rural Left-Behind Children sharply decreased by 11.37 million. This shift in numbers raises questions about the dynamics affecting these groups. One might hypothesize that the decrease in rural Left-Behind Children could correlate with an increase in those not receiving compulsory education or dropping out due to poverty. However, this hypothesis is contradicted by national education statistics. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2023b), the net enrolment rate for primary school-aged children was 99.9% in 2021, and the gross enrolment rate for lower secondary education exceeded 100%. Additionally, the consolidation rate of China's nine-year compulsory education reached 95.4%, improving by 7.9 percentage points since 2010, which signified marked progress in the access to and quality of compulsory education. Yet, the sharp decline in the number of rural Left-Behind Children receiving compulsory education needs further exploration. To understand the reasons behind the decrease in the number of rural Left-Behind Children, an analysis of data and policy on these children and migrant workers' children is necessary.

Table 2: Number of Rural Left-behind and Migrant Children receiving compulsory education

Table 2: Number of Rural Left-behind and Migrant Children receiving compulsory education (2009-2022) (million)
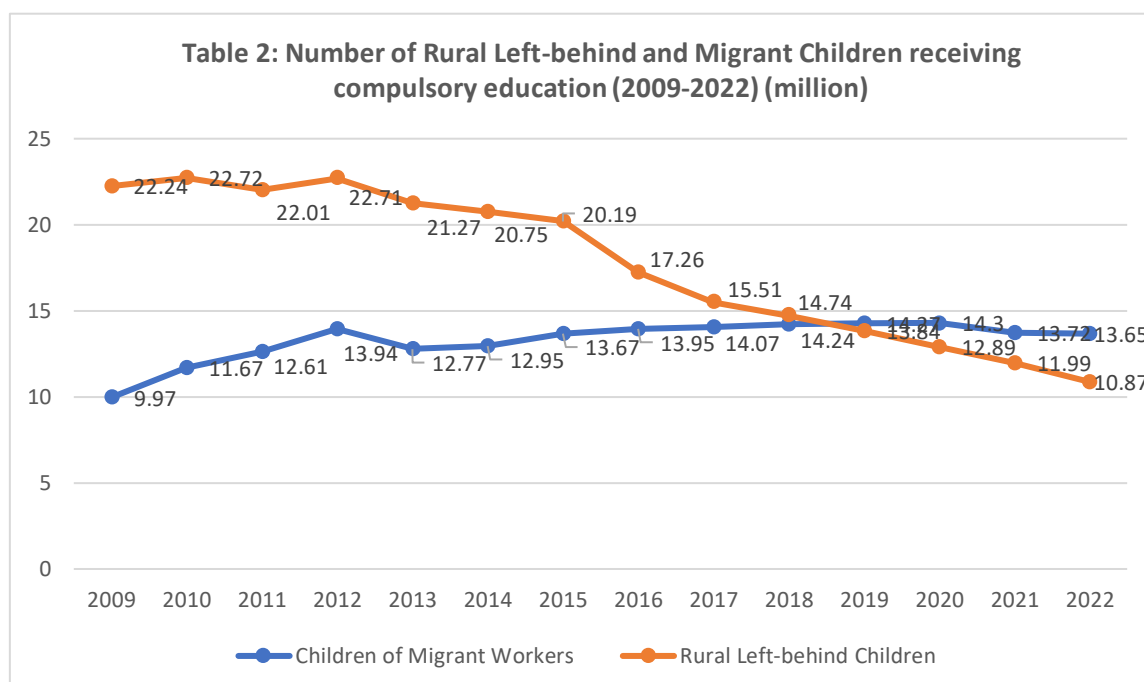
In 2009, the number of rural LBC in compulsory education significantly outnumbered Migrant Children by 12.27 million. By 2022, this gap had drastically narrowed to just 2.78 million. There were at least three primary reasons for this phenomenon: First, the younger generation of migrants were more inclined to bring their children with them, which was a major reason for the reduction of rural left-behind children. According to the National Population and Family Planning Commission (2016), nearly 90% of the married new-generation migrant population migrated with their spouses, and about 60% of the migrant population included both their spouses and children. This shift towards family-centric migration had significantly reduced the number of children left behind in rural areas, as these children accompanied their parents to urban areas.

Secondly, progressive government policies had eased the integration of migrant populations into local urban registries. With the release and implementation of a series of government documents (National Development and Reform Commission, 2019a; State Council, 2014b, 2016), most cities had

substantially lowered the barriers for migrant registration. This acceleration in the modernisation of the agricultural population had allowed more migrant families to obtain local household registrations, thereby enrolling their children in schools at their new locations. Consequently, these children were no longer classified as Migrant Children or rural LBC, which reflected successful policy measures aimed at fostering urban inclusion.

Thirdly, the strategy 'full citizenship in the localities' (known as In-situ urbanisation or local urbanisation) had played a pivotal role in transforming the demographics of Left-Behind Children – it reduced the number of left-behind children in rural areas but sharply increased the number of left-behind children in urban areas. National Bureau of Statistics of China et al. (2023) highlighted this shift, noting that from 2000 to 2020, the number of urban LBC aged 0-17 in China rose from 3.10 million to 25.16 million, constituting 37.59% of all Left-Behind Children. Local urbanisation typically involved the consolidation of existing administrative and natural villages into urban areas. However, this form of extensive urbanisation did little to encourage the migrant population to return to their hometowns for employment. Although the local residents' registration status shifted from rural to urban, the majority of the labour force remained migratory, and their children transition from being rural LBC to urban LBC. This transformation did not fully address the underlying issues associated with children being left behind. Furthermore, policies regarding LBC in China had been almost exclusively designed with rural LBC in mind, and neglected the systemic needs of urban LBC.

1.1.2 Challenges to rural left-behind children and migrant children

Numerous studies had highlighted the adverse impacts of parental migration on left-behind children, which emphasised the detrimental effects on their health, development, and academic achievement (Meyerhoefer & Chen, 2011; Yue et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2014).

Typically, the primary caregivers for these children were grandparents, who were tasked with not only childcare but also home maintenance and agricultural duties. This multiplicity of responsibilities often resulted in significant emotional and physical strain, and potentially led to compromised care and nutrition for the children (Lu et al., 2019; Smeekens et al., 2012; Zhong et al., 2012). Research by Guang et al. (2017), Wang et al. (2017) and Xiao (2014) found that left-behind children tended to experience poorer mental health outcomes compared to their peers. The emotional toll of separation from their parents can lead to substantial stress, a condition that was not eliminated even upon the parents' return. Consequently, these children faced an increased risk of developing stress-related disorders and potential depression over time. Furthermore, the absence of parental support in their education compounded these challenges. Left-behind children often assumed greater household responsibilities, which detracted from the time and energy they can devote to their studies. This imbalance adversely affected their academic performance, as evidenced by lower test scores and educational attainment (Bai et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2011; Meng & Yamauchi, 2017).

Given that rural-urban migration was ubiquitous, it was valuable to focus on the influence of migration on migrant workers and their migrant children (Johnson & Taylor, 2019). Rural-urban migration was not just a physical relocation from villages to cities; it represented a profound transformation in the lives of migrants and their children, and impacted everything from their psychological states to social identities (Hoffmann et al., 2019), which might affect everything from self-perception to interpersonal relationships. The need to assimilate into the urban culture while retaining ties to their rural roots can create internal conflicts and identity crises among migrant children. In their new urban environments, migrant children often encountered discrimination due to stereotypes associated with their rural origins, such as assumptions about low socio-economic status (SES), distinctive accents, and appearances, which led to social rejection and exclusion (Li et al., 2007). Such discrimination can lead to social isolation, and then affected the children's ability to form friendships and integrate into peer

networks in school. This isolation not only impacted their social development but can also exacerbated feelings of loneliness and alienation. Also, Datta (2018) noted that the specific vulnerabilities and the constant exposure to discriminatory practices directly threatened the mental health of migrant children. The stress of adapting to a new city, compounded by the stress of facing constant social exclusion, can lead to serious mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and other stress-related disorders.

Additionally, the Household Registration system (Hukou) in China, which restricted migrant children's access to state schools, significantly caused the educational inequities observed between urban local students and migrant children. Consequently, many migrant children were funnelled into lower-quality Migrant Children Schools (MCS), and led to unequal schooling opportunities in urban areas (Sun et al., 2018). Many MCS suffered from poor facilities, which were less conducive to learning compared to the well-equipped state schools; the lack of adequate infrastructure included basic necessities such as proper classrooms, libraries, and technological resources; additionally, the absence of proper licensing in many of these schools further questioned their legitimacy and the quality of education they can provide (Li et al., 2010a). These educational disparities were a core issue, demonstrated in entrenching social divides and impacting the future prospects of migrant children. Furthermore, the frequent relocation and even closure of MCS disrupted the education of migrant children, which forced them to change schools more often than their peers in the state system. This constant movement can be highly destabilising – it disrupted their social networks and severed the continuity needed for successful academic and personal development; such instability inherent in these schools fostered a sense of uncertainly among the migrant children, which exacerbated their feelings of loneliness and alienation, and ultimately affected their academic engagement and performance (Chen et al., 2014; Su et al., 2013). The most significant challenge for both MCS and migrant children was the lower-qualified and less experienced teachers who received lower wages

and fewer benefits compared to those in state schools. This not only affected the recruitment and retention of good teachers but also impacted their motivation and ability to provide quality education. It was then a common problem for MCS that both migrant students and teachers frequently moved in and out throughout an academic year (Zhao, 2000). This high turnover rate among teachers at MCS caused an unstable learning environment, which complicated the establishment of a consistent educational approach and undermining effective classroom management. Such an environment was not conducive to learning and often resulted in significant drops in academic performance among migrant children (Wang & Holland, 2011). Therefore, rural left-behind and migrant children in China faced substantial challenges, including poor physical health, mental health strains from separation and discrimination, and educational obstacles due to systemic barriers and school instability.

1.2 Brief introduction to globalisation

To understand the social forces underpinning the phenomena of both rural left behind and migrant children, this section briefly introduces the impact of globalisation on China. As globalisation has accelerated, economies worldwide have expanded rapidly, with some experiencing significant growth. China, as an enthusiastic participant in globalisation, has emerged as an economic superpower, attracting massive global investments and creating a vast urban labour market. This transformation has prompted a large migration from rural areas to urban centres, where individuals seek better employment opportunities and higher wages (Pateman, 2011). This migration significantly affects both the migrant population, which is largely low-income and without local household registration (Hukou), and their children. The lack of a local Hukou restricts migrants' access to social services such as healthcare, available to local residents. Migrant children often face difficulties in enrolling in state schools in their receiving areas, which hinders their ability to receive an education of comparable quality to that of local urban students.

1.2.1 Globalisation in China

In this era, the term 'globalisation' has been widely used to represent the various economic, cultural, social and political changes (Guttal, 2007). Globalisation may also be regarded as the closer integration of markets worldwide; due to the increased number and variety of international trade in supplies and services. Regardless of the specific definition, globalisation significantly influences all principal areas of life and social organisation. It represents a process in which the economies and cultures of the world are increasingly bound together through vast networks of trade, capital flows, technology dissemination, and global media, and creates a highly interconnected global environment.

Since China implemented its reform and opening-up policies in the late 1970s, it has experienced a remarkable boom in global trade and economic growth. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in China dramatically increased from $920 million in 1983 to $45.3 billion in 1997. After joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001, foreign corporate giants began to establish wholly foreign-owned enterprises, joint ventures, and cooperative enterprises across China. According to the UNCTAD (2023), China, with $3.82 trillion in FDI, ranked as the world's second-largest recipient of foreign investment, followed by the United Kingdom, which had $2.70 trillion. China reached historic heights in attracting foreign investment, with an average of nearly 2,500 new foreign-invested enterprises approved each month (World Bank, 2019a). By the end of 2020, over 1.04 million foreign-invested enterprises had been established in China. Presently, China attracts investments from more than 200 countries and regions, mainly from Asia, the European Union, North America, and Free-port Zones. Looking at domestic job creation, in the five years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (2015-2019), China created an average of 3.26 million jobs annually. Furthermore, in 2023, China generated 12.44 million new urban jobs and employed 33.97 million people from the previously poverty-stricken population (Central People's Government of China, 2024).

Economic development and population migration are two interlinked interdependent processes. Fast development of FDI in China has provided massive labour markets in manufacturing and service industry with a lot of job opportunities. Coupled with the creation of new urban job opportunities across the country, these factors have attracted significant population migrations, resulting in large-scale internal population movements within China.

1.2.2 Growth and impacts of migration on families and their children

To put it precisely, China's economic reforms and globalisation have led to rapid urbanisation, with the country's migrant population experiencing unprecedented growth. This shift has triggered a massive internal migration, with nearly 300 million individuals (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023) moving from remote rural areas to urban centres. This internal migration population increased from 79 million in 2000 to 297.53 million (in Table 3.) in 2023, marking a 276.62% growth and becoming a dominant force in China's working-class population. These internal migrants were driven by the pursuit of more employment opportunities and higher wages, leading to significant demographic shifts and changes in migration patterns. National Bureau of Statistics of China (2024a) defined these migrants as individuals whose places of residence did not align with their registered household locations, and had migrated to the receiving area for more than half a year. These migrant rural workers who did not have household registration (Hukou) in the receiving places were mostly regraded as low-income groups because they were poorly educated and highly mobile (Holdaway, 2018).

With few job opportunities available in rural areas, individuals traditionally turned to agriculture. However, rural migrants moving to urban areas found more employment opportunities and higher wages, which allowed them to work longer in these new settings and continued to attract more people

into internal migration. By 2016, of the 169 million "outbound" migrant workers, over 80% were engaged in manual labour in urban areas, with 50.2% in manufacturing and construction, and 46.7% in the service sector. By 2023, the proportion of migrant workers in the tertiary sector increased further, with 53.8% working in services, and 42.9% in manufacturing and construction (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024a). In 2023, the total number of rural migrant workers was 176.58 million, which accounted for 12.53% of the total national population of 1,409.67 million. These workers represented 23.85% of the total employed population of 740.41 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024c), indicating that one in every four employed individuals in China was a migrant worker from a rural area, which highlighted the significant impact of internal migration on the China's workforce and economic development.

Table 3: The number of local migrant workers and migrant rural workers

Table 3. The number of local migrant workers and migrant rurual workers (million) from 2010-2023
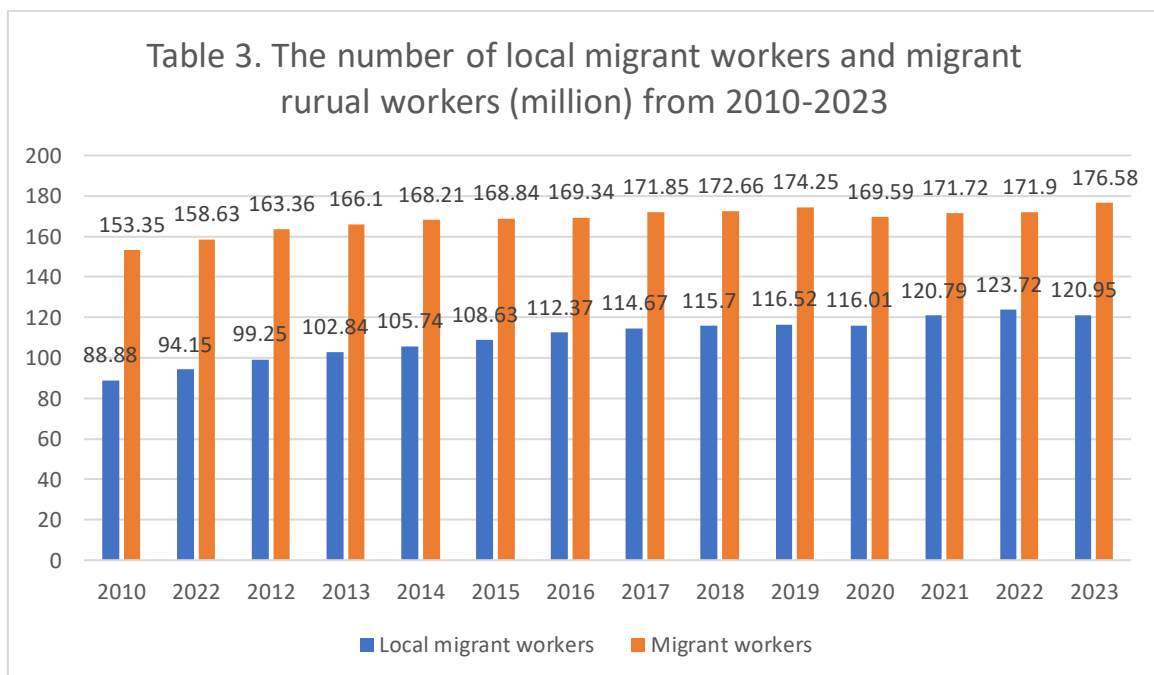
At the same time, the number of migrant children eligible for compulsory education rose to 13.65 million in 2023. A closer look at the scale of migrant and left-behind children across China revealed significant numbers: in 2020, Guangdong province reported over 7 million migrant children, and Henan province had more than 6 million rural left-behind children. By 2022, the provinces with the highest numbers of migrant children in compulsory education were Guangdong (3.023 million),

Jiangsu (1.182 million), and Zhejiang (937,000), while the highest numbers of rural left-behind children were in Hunan (1.59 million), Henan (1.438 million), and Sichuan (1.114 million) (Ministry of Education of China, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023). Many of these migrant children did not possess local household registration (Hukou) in the receiving area, which restricted their access to the same educational rights as local urban children. This situation often prevented them in accessing free compulsory education in state schools in urban areas. Furthermore, low-income migrant worker families often cannot afford the expensive tuition fees of private schools, nor can they manage the costs associated with extracurricular educational activities (China Labour Bulletin, 2019). Although there were more affordable private schools run by social organisations for migrant children, they generally provided lower quality education and facilities compared to state schools (see the section 1.3 and 1.4 for details). This differences severely hindered these children's chances of receiving an education comparable in quality to that of local urban students, and then posed a significant challenge to educational equality. Addressing these educational challenges faced by migrant children in the receiving areas is a critical focus of this research.

Another significant social phenomenon impacting the development of migrant children was the lack of consistent parental presence despite this shift from being rural left-behind to urban migrant children. Data from National Bureau of Statistics of China et al. (2023) showed a concerning trend: out of the 138 million migrant children, nearly 70% (94.09 million, 68.2%) did not live with both parents. Specifically, 43.93 million migrant children lived with both parents, 9.31 million live with one parent, and 17.84 million live with neither parent. This indicated that although migrant children migrated to urban areas, many still did not live with both parents, essentially making them "left behind children" within urban settings. The lack of stable family support and consistent parental companionship in the lives of many migrant children remains a critical issue that requires attention.

1.3 Educational provision and government responses

Before considering the ways that migrant children navigate and access education, the following section offers a brief overview of policy in this area. It is important to understand the changes in policy and focus of the Chinese government concerning compulsory education for migrant children. This research compares and analyses the changes in both national and Beijing-specific government policies since 1996 and highlights how these shifts have impacted access to education.

1.3.1 National level

The challenges these children faced in accessing local state schools began to draw attention on the central government's policy agenda, as it was the government's responsibility under the Law of Compulsory Education to provide schooling for all school-age children. The central government's policy development experienced many fluctuations. Precisely, state schools were largely inaccessible to migrant children from 1996 to 2001; this was followed by a period of relaxed requirements for migrant families from 2001 to 2014, making it somewhat easier for migrant children to enrol in local urban schools. However, from 2014 to the present, there has been a tightening of requirements, particularly in megacities, where accessing state schools has become increasingly difficult for migrant children. The table below (Table 4.) outlines the major policy changes by the Central Government of China.

Table 4: the changes of central educational policies towards migrant children education

1996 ➤	**MOE** *The Regulation on the Compulsory Education of Migrant Children in Cities and Towns (Trial)* ➢ **Point 1** the receiving government should be responsible for the migrant children's compulsory education
1998 ➤	**MOE** *The Provisional Regulation on Migrant Children's School Attendance* ➢ **Point 1 "receiving government":** re-stress that the receiving government should be responsible for the migrant children's compulsory education ➢ **Point 2 "strict control the outflow of children":** children are forbidden to migrate into other places without the proof of guardian in the hometown ➢ **Point 3 "Jiedu fees":** full-time receiving state primary and secondary schools can charge expansive "Jiedu fees" for migrant children
2001 ➤	**State Council** *The State Council's Decision on the Reform and Development of Fundamental Education* ➢ **Point 1 "Two Main Streams" (TMS):** The receiving local government and the full-time receiving state primary and secondary schools should be the main streams of recruiting migrant children to receive compulsory education
2003 ➤	**1. (6 Government Department)** *The Decisions on Improving the Compulsory Education of Migrant Peasant Workers' Children in the Cities* ➢ **Point 1 "Two Main Streams" (TMS) & fund subsidies from receiving governments to receiving schools who receive more migrant children** ➢ **Point 2 "the equal treatment with local students & fees reduced":** The receiving local government should charge the same tuitions fees from migrant students as the local students, reducing fees in other aspects ➢ **Point 3 "the opening of private schools":** manage and support informal private schools run by social organisations who receive migrant children
2006 ➤	**1. State Council** *The State Council's Decision on Solving the Issues Related with Migrant Peasant Workers (including their children)* ➢ **Point 1 TMS & migrant children education is included in receiving government's education budget** ➢ **Point 2 "the equal treatment with local students" & No "Jiedu fees"** ➢ **Point 3 "support and guidance for private schools":** in terms of teacher training and funds for running schools **2. MOE** *The MOE's Decisions on Implementing 'The State Council's Decision on Solving the Issues Related with Migrant Peasant Workers'*

23

- ➢ **Point 1 TMS & education budget**
- ➢ **Point 2 "the equal treatment" & No "Jiedu fees" & "Enrolment in a nearby school without examinations"**
- ➢ **Point 3 "support and guidance for private schools"**

3. National People's Congress
Law of Compulsory Education (revised)
- ➢ **Point 1** receiving governments provide chances for migrant children to equally receive compulsory education **by law**

2014

1. MOE
The Decisions on Facilitating Students' Accessing the Nearby Junior Secondary School without Exams
- ➢ **Point 1 TMS:** expand the capacity of state schools
- ➢ **Point 2 "Enrolment in a nearby school without examinations both in state and private schools":** ensure the equal access to receive education
- ➢ **Point 3 "encourage more opening of private schools" & "purchase services of private schools":** purchase enrolment places
- ➢ **Point 4 "strict access to receive education in megacities":** megacities receiving migrant children need to take its educational resources capacities and urban development planning into consideration

2. State Council
The State Council's Opinions on Further Improving the Services for Migrant Workers (including their children)
- ➢ **Point 1 TMS:** increase educational funding for state schools
- ➢ **Point 2 "mixed classes with local students":** state schools should be generally open to migrant children with mixed classes and unified management
- ➢ **Point 3 "purchase services of private schools and kindergartens":** improve quality of compulsory education and early years education for migrant children
- ➢ **Point 4 "Hukou":** the basic conditions are the years of employment, residence, and social insurance paying in the receiving areas

3. CPC and the State Council
National Plan on New Urbanisation (2014-2020)
- ➢ **strict limitation** on the migrant population **to megacities**

2018

1. CCP Central Committee & State Council
The State Council's Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalisation (2018-2022)
- ➢ **Point 1 New TMS: the receiving state schools** are the main stream of receiving migrant children to have compulsory education; the **inclusive kindergartens** are the main stream of receiving migrant children to have early years education (increase the supply of places in various ways)
- ➢ **Point 2:** encourage cities to further relax conditions of Hukou, **with the exception of megacities**

During the initial phase (1996-2001), the Ministry of Education of China issued *the Regulations on Compulsory Education of Migrant Children in Cities and Towns (Trial)* in 1996. This policy required that the receiving government should provide compulsory education opportunities for migrant children and establish strict management system. This marked a significant step as the Chinese government began to directly address the educational needs of migrant children. The policy recognised the legitimacy of non-state schools or classes for migrant children to ease pressure on the local formal school systems. As the policy made clear, non-state schools or informal classes can take the form of night schools, weekend classes and summer or winter vacation classes. At the primary education level, these institutions were permitted to offer only Chinese and Mathematics to ensure a basic literacy level. Additionally, receiving secondary schools were allowed to reduce the number of courses offered to migrant children. Thus, most migrant students had little access to state schools and can only receive informal compulsory education provided by receiving government and social organisations and even then, at a basic minimum.

Building on earlier efforts, the Ministry of Education issued *The Provisional Regulation on Migrant Children's School Attendance* in 1998, which re-stated the responsibilities of local receiving governments for migrant children's education as well. The regulation continued to recognise the legitimacy of informal schools or classes for these children.

However, it introduced stricter guidelines and emphasised that hometown local governments should strictly limit the number of school-aged children to leave their hometowns unless these children could provide evidence of having no guardian back hometown. For those who could provide such proof and were admitted into full-time state schools in the receiving areas, they were subjected to substantial

'Jiedu fees'[1] to access education (MOE, 1998). In addition, compared with the policy in 1996, it clearly stated that receiving state schools should be the main receivers of migrant children, which marked progress and became the origin of the 'Two Main Streams' policy proposed in 2001. Despite these advancements, the policies at this stage predominantly expected receiving governments to provide education - often through informal means – for migrant children and did not explicitly require receiving local governments and state schools to take full responsibility for these children's compulsory education. Furthermore, the entry barrier for migrant children into state schools remained high due to the extra 'Jiedu fees,' which many low-income migrant families could not afford. This financial barrier continued to prevent broad access to formal education for many migrant children.

From 2001-2006, significant steps were made in the policy framework for migrant children's education (MCE) in China. The State Council's *The Decision on the Reform and Development of Fundamental Education,* promulgated in 2001, was marked the first State Council policy specifically addressing MCE. It was regarded as a milestone in the policy changes of MCE, beginning to establish clear responsibilities for local receiving government and full-time state schools to receive migrant children. It explicitly stated that "the local receiving government and state schools should be the main streams for recruiting migrant children of compulsory education age" and then the policy was referred to as 'Two Main Streams (TMS)', which was followed by subsequent polices for many years (State Council, 2001). However, the 2001 policy primarily set the direction for future policies without providing detailed implementations. Building on this foundation, *The Decisions on Improving the Compulsory Education of Rural Migrant Workers' Children in the Cities* promulgated in 2003 further developed the TMS policy and emphasised the principle of equal access to compulsory education for migrant children,

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[1] It is noted that the definition of 'Jiedu fees' is the additional fees that students who receive education and occupy teaching resources in other provinces, cities, districts and counties (not in their hometowns) need to pay.

which expanded their rights and the accountability of urban educational systems to accommodate and integrate these children inclusively and effectively.

Compared with the policy in 2001, the 2003 policy was the first step that clearly elaborate on the financial responsibilities of receiving local governments for migrant children's education. The financial department of receiving governments were required to give additional fund subsidies to state schools that enrolled a higher number of migrant children. Thus, it encouraged increasing state schools to receive migrant children. The policy required state schools to have equal treatment with local students, which meant that the receiving state schools should treat the migrant children equally in terms of evaluation, and charge the same tuitions fees from migrant students as the local students, reducing fees in other aspects to reduce the educational burden on migrant families. Also, the 2003 policy strongly encouraged social organisations to establish schools for receiving migrant children. The purpose of this point was to list these unlicensed schools or informal classes for migrant children into the private education systems, and these schools can also receive the guidance and supervision in teacher training and educational funding from local governments to strengthen their education qualities.

In brief, it established a foundation of policy system to clearly elaborate the receiving local governments' responsibilities for migrant children to receive compulsory education equally since this stage. However, although receiving governments provided more access for migrant children to receive education, these children were difficult to have the same education quality as the local students due to the lower teaching standards in private institutions versus public ones. Migrant families who cannot afford expansive 'Jiedu fees' charged by state schools, often chose more affordable non-government funded schools. These schools, constrained by their financial limitations, were unable to offer competitive salaries to attract highly qualified teachers. Consequently, private schools often lowered

their hiring standards. This situation placed migrant children at a distinct disadvantage, as they did not receive the same level of educational instruction as their peers in state schools.

The third stage (2006-2014) was marked by two significant policies issued in 2006. The first was *The State Council's Decision on Solving the Issues Related with Rural Migrant Workers (including their children)*, which almost repeated the policies from 2003 but notably abolished 'Jiedu fees' and other non-tuition fees for migrant children, and then greatly reduced the financial burden on migrant families. The second policy, *The MOE's Decisions on Implementing 'The State Council's Decision on Solving the Issues Related with Rural Migrant Workers'*, was aimed at putting into practice the directives issued by the State Council by introducing more detailed regulations. This policy outlined specific measures for receiving governments to fulfil their financial responsibilities effectively. It required that the educational departments collaborate with financial departments to integrate funding for migrant children's education into the local education budget. Additionally, it mandated that schools receiving migrant children should receive funding in accordance with the local compulsory education budget standards. This policy significantly clarified the role of government educational departments in financing the education of migrant children and for the first time eliminated selective examinations for enrolment in nearby state schools. This change made it easier for migrant students to enrol in state schools close to their (renting) residences, and enhanced their accessibility to quality education in their new localities.

In addition to this, *the Law of Compulsory Education* was revised in 2006 and it clarified that "receiving compulsory education equally" is the goal of education policy enacted afterwards. This revision laid a legal foundation aimed at addressing the educational challenges faced by migrant children. Building on the initiatives from 2003, these three policies and the law announced in 2006 established a solid and coherent policy system for migrant children to receive compulsory education equally, which was

then followed by later enacted policies, such as *The National Medium and Long Term Planning Outline of Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020)* in 2010 and *The State Council's Decision on Improving the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education* in 2012. At this stage, migrant children had more access provided by receiving governments and state schools to receive compulsory education equally. With regard to private schools, an increasing trend of support and guidance from receiving educational departments were provided to improve the education quality for migrant children. Also, financial burdens on migrant families were also significantly reduced due to the exemption of 'Jiedu fees' and an educational budget from receiving governments. This stage marked an essential shift towards greater educational equality for migrant children, supported by both policy and legal reforms.

During the fourth stage (2014-present), although receiving governments made great efforts to provide more opportunities for migrant children to receive education through expanding the capacities of state schools, increasing educational funding for state schools, and even purchasing educational services, such as places and management from private schools, there was a stricter access for migrant children to receive compulsory education in megacities. It was largely influenced by the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform*, published in 2013, which stated to strictly control the population of megacities. Following this, the CPC and the State Council released the *National Plan on New Urbanisation (2014-2020)* in 2014, which was the China's first central government-driven urbanisation plan. This plan explicitly highlighted the conflicts between the growing populations and the decreasing urban capacities of megacities, thus there required strict population controls. To manage the influx of migrants, criteria such as requiring longer social insurance contributions and higher wages introduced for migrant families seeking local social welfare benefits and for their children's admission to state schools. Therefore, *The Decisions on Facilitating Students' Accessing the Nearby Junior Secondary*

School Without Exams, issued in 2014, clearly clarified that megacities should integrate the urban development planning with population control objectives and educational carrying capacities to arrange the eligible children to attend receiving state schools in a steady and orderly manner. This policy framework reflected a complex balance between urban capacity management and the provision of equal educational opportunities for migrant children.

In addition, in 2018, *The State Council's Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalisation (2018-2022)* was released. It tried the first step to enhance early childhood education for migrant children. This plan proposed transforming the traditional approach (often referred to as the 'TWS') by emphasising that inclusive kindergartens should become the mainstream institutions for the early education of migrant students. What is more, the plan addressed the Hukou system, which played a critical role in school enrolment due to its ties to local residency status. There was a push to relax the conditions for applying to this system, although such relaxations were not extended to megacities. This meant that while smaller cities were encouraged to open up and facilitate easier integration of migrant families and their children into local schools, megacities continued to enforce strict controls on their migrant populations. This difference in policy enforcement across city sizes significantly impacted the ability of migrant children to access compulsory education in larger urban centres.

In summary, reviewing the development of government policy towards migrant children education in the last two decades, China's central government had put greater emphasis on migrant children's access and equality in receiving education, but the restrictions were greater in megacities. The receiving governments had worked to expand the capacity of state schools to accommodate migrant children, and had also encouraged social organisations to operate private schools, which were offered official support and guidance to improve educational quality and then attracted more migrant children. When state schools reach capacity, the receiving government purchases places in private schools to

provide access to education for migrant children. In terms of equality, policies mandated that migrant children received the same treatment as local students in aspects such as enrolment, evaluation, and school management. Furthermore, migrant children generally benefited from fee equality, exempt from 'Jiedu fees' that were previously imposed. However, as large populations continued to migrate to major cities, the strain on educational resources and public services intensified. To manage this pressure, receiving governments in megacities began to impose stricter controls on the migrant population. These measures reflected the challenges of balancing the demand for education with the capacity of urban infrastructures to support rapid population growth.

1.3.2 City level

Following the Central Government's adoption of the 2001 policy aimed at improving educational access for migrant children, local governments across China began to adapt their own specific measures to address the needs of migrant children. These local policies varied in scope; some were dedicated entirely to the education and schooling of migrant children, while others only listed items related to migrant children's education. For example, Beijing Municipal Government annually issued policies to clarify enrolment procedures for migrant children. From 2003 to 2008, the *Regulation on Student Enrolment of Elementary and Lower Secondary Schools* was in effect, and from 2009 to 2019, it was followed by the *Regulation on Student Recruitment in Compulsory Education Age*. These regulations explicitly stated the enrolment criteria for migrant children to relation seeking to enter state elementary and lower secondary schools in Beijing. The specifics of these criteria are detailed in Table 5 below.

Table 5: the changing enrolment criteria in Beijing state schools (since 2002)

2002

Beijing Municipal Commission of Education
The Implementation of Compulsory Education for School-Age Children and Adolescents of Migrant Population in Beijing
- ➤ 1. Proof of Employment
- ➤ 2. Household Registration Card
- ➤ 3. Identification Card
- ➤ 4. Temporary Residential Certificate

2004

Ten local government departments in Beijing (jointly)
On Implementing 'The Decisions on Improving the Compulsory Education of Children of Migrant Workers in the Cities'
- ➤ 1. Proof of Employment
- ➤ **2. Proof of House Renting or Ownership**
- ➤ 3. Household Registration Card
- ➤ 4. Temporary Residential Certificate
- ➤ **5. Proof of No Guardian in the Hometown**

2007

Beijing Municipal Commission of Education
Beijing Municipal of Education's Opinions on Student Enrolment of Elementary and Junior High Schools in 2007
- ➤ 4 documents as 2002; **5 documents preference,** which can enjoy the exemption of the **'Jiedu Fee'** with 2004's regulation of 5 documents
- ➤ 2005 and 2006 criteria as 2002; 2006 policy with 5 documents as 2004 preference

2008

1. Beijing Municipal Commission of Education
Beijing Municipal of Education's Opinions on Student Enrolment of Elementary and Junior High Schools in 2008
- ➤ **5 required documents as 2004**

2. Beijing Municipal Commission of Education
Beijing Local Government's Opinions on Implementing 'The State Council's Decision on Exempting the Tuition Fees & Incidental Fees for the Students in Compulsory education age in Urban Areas'
- ➤ 1. Proof of Employment
- ➤ 2. Household Registration Card
- ➤ 3. Temporary Residential Certificate
(reduced to 3 required documents)

2011

1. Beijing Municipal Commission of Education
Beijing Municipal of Education's Opinions on Student Recruitment in Compulsory Education Age in 2011
- ➤ 1. Household Registration Card
- ➤ 2. Temporary Residential Certificate
(only 2 documents required)

| 2012 | ➤ | **1. Beijing Municipal Commission of Education**
Beijing Municipal of Education's Opinions on Student Recruitment in Compulsory Education Age in 2012
  ➢ **5 required documents as 2004**
(criteria keep the same from 2012-2018) |
| 2019 | ➤ | **1. Beijing Municipal Commission of Education**
Beijing Municipal of Education's Opinions on Student Recruitment in Compulsory Education Age in 2019
  ➢ 1. Proof of Employment
  ➢ 2. Proof of House Renting or Ownership
  ➢ 3. Household Registration Card
  ➢ 4. Residence Permit Certificate
(4 required documents, reducing "Proof of No Guardian in the Hometown") |

The enrolment criteria for migrant children's access to compulsory education in Beijing's state schools underwent significant fluctuations over the years, particularly in terms of the documents required from migrant families, as detailed in Table 5. In general, there was a decreasing trend of enrolment criteria for migrant children from 2002 to 2011, with the requirements reaching their most relaxed point in 2011. However, in 2012, these criteria were tightened considerably, marking a shift to much stricter standards. Since then, the enrolment requirements remained consistently strict and had rigorous control over the access of migrant children to state education in Beijing.

In 2002, it became relatively easier for migrant children to access compulsory education in Beijing's state schools compared to previous years, which had been marked by unclear requirements and complex processes. Recognising these challenges, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education endeavoured to establish more loose enrolment criteria for migrant children and their families. From 2002 to 2007, there were steady enrolment criteria which required 'Four Documents': 1) Proof of Employment; 2) Household Registration Card, 3) Identification Card; and 4) Temporary Residential

Certificate. These requirements made it significantly easier for migrant children to enrol in state schools during this period. However, in 2004, the enrolment process was tightened once again when ten local government departments in Beijing collaboratively introduced the 'Five Documents' criteria. This new framework added a fifth requirement: Proof of No Guardian in the Rural Hometown, and replaced the 'Identification Card' with 'Proof of House Renting or Ownership.' These changes reintroduced significant barriers. These two new criteria made it difficult for migrant children to receive education in Beijing. The proof of house renting or ownership exerted huge financial pressure on migrant families so that their children were hard to access to state schools. Also, the requirement of 'Proof of No Guardian in the Rural Hometown' in fact strictly limited the outflow of population, thus migrant children were harder to migrate to larger cities.

By 2006 and 2007, the 'Five Documents' were no longer mandatory but preferred for enrolment in Beijing's state schools. During these years, meeting the criteria of the 'Four Documents' was sufficient for migrant children to enrol in receiving state schools. This adjustment made the enrolment process somewhat more accessible again. However, after the Central Government's mandate in 2006 to eliminate 'Jiedu fees,' local policies adapted by adding more conditions. Specifically, the exemption from the 'Jiedu Fee' was granted only to those migrant children who satisfied the 2004 regulation requiring the 'Five Documents'. This change increased the challenges for migrant children to access education in receiving state schools, as they now needed to fulfill more strict documentation requirements to benefit from the fee exemption. This development reflected the complex interplay between central mandates and local implementation with increased bureaucratic hurdles that can inadvertently place greater pressure on migrant families seeking educational opportunities for their children.

The 'Five Documents' became compulsory in 2008, which significantly enhanced difficulties for migrant children to enrol in Beijing local state schools. Recognising the increased difficulties, at the end of 2008, Beijing Municipal Government officially issued another policy, which reduced the previous 'Five Documents' into 'Three Documents', only requiring Proof of Employment, Household Registration Card and Temporary Residential Certificate. This simpler set of documents was in effect for two years and surprisingly, the criteria were reduced to 'Two Documents' required in 2011 without the Proof of Employment. However, the change of enrolment criteria in 2012 was a turning point, which suddenly regarded the 2004's 'Five Documents' as compulsory. There was one more change of 2004's criteria compared with that in 2002. To be precise, in 2002, the criteria required migrant parents' 'Identification Cards', which was replaced as compulsory 'Proof of House Renting or Ownership' in 2004. In later years, the proof of housing was always necessarily required. Despite a slight easing in 2019, when the requirements were reduced to 'Four Documents' by removing the 'No Guardian in the Rural Hometown' requirement, significant challenges still remained for migrant children seeking enrolment in Beijing's state schools.

In summary, the tightening of enrolment criteria for migrant children in Beijing and other megacities was a response to the large-scale migration of populations from rural to urban areas across China. It in turn posted a threat to urban infrastructure and services, and urged cities like Beijing to strictly control the size of the incoming migrant population. It indicated the ongoing struggle to balance between controlling the inflow of the migrant population and ensuring access to education for migrant children.

1.3.3 District level

In the 16 districts of Beijing, there are significant variations in the policies for non-local children's enrolment in compulsory education, which pose substantial challenges for migrant families from rural backgrounds. According to the *2024 Guidelines for Compulsory Education Enrolment* issued by the Beijing Municipal Education Commission, that parents of migrant school-age children should submit "Four Documents", including Proof of Employment, Household Registration Card, Proof of House Renting or Ownership, and Beijing Residence Permit Certificate. These requirements, intended to manage educational resources and control population mobility, are often out of reach for migrant families from rural areas due to their complex and strict nature.

The Beijing Residence Permit policies vary drastically across districts. Dongcheng and Shijingshan district, for instance, require residence permits to be processed nearly 16 months before enrolment (by May 1, 2023, for migrant children enrolling in September 2024), indicating strict control in regions where educational resources are under great pressure. In contrast, districts like Shunyi and Daxing have more lenient requirements, with deadlines extending to December 31, 2023. Such differences can be particularly challenging for families whose employment and living situations are unstable and subject to frequent changes.

The criteria for renting documentations also highlight differing district approaches to stability of residence. Common requirements include a valid tenancy agreement and proof of property ownership from the landlord, which are intended to ensure a family's stable and legal residency. However, many migrant families from rural settings, constrained by financial limitations, often resort to substandard housing or lack formal rental agreements. They may even find themselves living in temporary accommodations. Moreover, districts like Haidian and Shijingshan impose the strictest standards, not only in terms of rental duration and tax documentation but also by implementing specific policies like "one enrolment per six years" and "one enrolment for a nine-year continuous education school."

These policies, which emphasise rental stability and equal distribution of educational resources, place significant pressure on families who frequently need to relocate due to changing job locations.

Proof of Employment policies further exacerbate the difficulties faced by rural migrant families. Requirements for social insurance contributions and employment contracts vary significantly across districts, with areas like Dongcheng and Xicheng requiring up to 12 months of continuous contributions. All districts emphasise the need for continuous social insurance contributions and typically do not accept retroactive payments, which shows the value placed on stable employment and financial conditions for applicant families. However, many workers from rural areas engaged in temporary or seasonal employment, such as in construction or services, struggle to maintain stable and continuous social insurance records. Additionally, those in informal employment or self-employment, making it difficult to provide the required employment contracts, which prevents their children from accessing educational resources.

Overall, the varied enrolment policies across Beijing's districts reflect the complexities of urban management in balancing educational equality, resource efficiency, and population control. Although these policies provide families with a range of options, they inadvertently highlight and potentially exacerbate the inequalities experienced by migrant families from rural backgrounds. These families often face unstable employment, poor economic conditions, and inadequate living situations, making it challenging to fulfil the rigorous enrolment criteria set by different districts. Consequently, many migrant children are excluded from accessing quality educational resources, further perpetuating educational inequalities and hindering social mobility.

1.3.4 The household registration system

China is experiencing an unprecedented scale of rural-to-urban migration. Unlike Britain, the intermigration in China is specifically due to its household registration system (Hukou) (Huang et al., 2018; Yu, 2017). Executed in the late 1950s, the Hukou system divided the Chinese population into two groups: those with agricultural Hukou and non-agricultural Hukou by their residences (ethnically birthplace) in order to keep social control and order (Cheng & Selden, 1994). As a result, there was a distinctive restriction on the migration in the 1960s and 1970s (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Under this circumstance, only the well-educated men were permitted to attain urban Hukou from their rural status (Wu & Treiman, 2007), most migrants were viewed as temporary migrant workers and were refused access social welfare in urban areas (Ma & Wu, 2019). Thus, their children who have migrated with them cannot enter urban state schools to receive education and can only choose poorly resources, unlicensed and unstable migrant children schools with poor limited facilities, usually in urban industrial areas or suburbs (Goodburn, 2009). Due to the segregation of the state schools' systems, Hukou has put migrant children at a significant disadvantage to access education (Lu & Zhou, 2013) although the government policies have benefited numerous migrant children as discussed in previous sections.

Precisely, some scholars maintain that the Hukou policy significantly affects rural-urban migrants' ability to enrol their children in state schools. Data from a study by Wu and Li (2016), which surveyed 445 rural–urban migrant households in Guangzhou, Dongguan and Suzhou, indicate that nearly half (49.8%) of respondents face challenges in securing state school admissions for their children. Another study by Wang (2009) in Beijing finds that local authorities often require migrant families to present additional documentation proving their financial capability to support their children's education in urban areas. Interviews conducted by Zhang and Luo (2016) with rural-urban migrants in Beijing reveal a common perception among migrants that they receive inadequate policy support from both federal

and local governments. Tan (2010) describes the rural-urban migrant community in Beijing as an "invisible population" (p. 32), pointing out that the educational needs of migrant children are frequently overlooked in both education and household registration policies. Consequently, some researchers argue that the persistent restrictions imposed by the Hukou policy continue to exclude rural-urban migrant students from state-run schools, which leaves families no choice but to seek alternative educational arrangements.

Nevertheless, some experts argue that the impact of the Hukou policy is waning due to national and local legislation aimed at integrating rural-urban migrant children into the urban public education system (Liu & Jacob, 2012; Qian & Jing, 2014). Liu and Jacob (2012) note that many migrant families they surveyed gain access to state schooling. Similarly, Qian and Jing (2014) report that migrant families with higher SES have already benefitted from these policy improvements. Based on policy analysts, the authority to adjust school admission policies has shifted to local governments (Liu, 2015). As a result, local school admissions have become less dependent on Hukou status and more adaptive and inclusive, which reflects local economic conditions rather than excluding rural-urban migrants.

In general, despite improvements in the national system, household registration remains the main factor that restricts migrant children from receiving equal education (Yang, 2022). Then, the inequality of the educational system has continued largely unchanged in terms of the preparation and access to higher-secondary education as well as higher education. The mix of low-quality education and exclusion from academic urban secondary schools has minimised migrant children's opportunities to reach their potential and pushed them directly into the labour market or into vocational courses.

1.4 Focus for this research

The phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration presents profound implications for education systems, especially in megacities like Beijing. Children left behind in rural areas suffer from poor academic performance due to factors such as parental absence and inadequate health or nutrition. Meanwhile, children who migrate with their rural families to urban settings face their own unique set of challenges. Despite living with their parents, these migrant children often struggle academically and remain in disadvantaged positions within the education system. This highlights a critical research gap: there is limited understanding of the role of migrant parents and the specific experiences of migrant children within urban educational environments.

This research is therefore interested in finding out about the educational experiences of children of migrant workers in Beijing. Namely, this research will examine migrant children's – whose families work in the low-income occupations in Beijing – experiences of access to education. The key research question is outlined as:

How does being a rural migrant student influence access to education, experiences of learning and educational attainment in Beijing?

Sub-questions include:

1.   What is the role of parents in children's educational experiences from their perspectives?

2.   What are migrant children experience in the classroom and community – learning, attainment and social activities?

1.5 Research aims and objectives

The aim of this research are as follows:

1. to explore what support migrant families need to ensure the best educational outcomes for their children (SES, family structure, resources)

2. to understand the specific educational challenges facing migrant children, from the perspective of teachers and the students

3. to consider the resources needed to support migrant children in education

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. to highlight for educators that influence migrant students' academic performance

2. to provide some useful suggestions to policy makers and educators on areas for improvement in schools, and on the academic and social experiences, of migrant children.

3. to give suggestions to government on how migrant children can be supported to settle into their new cultural environments, specially focusing on educational structures and the household registration system

1.6 Overview of the thesis

This chapter provides essential context for understanding the migration and the challenges faced by migrant children in China. Chapter Two analyses the effects of poverty on education in rural China, and highlights disparities in educational resources and quality. It explores theoretical perspectives on how social and cultural capital impacted educational outcomes, particularly for children from impoverished rural areas. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, detailing the

ethnographic and case study approaches used, methods of data collection, and sampling strategies with a discussion on the ethical considerations. Chapter Four provides a comprehensive background on the educational setting, including the school's history, infrastructure, and my daily routines during the fieldwork. Chapter Five examines the critical role of parental decisions in shaping migrant children's educational paths and daily routines, and Chapter Six explores the educational and social experiences of migrant children in Beijing, focusing on their academic performance, aspirations, and peer relationships. The discussion, Chapter Seven, integrates findings on how cultural, emotional, and social capital influence the educational experiences of migrant children. It reviews theoretical frameworks to explain these impacts on Beijing's migrant communities. The last Chapter Eight summarises this research's findings and their implications for educational policy and practice, reflects on the research limitations, and suggests future research directions for improving the education of migrant children in China.

Chapter 2: Poverty and education in China

In Chapter One, I introduce and explain the context to China's large migration and the subsequent impacts on these migrants, that is, in this study, the large number of rural workers who move to big cities for better working opportunities and higher income because of the opportunities that result from globalisation and urbanisation. The children migrating with their parents into megacities and lacking local Hukou in the receiving place have difficulties in accessing good-quality state schools, despite the government's promulgated educational policies towards migrant children's schooling. This phenomenon causes educational inequalities among migrant children, especially those poor children with low socio-economical background. Therefore, this chapter discusses poverty in rural China, then explores the impact of poverty and how these impacted on education.

2.1 Rural China's Poverty

2.1.1 Brief introduction to poverty

Poverty alleviation is a challenge facing all countries, and the elimination of poverty was an ideal that mankind is constantly pursuing (Bapna, 2012; Griggs et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). The international community have continuously made efforts to reduce or eliminate poverty and narrow the gap between urban and rural areas (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014; Mani et al., 2013; Tollefson, 2015). The United Nations (2019) has proposed a report of 17 sustainable development goals and hopes to achieve them all by 2030. Among them, the first goal is to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere" (p.22). Globally, due to regional, national and local joint efforts, remarkable achievements have been made in poverty alleviation (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Irz et al., 2001; United Nations, 2015). The decline in the proportion of the world's population living in extreme poverty is largely attributable to China's poverty reduction efforts (United Nations, 2015; Zhou et al., 2018), with current indicators of poverty predominantly economic in China (Labar & Bresson, 2011; Wang et al.,

2013; Zou & Fang, 2011). China's economic reforms that began in the late 1970s has led to rapid economic growth. In the past four decades, the China's average annual growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP) was 9.5%, significantly higher than the world's average of 2.9% over the same period (World Bank, 2019b). With the rapid growth of national accounts, poverty has rapidly and extensively reduced. According to China's national poverty line (the latest poverty line was about 3,000 RMB (UK£330) per year in 2016, slightly lower than the international poverty line of US$1.90 per day), the extreme poverty rate was reduced from 97.5% in 1978 with 770 million poor people to 0.6% in 2019 (State Council, 2020). It meant that China had already achieved the goal of reducing the poverty population by half as listed in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which made a huge contribution to the world's poverty reduction efforts (United Nations, 2015; Zhou et al., 2018).

2.1.2 Experience of poverty in rural China

Despite rapid income growth and benefits for the rural and urban sectors, the accompanying poverty reduction efforts in rural China has not been smooth nor equal (Ward, 2016). With the overall sharp decrease in poverty, income inequality has increased between urban and rural areas (Naughton, 2006). According to China's National Bureau of Statistics in the last decade (shown in Table 6), both per capita disposable income of rural and urban households in China has steadily risen. Yet, the gap between urban-rural income is constantly widening, and the growth of China's rural per capita disposable income, including migrant workers, has declined from 11.4% in 2011 to 6.2% in 2019. The table of rural household income in 2019 only reached RMB 16,021 (UK£1,803), almost one-third of RMB 42,359 (UK£4,769) recorded in urban areas. It is also worth noting that a majority of rural households income has been accounted for by migrant workers from cities sending remittances home (Ping & Shaohua, 2008). In addition, China is an agricultural country, and a large amount of people still live in extreme poverty in its extensive rural areas (Liu, 2016; Zhou et al., 2018). As of the end of 2019, nearly 5.5 million rural impoverished people in China lived below China's national poverty line of 3,000 RMB

per year, of which 91.5% lived in remote, extremely fragile ecological, deep rocky mountainous areas in the central (32.9% with 1.81 million) and western regions (58.6% with 3.23 million), with relatively underdeveloped infrastructure and social service (Glauben et al., 2012; State Council, 2020; Yang et al., 2020).

Table 6: Per Capita Disposable Income of Rural and Urban Households in China 2011 - 2019
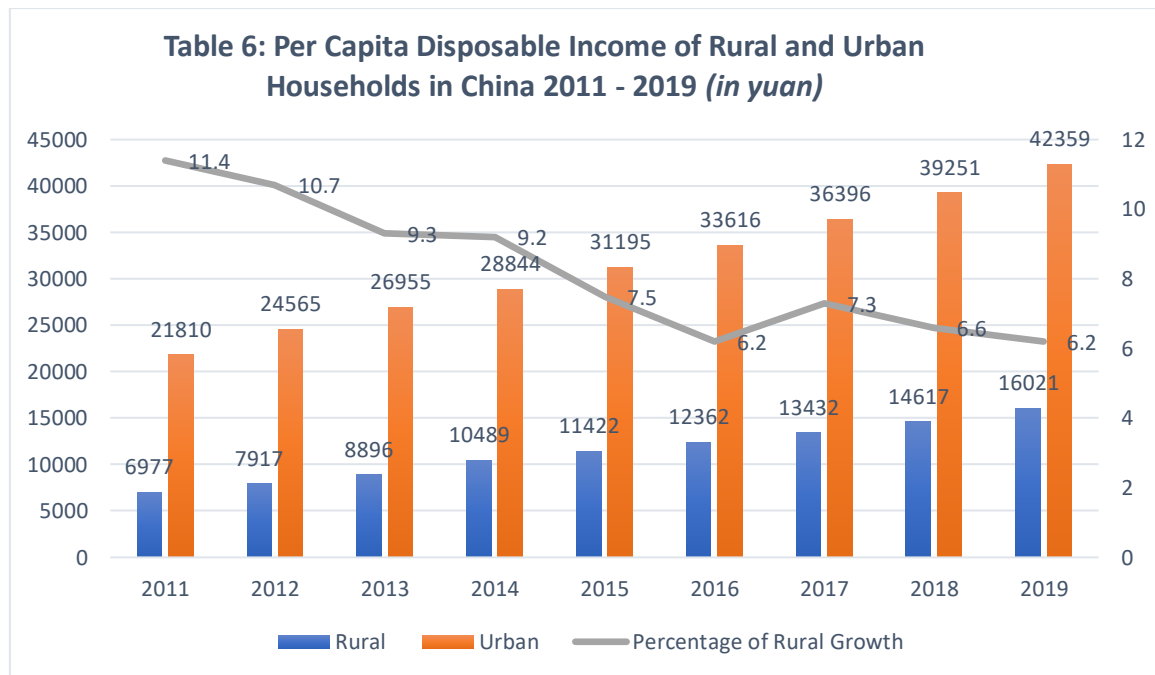
Source: (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020)

What is worse, China is the most populous developing country in the world with fundamental realities of less land for a larger population (Zhou et al., 2019). The rapid development of the social economy and urbanisation has inevitably occupied a large area of farmland and rural habitat (Lin, 2001; Liu et al., 2010; Smith, 2014; Wang et al., 2009; Wu, 2009; Zhou et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2014). The inefficient use of construction land, severe soil pollution and land degradation has exacerbated the already tense relationship between rural people and land (Zhou et al., 2019). Approximately 270,000 hectares of arable land are lost because of natural disasters and human production and construction activities each year (National Development and Reform Commission, 2017). In the process of urbanisation and

industrialisation, large areas of rural land usually in the suburbs of cities are requisitioned and cleared by the local government, and sold to real estate developers (Lin & Ho, 2005; Lo et al., 2016; Ong, 2014; Xu et al., 2011) or used to establish various types of special economic zones and industrial parks (Yang & Wang, 2008; Zhang, 2011). In addition, government's land expropriation is usually involuntary from the perspective of affected rural residents, and the results are typically harmful to these land-lost farmers (Li & Xi, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). It is estimated that the number of land-lost farmers will rise by 3 million each year and is likely to reach 110 million by the end of 2030 (Pan & Wei, 2015). Land-lost farmers generally suffer from unemployment and low income (Gan & Sun, 2015). There are many reasons for land-lost farmers' limited employment opportunities, including their low education background, poor health and lack of non-agricultural work skills (Chen et al., 2013). The social insurance system is possible to lessen some of their severe problems. However, social insurance can only meet basic living demands, instead of covering medical expenses caused by illness or physical disability or providing a good life (Bao & Peng, 2016; Zhou et al., 2018). Some lost-land farmers who have few work opportunities in rural areas and have to migrate to work in cities cannot enjoy social welfare and security in the receiving areas because of strict household registration system (Liu & Ju, 2014). Occasionally, migrant workers can be regarded as second-class citizens and their inherent agricultural behaviours are always discriminated against by urban residents, which leading to social exclusion for rural migrants (Li & Xi, 2019; Liu & Ju, 2014).

Thus, when considering poverty, it is important to recognise that the concept of poverty should involve not only absolute poverty, like severe deprivation of basic human needs, but also includes overall poverty, which could be social discrimination and exclusion, lack of opportunities or public services, and the vulnerability or exposure to risks of those deficits (United Nations, 2015; World Bank, 2020). Accordingly, the remaining rural impoverished residents in China are suffering serious multidimensional deficits rather than only economic shortage. The measure of poverty and its impacts

develops from a one-dimensional measure of income or consumption to a multi-dimensional measure of education, health condition, employment conditions, economic and political resources, environment, area and vulnerability (Liu & Xu, 2016; Wang et al., 2006; Xu & Gong, 2017; Zou & Fang, 2011). The next section focuses on the impacts of poverty on education.

2.1.3 Impacts of poverty on children and education

Low income is a powerful predictor of low educational performance (Hirsch, 2007). Children growing up in poverty are more likely to have lower educational achievement (Brown & Park, 2002; Goodman & Gregg, 2010). In 2020, children in China's formerly impoverished areas, including key counties for poverty alleviation counties and other poor counties totalling 832, accounted for 65.17 million people, making up 21.9% of the National Child Population. Of these children, 57.8% lived in rural areas, and their living and developmental status was particularly noteworthy. Among them, over 15 million were rural left-behind children in rural areas, which constituted 40.6% of the rural children in these impoverished regions, a figure higher than the national average for rural left-behind children at 37.9%. Child deprivation was multidimensional, with children in underdeveloped areas suffering from poorer health, educational opportunities, and living conditions compared to other children. In impoverished areas of China, children often face nutritional deficiencies, which leads to concentration difficulties, lower energy levels, and overall reduced cognitive capabilities. This directly impacts their academic performance and ability to benefit from educational opportunities. Early marriage and childbearing among adolescents are also relatively common in these regions (National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2023).

Although China's central government has exempted tuition fees of compulsory education since 2017 to reduce the family's expenditure on education and provided more equitable educational

opportunities, one of the biggest challenges for educational equality is the variation in national public expenditure on education (Sherman & Poirier, 2007). A majority of poor rural residents live in remote central and western areas of China while southeast and southern coastal areas make remarkable economic achievement (Bliney, 1997; Song et al., 2019). It is clear that in the past several years, the public expenditure on education allocated by the state to coastal areas (Jiangsu Province and Guangdong Province) was much higher than that in the central and western regions (Qinghai Province and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region). The expenditure gap had dramatically increased as education expenditures in Guangdong and Jiangsu almost doubled, while Ningxia and Qinghai only slightly grew with little change. Thus, it becomes more disadvantaged for less economically developed rural areas in China. Without adequate education subsidies from the central government or sub-central of government, many governments and individual families in poor rural areas are inevitable to bear more burdens and pressure on financing and local school management (Fu, 2005; Park et al., 1996).

Table 7: Public Expenditure on Education in Four Provinces, China 2011-2018
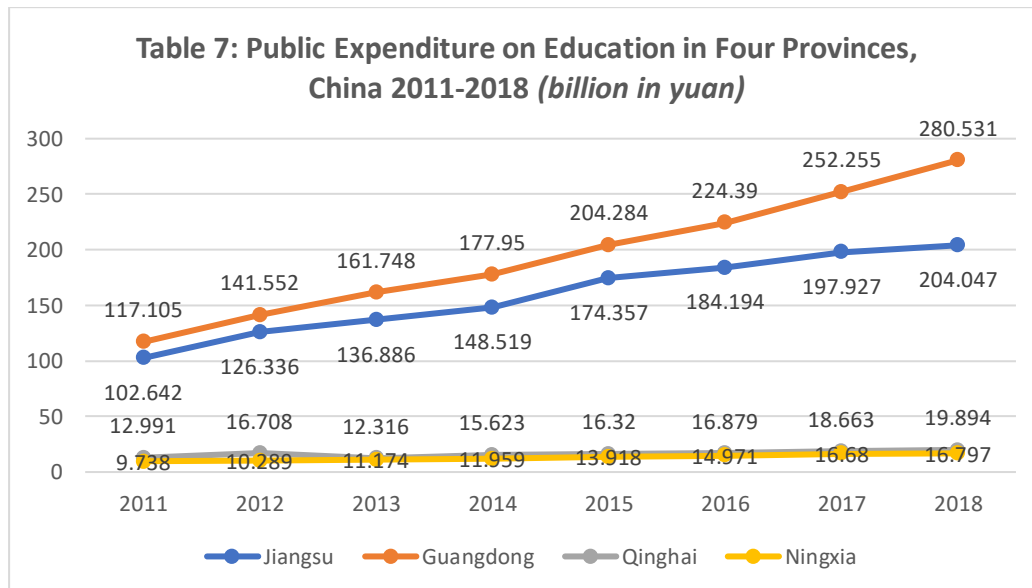
Source: (MOE, 2019b)

It has also been confirmed that educational disparities exists in school infrastructure construction, teacher training and distribution, and funding investment (Yang, 2022). One of the primary factors contributing to the rural-urban education disparity is the uneven distribution of educational resources. Urban schools typically have better infrastructure, including more modern facilities and access to advanced technological resources. In contrast, rural schools often grapple with inadequate physical infrastructure and lack essential learning materials, such as textbooks and laboratory equipment. There is also a difference in the curriculum and extracurricular opportunities offered in urban versus rural schools. Urban schools are more likely to offer a diverse range of subjects, including foreign languages and advanced science courses, and provides a wider array of extracurricular activities. Rural schools, with limited resources and personnel, often struggle to offer such breadth in their curriculum. On the other hand, due to the insufficiency of public education funds in rural areas, free compulsory education in poor areas in China generally provides a lower quality of education with inadequate funds to employ and train teachers (China Power Team, 2020; Fu, 2005; OECD, 2016). These regions often face huge disparity in teacher quality compared to their urban counterparts. This divide is not merely a matter of academic qualifications; it encompasses the ability to engage students, employs effective teaching methods, and adapts to the varied needs of learners. The implications of this disparity are profound: where teacher quality faltered, student achievement often followed suit, leaving children in poverty-stricken areas at a significant disadvantage.

Moreover, children in low-income families are more likely to perform worse in their exams and get lower test scores than urban students, which highly witnesses high dropouts in compulsory education and low enrolment ratio in higher education (Bai et al., 2017; Chung & Mason, 2012; Wang et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2017). The statistics in Zhang et al. (2015)'s study has shown that 88% of rural children finished primary education and entered junior high schools, while the rest 12% dropped out of primary schools. In addition, only 70% of rural children who received junior high education can complete their

study. It means that 38% of rural children cannot complete nine-year compulsory education with a high percentage of primary and junior high school dropouts. The biggest drop in the enrolment rate of lower-secondary school in China occurs before going to higher-secondary school. Over half (51.2%-53.5%) of students in poor rural areas do not attend higher-secondary school while almost all urban children complete lower-secondary school, of whom 63% are enrolled in higher-secondary school (Zhang et al., 2015). More than half (54%) of urban children who graduated from junior high school enter university and college for higher education. For rural children who are enrolled in higher-secondary school, most of them have to study in vocational schools or technical schools (Gu et al., 2019; Li et al., 2016).

Furthermore, tuition and other expenses related in higher education in China have been increasing since the late 1990s and have remained high (Li & Liu, 2013; Wang, 2013; Zhang, 2014). The tuition fee in most Chinese public universities such as Peking University and Tsinghua University charges undergraduate programmes approximately RMB 5,000 to RMB 6,000 (UK£560 to UK£670) per year (Gu et al., 2019). It accounts for around half of the per capita disposable income of rural residents (RMB 11,567 = UK£1290) in poor areas (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020a). The high cost of four-year higher education not only limits the access of poor children to receive education, but also put a long-term financial burden on low-income families (Zhang, 2014). It also results in poor rural children's low enrolment rate in higher education (Bai et al., 2017; Chung & Mason, 2012; Wang et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2017).

For rural migrant families who are living in poverty (Holdaway, 2018), it creates additional issues - it is not only about migrant children's struggle to access to schools, but also their struggle to get good quality education and have better educational attainment. They come from low social-economic and poorly-educated families, so it is necessary to look at the relationships between poverty and migrant

children's educational attainment. Park and Wang (2010), and Cheng (2011) find that because of their low-skilled and unstable nature of migrant work, migrant family income are likely to vary from season to season depending on shifts in market demands. Migrants then have lower income than local residents on average. Without urban household registration status, many migrants cannot be covered by a lot of significant non-income welfare indicators like such as access to social insurance systems, access to educational service and access to decent quality housing. These underpaid migrant workers have almost no savings after deducting urban living expenses. Therefore, they have to send their children to MCS, which only provides educational resources to children of migrant workers and charges relatively cheap tuition fees, rather than choosing state schools (Chen & Liang, 2007).

2.2 The influence of Confucianism on Chinese education

Confucianism, also known as Confucian culture, was proposed by Confucius, an influential Chinese thinker, philosopher and educator during the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu) period for more than 2,500 years. Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism has been the basis of China's official and mainstream ideology for most of its history, and has historically influenced many Southeast Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and Singapore (Leung, 1998). Despite various challenges, social transformations, and phases of economic development, Confucianism continues to embody the core values of Chinese education and represents Chinese civilisation and national traditions worldwide (Kajawo, 2019; Littlejohn, 2010).

2.2.1 The idea of "education for all"

Confucius is among the earliest philosophers to advocate for universal education (Mu et al., 2013). During the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu) period in ancient China, society is rigidly stratified, with education being a privilege reserved exclusively for aristocrats and elites, while other citizens, ethnic

minorities, and slaves are excluded (Mu et al., 2013). It indicates that scholars belonging to the upper-most class and these vulnerable groups with little power in the lower class have no access to education. Confucius is credited with breaking the ruling class monopoly over education and then transforms "education for aristocrats" into "education for all" through establishing the first free school in China (Kajawo, 2019; Mu et al., 2013). Although he does not explicitly use the term "educational equality", Confucius advocates "education without distinction" and asserts that everyone is capable of learning (Rainey, 2010). His belief is that education should be universally accessible regardless of their social class or wealth. Lee (1996) points out that Confucius recognises individual differences in intelligence, yet he maintains that such variations should not restrict one's potential for learning, arguing that "differences in intelligence… do not inhibit one's educability" (p. 29). Confucian philosophy not only embraces the idea that everyone could be educated but also that everyone could achieve perfection or sage hood through persistent effort (Lee, 1996). This optimistic view of learning historically motivates Chinese students to apply themselves diligently in their educational pursuits (Leung, 1998). Confucius's concept of "education for all" is consistent with contemporary, universally accepted view of education and remains deeply rooted in long-standing Confucian thought.

2.2.2 Emphasis on exam and high expectations on student achievement

Because of this great emphasis on education, Chinese parents and teachers attach great significance to the education and achievement of their children and students (Leung, 1998). The principle of "education for all," established during the Han Dynasty, leads to the creation of a public education system where Confucianism becomes a core subject in the civil service examination. This system guarantees that not only the elites from upper-class families have access to education, but also that ordinary people could also become better a better man (gentleman) through education. It becomes the means by which individuals from even the humblest backgrounds could rise to great heights. Indeed, for the common man, mastering Confucian principles and being a gentleman is the most

effective way for them to advance to the upper classes and reach a high social status, which is still shaping the Chinese society up to date (Huang & Gove, 2012; Kajawo, 2019). Success in the national examinations, which requires rigorous study, is often seen as essential for securing prestigious government positions (Kajawo, 2019). Provincial schools spread to the countryside, which leads to the influence of Confucian educational traditions being spread throughout China. This system not only motivates individuals to pursue educational success to uplift their families (Kajawo, 2019; Lien, 2006), but also motivates a thirst for academic excellence. As a result, there is often high pressure on students to perform well academically, which can sometimes lead to undue stress (Leung, 1998). In contemporary China, securing high scores, attending top-tier schools, and obtaining advanced degrees are widely regarded as indisputable pathways to success and social prestige (Huang & Gove, 2012). In short, the belief that excellent educational achievement will bring a better life – including higher social status, better job opportunities, and more desirable marriage prospects and relationship – places education at the heart of many Chinese families for shaping individual futures and social structure.

2.2.3 The value of education on migrant families

Archer and Francis (2006) believe that Chinese families emphasise on education and their children have higher educational aspirations, which results from Confucian teachings and considerable economic benefits brought by education. Extensive research results indicate a positive correlation between income and education in rural and urban areas since the 1980s (Adamchak et al., 1999; De Brauw & Rozelle, 2008; Zhao, 1997). As mentioned in section 2.2.1, only people who are well-educated can obtain urban Hukou from rural areas, which also place a high value on education.

Migrant families and children regard 'university' as their educational aspirations as the same as local students in state primary schools because they believe that education is the key to economic success

(Koo, 2012). Most of them have faith in a phenomenon that high education qualifications have high possibility to bring them high-paid jobs (Lu et al., 2013). A great number of migrant families firmly highlight that low-class young people without higher education would not find stable jobs and sufficient income (Liazos, 2015). Parents view education as a way out of poverty and a means to create a better life for their children (Wei et al., 2005), and children also believe that educated qualifications can access to decent employment and higher incomes (Koo, 2012). A participated Grade 6 child in Koo (2012)'s research mentioned that she wanted to go to university, thus she could choose her occupation which she was really interested in and then earned enough for herself and for her family to become a useful and successful person. In her mind, education is a significant way to have a better life.

However, when migrant families and children carry out a concrete plan to reach their aspirations, they encounter many difficulties and obstacles, and then generally lower their expectations with uncertain future (Lu & Zhou, 2013). As mentioned in the section 1.1.2, migrant children have educational barriers to access to higher-secondary schools and universities in the receiving areas and in their hometowns. For example, migrant children cannot access to state higher-secondary schools in Beijing without Hukou even though they might be the top student, and they have no option but to apply for vocational training schools instead of colleges or universities if they chose to stay in Beijing. They are not provided an opportunity to fulfil their aspirations in urban areas because of their disadvantaged social background when compared with local students. They also have difficulties to receiving higher-secondary education in their hometowns. They are not familiar with the admission criteria or the lifestyle in their hometowns without parental care. In Koo (2012)'s research, a child back to hometown to receive education complains that the textbook and criteria are much more difficult than that in Beijing, thus she totally loses her confidence in catching up with other peer students; also, a parent eventually prefers to letting his daughter stay in Beijing rather than back to hometown to attend only

vocational training schools even though he knows that his daughter cannot take the examination to enter universities in Beijing; another Grade 5 boy claimes that he wishes to drop out of school after finishing compulsory education due to family financial burden. He believes that since there is no hope to receive higher education in Beijing, it is unnecessary to waste money and time on post-secondary schools but quitting school early to support the family (Koo, 2012).

In summary, despite their educational background, migrant parents put more emphasis on children's education, and migrant families have hopes of the same high educational attainment as other Chinese families. The educational aspirations in migrant parents and children's mind are not greatly influenced by the poor socio-economic levels. Nevertheless, the unequal educational structure has a great impact on their expectations when they are asked to clarify their educational goals. The restrictions on household registration system, examination policies and financial resources are objective factors that block their opportunities, which not only affect their access to higher education, but also have an influence on their subjective evaluation of success. For migrant families, paying tuition fees plus spending extra years in school without income is costly, and there is a great risk that they might not eventually have access to college education. Even if migrant families have high aspirations, the current limitation and social structure of unequal chances push them to adjust and lower their educational expectations.

2.3 Theories of poverty and its impacts on migrant children and families

2.3.1 Cultural capital, habitus and field

2.3.1.1 Cultural capital

In Bourdieu's (1984) theory, capital refers to "the set of actually usable resources and powers" (p.114). Capital is accumulated over time, plays an important role in the production and reproduction of profits

in an individual's life opportunities, and is most valuable when capital is scarce (Bourdieu, 1986). The capital is conceived by Bourdieu (1986) not as capital in a purely economic sense, but understood as various forms of capital. In general, Bourdieu (1986) believes that capital can be divided into three fundamental types associated with poverty:

> *as **economic capital**, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; as **cultural capital**, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications; and as **social capital**, made up of social obligations ("connections"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1986: 243).*

These three basic forms of capital are not unchanging, but can be transformed into each other (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, cultural capital can be transformed from economic capital, such as the economic investment in education; Cultural capital can also be transformed into economic capital. For example, people with advanced education can often find a good job. At the same time, cultural capital can also be transformed into social capital. For example, people with a certain education diploma can enter certain business or academic circles to establish interpersonal relationships.

In the field of education, Bourdieu (1986) points out that a significant factor contributing to academic success is "the transmission of cultural capital" (p. 244). This is a process that economists have long ignored. Economists only consider monetary investment, failing to realise that ability and talent is the product generated by the investment of time and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In short, acquiring and equipping one's own cultural capital can lead to academic success and upward mobility on the social ladder. However, the emphasis on the importance of cultural capital does not negate the value

of economic capital, but rather complements it. Bourdieu (1986) states that economic capital is at the root of conversion into other capital and their effects (p. 252), which emphasises the significance of the economic capital. For Bourdieu, cultural capital is something that one acquires for equipping oneself and is reproduced by economic capital. To be precise, when a person has more economic capital, their children are likely to obtain more cultural capital. These two capitals are directly proportional. For example, since the parents can afford their children's after-school tutoring fees, the academic performance of these children will improve. By improving academic performance, children could enter better schools and then they may get a higher-paying job in the future. The parents' economic capital "purchases" the cultural capital of their children, which the children can use in exchange for a higher social status and may also generate more economic capital. This is how Bourdieu's capital operates. Therefore, both economic and cultural capital are very important in education, as they reinforce the reproduction of both economic and cultural capital.

Accordingly, in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) theory, children from different social classes might have different academic performance, which leads to a phenomenon that more privileged class are more likely to have more gains from the academic market, which corresponds to the distribution of cultural capital among different social groups. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that the concept runs counter to accepted wisdom, which attributes academic success or failure to natural abilities like intelligence or talent and find that the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family environment explains school success better than a measure of individual talent or achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu (1986) believes that there are three different states in cultural capital. First, the *embodied* state is reflected in the cultivated dispositions in an individual's mind and body through socialisation. It concludes intellectual capacity, understanding and acquired skills and individuals can appropriate them only by apprehending their meaning. The second is the *objectified* state, referring to material goods like instruments and study guides. Upper-class families are highly

possible to invest this cultural capital for their children than working-class families who have no resources or knowledge of how or why they have access to these materials. The third form that cultural capital exists in is the *institutionalised* state, which means academic and professional degrees and qualifications can be achieved through formal education. It is supported by Kingston (2001), stating that schools reflect and respond to the cultural orientation of the leading class. As a result, children from wealthier families are more likely to have cultivated a school-rewarded personality before going to schools, while children from poor families cannot acquire cultural capital, which edge in the cultural bias of the institution.

Family economic and cultural capital significantly influence children's educational outcomes, with parental involvement being a key determinant of academic success. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) highlight that parental involvement is the strongest predictor of educational attainment, affecting not only academic performance but also children's self-efficacy and attitudes towards learning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Şengönül, 2022). The more frequently parents communicate with their children and the more they participate in their children's school, cultural, and leisure activities, the higher the children's academic performance (Wilder, 2023). Parental involvement encompass both home-based strategies, such as supporting homework and stimulating educational motivation, and school-based activities like volunteering and attending parent-teacher meetings (Tan et al., 2020; Wilder, 2023). However, families with lower economic and cultural capital face challenges in sustaining engagement due to financial pressures and significant life events that diminish the ability of parents to participate effectively at home and school. A study by Camacho-Thompson et al. (2016), which conducted quantitative interviews with parents of 428 Mexican-origin ninth and tenth grade students, by Camacho-Thompson et al. (2016), it finds that major family life events tend to reduce parental involvement at home, while economic pressures decrease parental participation at school. Although parents from low-income families recognise the importance of their involvement in their

children's education, the challenges posed by limited capital resources still exist, leading to questions about the effectiveness of parental involvement in these households (Cashman et al., 2021; Şengönül, 2022). In a quantitative longitudinal research of 463 American families, Hill et al. (2004) find that in families where parents have lower education levels, although parental involvement boosts adolescents' educational and career aspirations, it does not significantly change children's school behaviour or academic performance; however, in families where parents have higher education levels, parental involvement effectively impacts their children's school behaviour and, thereby, their learning achievements and future prospects. Research by Vellymalay (2012) also finds that even in top performance-based schools, although most parents adopt various strategies at home to help their children succeed academically, the educational level, employment status, and income of parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds affect their understanding of the practical value that needs to be placed on their children's education.

In the context of Chinese migrant children, cultural capital and parental involvement significantly influence their educational paths, and often determined the quality and extent of their educational achievements (Fang et al., 2017; Li & Xie, 2020; Wang et al., 2016). Despite legal mandate in China that emphasises the importance of family education — such as the *Family Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China* which highlights parental responsibilities and collaboration with educational institutions—effective parental involvement is notably challenging for lower-income families (Ministry of Education of China, 2021). Migrant parents, often from lower socio-economic backgrounds, typically have limited access to cultural resources that could enhance their children's educational opportunities (Ding & Wu, 2023). They often face constraints that hinder their involvement in their children's education. These constraints include limited time due to demanding work schedules, lack of familiarity with the educational system and a lack of educational resources that would enable them to support their children's learning effectively (Ding & Wu, 2023; Ma & Wu,

2020; Yu, 2020b). China Labour Bulletin (2023) indicates that migrant parents, typically engaged in labour-intensive jobs, find it challenging to allocate time for educational activities at home or participate in school-based events. Specially, the disadvantaged social background of poor migrant families, such as migrant parents' limited involvement in children's schooling and the suboptimal family learning environment affect migrant children's academic performance (Li et al., 2010a); in their study, Li ei al. (2010) state that because of parents' poor-educated background and physical-demanded work, they have to work at early time and came back home late, thus they have no more time, energy or strong knowledge and skills to support children's study or even attend parents' meetings. Also, from their observations, some children do not have space for studying because they live in a very small crowded rented room of 20 square meters. Low-income migrant parents cannot afford higher rent on housing, thus their children have to study in substandard living conditions, which has negative influence on their study. This limitation not only affects the direct academic support migrant children receive but also influences their educational aspirations and attitudes towards learning.

Overall, due to differences in family economic and cultural capital, parental involvement in children's education has an important role to play on children's learning achievements and aspirations, and is reflected throughout the child's life course. Those students from more educated families not only have a higher academic success rate, but also perform different cultural consumption and cultural expression patterns than students from other families in almost all fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Therefore, in Bourdieu's view, cultural capital is the collection of power, status, and cultural knowledge. To a certain extent, it is inherited and passed between classes. Although it is not like economic capital that can be quantitatively controlled, it could be called a kind of reproduction between the previous generations. There is little upward or downward flow between different classes; and it remains largely unchanged. The social structure basically restores itself through reproduction,

and social status is also transmitted between generations within the family. Such cultural reproduction inherited by social power relations is a kind of social alchemy. Family then is undoubtedly the primary and most important place for the reproduction of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). No matter it comes from parents' innate genes, the invisible edifying in the growth environment or the operation of tangible symbols and power, such cultural capital of knowledge and status is passed down from generation to generation with a strong attitude in a reproduction way, and its momentum is increasing (Bourdieu, 1977). Culture contains complex operations of power to achieve their goals of maintaining and strengthening the existing social hierarchy. Individuals taking advantage of culture, language, intellectual curiosity, parental interest and so on from the beginning, would get more resources. The reproduction of cultural capital is carried out in a way of inheritance, which condenses the unequal relationship between social members and reflects the unequal distribution of social resources (Bourdieu, 1977).

Parents transmit their economic, cultural and social resources to their children, enabling their children to benefit from these advantages and achieve academic and professional success in the future (Devine, 2008). These families invest time, effort and money while children put time and enthusiasm for education to obtain profits in the academic market (Bourdieu, 1977). As Devine (2008) supports Bourdieu's theory, "cultural capital is created out of struggles between social classes that attempt to legitimate their own culture" (p.102). Upper-class and middle-class parents use their capital to legitimise and maintain their culture in society. Therefore, class inequality is reproduced in the process of parents transmitting their resources to their children. However, critics raise significant questions about Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Sullivan (2002) contends that Bourdieu's concept lacks a clear definition and questions whether the standards disadvantaging lower-class students are arbitrary or reflective of these students' lack of resources to meet these standards. Goldthorpe (2007) offers a more direct critique, suggesting that family is not the only locus of either the creation or

transmission of cultural capital, and children from working-class backgrounds can acquire cultural capital in school settings, which are not available at home. Contrary to Bourdieu's claims, educational institutions also can, and do, play a major role in this regard, and one that has some significant degree of independence from the influences of family and class. As evidence shows by the early 1970s, over two-thirds of those surveyed who attended elite schools in Britain were "first generation"—their parents had not received education at this level (Halsey & Ridge, 1980); although children from working-class backgrounds were underrepresented, they were not excluded. For this research, despite the critiques of cultural capital, it provides a useful lens through which to view the educational inequalities faced by migrant children in China. Migrant children often attend schools with fewer resources and lower educational standards compared to their urban counterparts. This theoretical approach provides valuable insights into how migrant students navigate the educational development, influenced by their family backgrounds and social structures.

2.3.1.2 Habitus and field

Having explored the concept of capital as a crucial element within Bourdieu's theoretical framework, this review now turns to his other essential concepts: habitus and field. These are interconnected with capital, developing a dynamic triad that influences social positions and interactions. Habitus represents the deeply ingrained dispositions and tendencies developed through individual life experiences, crucial for navigating the social field; field, on the other hand, is the context where these dispositions and capital interact, which continuously shapes and is shaped by the struggles for position and power (Bourdieu 1986).

In Bourdieu (1990)'s definition, the concept of 'habitus' is

*a system of durable, transposable dispositions, **structured structures** predisposed to function*

*as structuring structures, that is, as **principles which generate and organise practices and***

***representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes** without presupposing a*

conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain

them (Bourdieu, 1990: 53).

According to Bourdieu's definition, habitus encompasses a range of deeply internalised, dominant dispositions that shape an individual's behaviour and actions. Swartz (1997) further expands this concept by emphasising that habitus is not only the bodily and cognitive basis of action but also highlights the creativity and habitual forms of behaviour. Through this perspective, it allows for a deeper exploration of how habitus influences the educational field, particularly in how individuals adjust their educational behaviours and expectations based on their socialisation experiences and social structures. For example, Bourdieu illustrates this through the case of young people from the French working class during the rapid educational expansion of the 1960s, who did not expect to pursue higher education. The reason was that they internalised and resigned themselves to the limited opportunities for success in school education. This case effectively reflects the close connection between social class opportunities and individual aspirations or ambitions, and reveals how educational inequalities are transmitted across generations through deeply embedded socialisation processes and result in self-defeating behaviours (Swartz, 1997).

Swartz (1997) also notes that habitus predisposes individuals to choose the most likely path to success based on their resources and earlier experiences. This means that individuals' desires and expectations are adjusted based on their perceived opportunities for success. Moreover, he emphasises that habitus is resistant to rapid change. When individuals encounter new environments, there is a gradual adaptation process, but this process is often very slow, tending more towards

improvement rather than a complete change of the original dispositions (Swartz, 1997). In considering children's vocational aspirations, the research by Pimlott-Wilson (2011) further verifies that children's imaginings and aspirations for their future career paths are largely influenced by deep tendencies formed within their family environments. This shows that children tend to choose professions similar to those of their family members, which demonstrates the profound impact of family socialisation on career choices, and reinforces the critical role of habitus in shaping educational and vocational aspirations.

For field, Bourdieu gives the definition:

a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies. (Bourdieu 1998b: 40–41)

Bourdieu outlines three essential steps for exploring a social field to understand the interactions between individuals and structures within a specific social space. The initial step requires researchers to analyse the relationship between the field and the field of power, identifying its position within the broader social structure. Subsequently, the second step involves mapping out the relationships among participants or institutions within the field, particularly how they compete for and maintain legitimate authority. The final step focuses on the analysis of individual habitus. These are the behaviours and thought patterns formed by internalising specific social and economic environments, and how these predispositions find opportunities for realisation within the field. This analytical framework not only

reveals the structure of the field but also sheds light on how individuals position themselves socially and seek opportunities through their habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

In applying Bourdieu's framework to the analysis of migrant children's education, the first step involves analysing the position of the education field within the entire structure of social forces, particularly how the education field is influenced and constrained by the economic or political domains (i.e., the fields of power). This helps understand the interactions and dependencies between various fields. I have discussed this in detail in Sections 1.3 and 2.1. Secondly, it is necessary to map out or determine the structure of relations between individuals or institutions competing for specific authority within the field, that is, the quantity and quality of resources or capital needed to have access and secure a position, which are valued and recognised within the field and align with the previously discussed concept of capital. The third step is the analysis of the migrant children's habitus—their internalised behaviours and thought patterns shaped by their distinct social and economic backgrounds. This involves understanding how their specific dispositions are either enabled or restricted within the educational field, and how these dispositions align with or challenge the existing norms and values of the urban educational environment.

Research into the educational challenges faced by migrant children often focuses on the interplay between habitus and field. The habitus of migrant children is frequently conceptualised as accents and routine behaviours, including hygiene, hobbies, sense of discipline, which collectively reflect a lifestyle distinct from urban norms that makes it difficult for them to integrate into urban schools as it misaligns with the expectations of urban educational environments (Mu & Hu, 2016). Similarly, migrant college students encounter challenges that stem from their rural backgrounds, which can develop a sense of alienation within the urban-centric social life of universities (Li, 2017). The persistence of such habitus is not just a reflection of individual histories but a broader reproductive

pattern, where migrant children inherit and manifest the dispositions of their parents. Yu's (2020) research finds that the habitus of migrant children's families affects their behaviour in two intersecting aspects: on one hand, their rural background leads them not to view themselves as academic educators; on the other, as part of the urban working class, they face the necessity to strive for survival rather than educational engagement. This misalignment with teachers' expectations often leads to perceptions of parental incompetence in the context of home-school interactions. The fields in which migrant children are situated can be divided into two aspects: the urban environment they migrate to—a structured social space composed of various forces (Mu & Hu, 2016), and the other is the educational system, in which migrant children and their families should be aware of and engage in educational practices that embody common rules and processes, as Bourdieu described as 'playing the game' or 'practical sense' (Bourdieu, 1990), where understanding and adapting to it is crucial from success and integration.

Researchers have explored the challenges faced by migrant children's rural habitus in two fields (Li et al., 2010b; Mu et al., 2013). As detailed in section 1.3.3 and 1.3.4, in the field of the education system, migrant children frequently face barriers to accessing state schools preferred by urban families, leading to physical and social isolation from the urban field. Even when migrant children manage to enrol in these schools, they often encounter exclusion from their urban peers and reinforce their marginalisation (Li et al., 2010b). The rural dispositions of these children, which include distinct cultural and social practices, often lead to their stigmatisation and further disadvantage (Mu & Hu, 2016).

The mismatch between the migrant children's habitus and the urban educational field highlights the difficulties in achieving integration. Consequently, many migrant families turn to specialised schools designed for migrant children with similar rural backgrounds, which ostensibly provide a more

inclusive environment (Wang, 2008). However, these schools fail to help migrant children integrate into the urban field and even intensify the feeling of isolation. A large-scale comparative study with 1,259 children conducted in Beijing finds that migrant students in such schools felt lonelier than their counterparts in regular state schools (Lu & Zhou, 2013), and attending schools composed entirely of similar backgrounds does little to help them assimilate into the urban culture (Wang, 2008). Nonetheless, it is crucial to avoid over emphasise the reproduction of rural habitus on the social integration of migrant children. Yu (2020a) critiques 'rucksack approach' advocated by Erel (2010), which believes that children of immigrant families are always marked by the habitus and rural capital of the first generation of immigrants. Through interviews, Yu (2020) finds that the inclusive practices within urban schools foster a sense of belonging among migrant children, gradually shaping them into a new generation of urban citizens. This transformation shows the potential for educational environments to reshape habitus, and fosters mutual dependence and social interactions that align with urban norms (Fang et al., 2017).

2.3.2 Rationality

After exploring Bourdieu's theory of capital, it becomes clear that cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital play significant roles in shaping educational opportunities and social stratification. Bourdieu's theory reveals how the accumulation and transformation of capital work within social structures in the field of education. However, critics like Goldthorpe argues that the theory of cultural reproduction, seen as an enhanced version of the family education theory, does not adequately explain the temporal stability of class differences—why these cultural influences remain nearly unchanged across generations. Due to a perceived lack of a micro foundation in both Marxist and liberal class theories, Goldthorpe (2010) believes that the persistent class differences in education could only be explained through "methodological individualism" (p. 315), which importantly involves the adoption of Rational Action Theory (RAT).

The role of rational behaviour in educational processes is extensively discussed by Becker (2009). He views education as an investment in knowledge and skills - just as people invested in machinery and buildings. This viewpoint considers education as a means to boost future income and productivity. Goldthorpe's perspective on rationality diverges from Becker's economic-centric view. Goldthorpe (2010) offers a subtle version, positing that individuals have the capacity to act autonomously and pursue their goals in ways suit to their circumstances. His adoption of RAT, originating from Boudon and further informed by Keller and Zavalloni's (1964) 'positional' theory of aspirations, examines the mechanisms behind class differences at various stages.

Keller and Zavalloni (1964) argue that educational aspirations should be assessed from the individuals' class positions. For example, the aspiration to attend college represents a higher aspiration for children from poorer backgrounds compared to those from higher social classes, due to the greater social distance they need to cross. Boudon (1974) finds this description particularly useful, noting that "different opportunities and constraints, and thus the evaluation of different sets of probable costs and benefits, will be involved" (pp. 23). He distinguishes between 'primary' and 'secondary' effects that stratifies educational attainment. The primary effects refer to how SES directly influences academic performance, and acknowledges the impact of cultural capital. However, Boudon focuses more on secondary effects, which involves the choices children make about whether to continue education or leave school early for work. These choices are based on various considerations that arise from the relationship between their class origins and the educational and occupational destinations they envision. Boudon argues that these choices are determined by the children and their parents' assessments of the costs, benefits, and likelihood of success of different options. Moreover, as children progress through their educational careers, the impact of secondary effects becomes increasingly significant.

Building on this, Goldthorpe (2010) suggests that with the expansion and reform of education, the constraints imposed by primary effects might weaken (even though these effects persist throughout the educational trajectory), because the degree of choice in continuous transitions will decrease (as the requirements for students' capabilities and resources are lowered), leading to an overall increase in social educational opportunities. However, differences in educational achievement between social classes might still persist, as these classes do not significantly alter their perspectives and conditions in evaluating the costs and benefits of education. For lower social class families, even with more accessible education, the costs of educational investment might still seem high (considering their economic situation) and the expected returns uncertain. Therefore, Goldthorpe (2010) firmly believes that to effectively address the issue of class disparities under the conditions of educational expansion—or more precisely, their persistence—focus must shift to the secondary effects rather than the primary ones.

One aspect of rational choice is cost consideration. In this context, educational choices are defined as a cost-benefit calculation (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). Jakob and Combet (2020) conduct a random sample survey of high school students in the rural Morazán area of El Salvador, a lower-income country in Latin America; they find that nearly all students, irrespective of their social background, aspire to pursue higher education. However, these aspirations are largely unattainable for many students. The significant perceived burden of direct costs is identified as the primary factor driving the disparity between their aspirations and actual plans. This burden accounts for approximately 40 to 50 percent of the effect of social background on their educational decisions. Another aspect of rational choice is risk consideration. With the diminishing returns of higher education and the jobs it provides (Gale & Hodge, 2017), the purpose of educational choices for families can be understood as minimising the risk of attaining an education level lower than that of their parents (Davies et al., 2002). In other words, an important goal of educational decisions is to avoid downward mobility, and to achieve this,

individuals will pursue the minimum necessary educational trajectory. Kartika's (2020) study finds that, although financial aid programs such as the Knowledge and Skills Enhancement Program (KJMU) are available to help students choose higher education unrestrictedly, the reality is that impoverished students are often unwilling or unable to choose their preferred higher education institutions. If they are not admitted to public universities, they might choose for cheaper private schools. Some academically outstanding but impoverished students choose to work directly instead. In contrast, middle-upper students tend to maximise risk in order to gain admission to national higher education institutions.

It is noticed that there is significant phenomenon of Chinese educational system, which posts a threat of educational equalities on migrant children. As mentioned in central government policy towards migrant children in Chapter 1, these children's access to secondary schools and higher education is strictly structured. Goldthorpe's (2010) framework highlights how families assess the risk of educational investments. Migrant children often face systemic exclusions, such as restrictions tied to the Hukou system, which limits their eligibility for local educational opportunities (Holdaway, 2018). The uncertainty surrounding their ability to secure a return on educational investments significantly influences their educational choices. Therefore, despite the high aspirations migrant families often hold for their children's education affected by Confucius and desire for better life, the reality of achieving these goals is fraught with challenges (Xiong, 2015). The aspiration for upward social mobility through education is confronted by a harsh educational development where access to quality schools and universities is heavily mediated by local residency statuses and socio-economic factors. Furthermore, migrant children's right to access higher education is not the only issue for their families. They must weigh the high costs of post-secondary education and higher education such as tuition and living expenses against potential lost wages employed in blue-collar jobs like construction and factory workers, hotel service staff, and cooks after their vocational training. These economic considerations

are essential, as they directly impact the family's immediate financial stability and the child's long-term educational and career trajectory (Li et al., 2017).

If the critique of Goldthorpe's RAT shifts back to discussions on external factors such as family SES and cultural capital, it risks creating a cycle of mutual criticism. Instead, it is essential to start with the individual, exploring factors beyond rationality from the perspective of personal values that influence educational aspirations. As Devine (1998) points out, an overly materialistic view of educational choices overlooks the significant role of values, norms, and institutional contexts in shaping aspirations, and this view is considerably limited. A study on Chilean students in secondary vocational education and training finds that under a neoliberal backdrop, high social inequalities actually encourage young people to have 'ambitious' aspirations. This shift illustrates their readiness to undertake personal responsibility and risk over the long term (Aldinucci et al., 2023). Additionally, another study involving 700 low-income women at community colleges finds that even against the backdrop of setbacks like Hurricane Katrina, plans to return to university are still prevalent (Deterding, 2015). These university plans represent not only the 'instrumental logic of vocational training' but also serve an expressive function, allowing them to construct and perform narratives of upward mobility and claim themselves as morally deserving individuals. The economic necessity and symbolic value of attending university intertwine with the respondents' educational plans and expectations for themselves.

Overall, in examining the educational challenges faced by migrant children in China, Goldthorpe's RAT (2010) provides a valuable framework for understanding the decision-making processes of migrant families regarding their children's education. It posits that individuals make educational choices based on a cost-benefit analysis, where they weigh the potential risks and returns of various educational

pathways. This approach is particularly relevant when considering the unique barriers that migrant children encounter in accessing quality education in urban areas.

2.3.3 Social capital in community and family

While poverty has been recognised as a significant barrier to children's access to education and their educational attainment, the role of social capital in this relationship garners increasing attention (Liang et al., 2020), further emphasising the influence of families on children's education. Although Bourdieu (1986) discusses various forms of capital, other theorists only focus on the important role that social capital play in the educational outcomes of young people. The most famous of these theorists is James Coleman, whose conceptualisation of social capital has been one of the most commonly adopted (Field, 2003). The definition of capital by Coleman (1988) is very close to that of Bourdieu (1986), but the starting point is completely different. Bourdieu's definition of social capital includes two parts: social relationships/networks and the resources inhered in social relations (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 1998). The concept of social capital defined by Coleman (1988) stresses that actors do not exist independently of each other, and discovers the relationship between actors and among actors;

> *Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors - whether persons or corporate actors - within the structure* (Coleman, 1988: S98).

From the differences in conceptualisation, it can be seen that Bourdieu regards social capital as the reproduction of social inequality under the situations of unequal power and capital among stratified classes, while Coleman's concept of social capital does not clarify the role of unequal access to resources among status groups, nor does it illuminate the structural constraints like poverty that might

hinder the construction of social networks (Ra, 2011). Specifically, Bourdieu sees social capital as originating from an individual's position within social networks that provide access to information, support, and resources. These resources are maintained through sustained social interactions and relationships, which leads Bourdieu to view social capital as a collective resource. Individuals could draw support from their networks while also bearing the responsibility to assist others. In these networks, the strength of connections represents the quantity of social capital, and the extent to which an individual can access this network depends on their group affiliations. From this perspective, Bourdieu's concept of social capital emphasises class and its convertibility with cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, in the realm of education, Bourdieu's social capital demonstrates how different social classes can access varying degrees of resources and support from their respective groups. However, for the migrant families studied in this research, similar in economic status and migration, while Bourdieu's social capital might explain the different challenges these rural migrant children face compared to local students in school choice or educational experience, it struggles to account for the variances in educational experiences among migrant students themselves.

Unlike Bourdieu, Coleman regards social capital as almost universal productivity, that is, it is used to enable actors to achieve specific goals that would not be possible without it. For Coleman (1988), social capital is composed of certain aspects of the social structure, and promotes certain actions of agents within the structure. Coleman adopts a middle ground between the two theoretical traditions. The first is the functionalist view of social action, which is affected by the social structure. The second is the rational theory, which claims that the actor is determined by the pursuit of utility maximisation of his or her own interests (Coleman, 1988, p.S95). In Coleman's perspective, social capital within communities is crucial for the development of adolescents. He believes that beyond the family, social capital primarily includes networks of relationships between parents and other community members. These networks not only provide resources but also foster shared social norms, a sense of obligation,

and mutual expectations and trust (Coleman, 1987). Coleman particularly highlights that close ties within the community could facilitate active interactions among parents in sharing educational resources, assuming educational responsibilities, and establishing cooperative relationships with educational institutions. Taking religious communities as an example, Coleman notes that students who regularly participate in religious activities typically have lower dropout rates in Catholic schools (Coleman, 1987). This phenomenon indicates that religious schools with strong community support can offer richer social capital to students, thus reducing dropout rates, especially for those students whose family environments lack sufficient support (Coleman, 1987). This suggests that strong social capital within a community not only supports individual educational development but also enhances the overall educational quality and effectiveness of the community.

Another point different from Bourdieu, Coleman (1987, 1988) emphasises that the family is the natural birthplace for social capital. Coleman argues that the relationships between children and their parents constitutes significant social capital, which plays a crucial role in children's education. According to Coleman, a lack of effective communication and stable relationships between parents and children, as well as parental absence, can lead to a deficit in familial social capital, thereby affecting the transmission of cultural capital (Coleman, 1988). As Field (2003) points out, Coleman refers to the family as "primordial" social organisation characterised by its origins in relationships through childbirth (pp.26). Many researchers have also shown the significance of the family social capital, especially the advantages that parents share with their children (Abbas, 2002; Francis & Archer, 2005; Goulbourne et al., 2003; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In terms of Coleman's (1988) family social capital, there are three dimensions, which are physical presence of parents (presence of both parents and fewer siblings), attention to the child (mother's expectations on the child to go to college), and intergenerational closure (number of times the child had changed schools). Coleman (1988) discusses approvingly of the internal solidarity of immigrant groups and describes that Asian immigrant mothers

buy another set of the required school textbooks in order to help their children complete schoolwork and achieve better academic performance. Also, Coleman (1987, 1988) emphasises the significance of closure for effective parental guidance as well as the role of families, especially if they are endowed with community closure. Closure is the form of social capital, which is produced by parents knowing their children's friends and the parents of these children. Such kind of closure is high in many immigrant communities (Light & Bonacich, 1988; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), coupled with intact families and parental involvement in school activities, should lead to positive outcomes for children including high levels of educational attainment (Portes, 2000).

Empirical studies have also highlighted the significance of family social capital. For instance, Byun et al. (2012)'s national survey finds that family social capital significantly impacts the educational aspirations of rural youth. The study reveals that parents' attitudes towards higher education for their children and their frequent communication with them about educational and career matters play a crucial role in shaping these youths' educational aspirations, with an impact surpassing that of socio-economic and demographic characteristics. In Tan and Fang's (2023) quantitative study conducted in China, structural equation modelling is used to analyse the impact of family social capital and cultural capital on 11,313 adolescents' academic effort, educational aspirations, and achievements. The findings indicate that both social and cultural capital positively influence academic achievement. In the context of the study on migrant children in Beijing covered in this research, although these children move to larger cities with their parents, the lack of effective companionship and communication, along with frequent school changes, are common. Therefore, it is necessary to explore their disadvantages in social capital.

In contrast, Putnam's (2000) understanding of social capital places greater emphasis on external family social networks and trust. He defines social capital as the connections among individuals, including

social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Putnam views high social participation as indicative of substantial social capital. In an educational context, Putnam (2000) illustrates with a hypothetical example where a couple, dissatisfied with their child's poorly performing public school, could choose to start a Parental Teacher Association to build more social capital, thereby providing support for their child's education and their overall life. Research by Hill and Tyson (2009) finds that strengthening connections between parents and schools and active participation in school activities are positively correlated with student achievement. It is noteworthy that parental involvement in school affairs varies by region. Studies find that although Chinese parents, on average, participate more in their children's education compared to American parents (Lau et al., 2011), they tend to focus more on involvement within the family rather than in school activities (Pomerantz et al., 2014). Furthermore, schools in China seem less inclined to encourage parental participation in school governance (Ng, 1999).

However, there are two main aspects of the critique in the concept of social capital. Firstly, an excessive emphasis on social capital can lead to an oversight of background and individual differences. As Morrow (1999) specifically points out, Coleman's concept of social capital fails to adequately consider socio-economic historical contexts, neglects perspectives on individual gender and race, and as a concept introduced from the United States, do not appropriately address cross-cultural and international cultural differences. This critique stresses the need for the concept of social capital to be contextualised and understood within specific social and cultural settings. Additionally, Morrow (2001) mentions that tools for analysing social environments needs to be dynamic, capable of adapting to changes in families, children, friendships, social networks, institutions, norms, and values over time (throughout the life course) and space (as neighbours come and go). Secondly, Morrow (2001) points out that many studies on social capital portray children and young people as passive recipients of culture, denying their autonomy and failing to recognise how children actively create, utilise, or

negotiate their own social capital, or even acknowledge how children can provide positive support to their parents. Fuller (2014) also notes that overemphasising parents' ability to invest in social capital for their children undermines the children's own capacity as autonomous and active individuals. Regarding the specific group of migrant children which is the focus of this study, their unique circumstances limit the accumulation of familial social capital. However, some research find that children can acquire social capital independently from their families, through peers and schools, thereby influencing their academic performance and educational expectations (Ding & Wu, 2023; Eccles et al., 2013; Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

2.3.4 The role of gender in education

Despite a significant cultural shift towards gender equality in recent years, gender differences continue to have a major impact on children's parental expectations, occupational aspirations and life paths. It is important to acknowledge that since the 19th century, women's education has undergone a substantial expansion. Looking solely from a longitudinal perspective of educational attainment, the gender gap has nearly disappeared and, in some cases, even reversed (Bertocchi & Bozzano, 2020; Reynolds & Burge, 2008). This is also true in China, where in recent decades there has been a significant change in attitudes towards the education of girls. This change has been driven by economic development, government policies promoting gender equality in education, and an increasing recognition of the importance of educating women for social progress. As a result, the enrolment rate of girls in schools at all levels has significantly increased. According to the results of the Seventh National Census by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021), the average years of education for the country's population aged 15 and above is 9.91 years, with men at 10.22 years and women at 9.59 years in 2020. The gender gap has decreased from women having 0.8 years less education than men in 2010 to 0.6 years less in 2020, and in all types of higher education, the proportion of female students exceeds that of male students (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Increased levels

of education stimulate attitudes of gender equality, and this is particularly evident among women, whose regard for gender equality increases with their own level of education (Deole & Zeydanli, 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of the one-child policy in China from 1979 to 2015 also influences gender dynamics in education. In families with a girl, being the sole child, she becomes the 'sole hope' of the family (Fong, 2002), and parents often invest a substantial amount of money in her education (Liu, 2006; McGarry & Sun, 2018). This policy unintentionally provides more equitable educational opportunities for girls in urban areas (Fong, 2002; Hu & Shi, 2020). Also, research by Du et al. (2021) finds that the additional education resulting from China's compulsory education reform leads to more equal gender role attitudes. However, it is particularly noteworthy that women's education does not significantly impact the gender division of household labour within families; in contemporary China, the majority of the responsibility for domestic chores still falls on the wife rather than the husband (Du et al., 2021; Yu & Xie, 2011), meaning that education has a much smaller effect on gender-equal behaviours compared to identity and attitudes.

In the scope of gender identity, Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides an insightful lens through which the intricate processes of gender construction and socialisation can be understood. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of gender, grounded in the notion of 'gendered habitus' (Bourdieu, 2001), offers a deep exploration of how gender identities are not innate (Wilson, 2004) but are shaped and reinforced through social structures and familial interactions (Liu, 2006; Skeggs, 2004). He viewed the habitus as a system of durable dispositions, ingrained through socialisation and experience in specific social settings (Bourdieu, 1990). As Layder interpreted, habitus emerged from an individual's social experiences and background, including influential factors such as class, ethnicity, and gender (Layder, 2005). Gendered habitus, is an embodiment of social norms and roles associated with gender. It is socially constructed and acquired through everyday practices, and is particularly influenced by early childhood experiences within the family (Bourdieu, 2001). Children intimately learn and

experience broader structural features through the body, including the experiences of their mother's and father's bodies and the gender division of labour within the family, thereby forming their gendered habitus (Skeggs, 2004). This long-term internalisation process from socialisation in the family environment leads to gendered perceptions and actions that becomes integral to an individual's identity. Specially, this gendered habitus, according to Bourdieu, is not just present in the objectified state, but also in the embodied state, permeating agents' perception, thought, and action. It is a socialised gender identity, meld by the prevailing division of the sexes and reinforced through gender stereotypes, which decides inclusion and exclusion in various social realms (Bourdieu, 1984; Calhoun et al., 1993). Bourdieu also describes the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and roles as a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), subtly imposed through social norms and expectations.

> … a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling. (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 1–2)

This functions effectively when subjective frameworks, such as habitus, aligned with objective structures like the division of gender.

While Bourdieu's framework provided valuable insights into the development of gendered subjectivities, there are critiques of Bourdieu's approach, such as those posited by Silva (2005) and Jenkins (2013) highlight a tendency in his work to normalise traditional conceptions of the family and, by extension, traditional gender roles. This critique suggests that while Bourdieu aims to deconstruct the family as a social construct, he inadvertently reinforces conventional gender norms within the family structure. Silva (2005) also criticises Bourdieu for defining the family in a universal manner, which might not accurately reflect the diversity of family structures and dynamics across different cultures and socio-economic contexts. Additionally, Bourdieu's treatment of gender is often criticised

for its traditional binary framework such as dominant/dominated, high/low, strong/weak, and male/female (Bourdieu & Lamaison, 1986), which might not fully encapsulate the complexities and subtlety of gender relations and potentially overlooks the fluid and dynamic nature of gender identities and roles (McCall, 1992; Silva, 2005).

Nonetheless, applying Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework to the context of modern China provides a subtle understanding of how deeply entrenched cultural traditions, such as Confucianism, shapes gender expectations. Gender norms and expectations indeed play a significant role in shaping educational opportunities (Liu, 2006). Traditionally, Chinese society, influenced by Confucian values, has placed greater emphasis on the education of boys compared to girls (Wang, 2005). For centuries, the Confucian doctrine at the core of Chinese education has created a patriarchal social structure (Du et al., 2021; Rosenlee, 2023). Within this framework, the roles of men and women are explicitly defined, with men typically occupying public spheres, including education and governance, and are expected to be the breadwinners and bearers of the family lineage, while women are relegated to domestic roles, and are anticipated to fulfil the roles of homemakers and caregivers (Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Hesketh & Xing, 2006; Huang & Gong, 2022; Liu, 2006; Wang, 2005; Zhang, 2019). This rigid structuring relegates women to a subservient position, mandating obedience to male family members – the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the son in widowhood – thereby entrenching them in a position of significant social disadvantage (Rosenlee, 2023). Therefore, such social structures has led parental expectations, especially those in resource-limited rural areas, to prioritise the education of boys over girls. Despite socio-economic advancements and policy changes aiming at reducing gender inequalities in China, this son-preference tradition persists, continuing to manifest in unequal educational opportunities and career aspirations between genders because the social structure is characterised by various occupations and the corresponding forms of capital that are linked to them (McCall, 1992). The enduring nature of these disparities highlights the

deep influence of historical cultural norms on contemporary gender roles in China, as examined through Bourdieu's lens of social structures and habitus.

Moreover, these traditional gender stereotypes continue to shape contemporary choices in academic disciplines and career paths (Correll, 2004). Men are often associated with traits like rationality, strength, and competitiveness (Diekman et al., 2010), steering them towards fields viewed as 'masculine', such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). On the other hand, women, linked with nurturing, emotional, and caring qualities, are frequently encouraged to pursue fields in the humanities, arts, or social sciences, aligning with roles traditionally deemed 'feminine'. In addition, such gender attitudes can bias the formation of self-assessments of competence at career-relevant tasks, which in turn can impact emerging aspirations and early career-relevant decisions (Correll, 2004). These deeply embedded stereotypes, reinforced through cultural norms, media representations, and social expectations from a young age, not only restricts subject choices but also limits the potential and opportunities for individuals based on their gender.

Despite evidence illuminating a shift in gender dynamics, which reveals that women not only harbour more substantial career ambitions compared to men (Rani, 2018; Wicht et al., 2022) but also exhibits a greater capacity to deviate from traditional 'gender expectations' (van der Vleuten et al., 2016), the gap in career aspirations between genders persists. Women can choose to acquire masculine capital by adopting male traits in their work or for work (McCall, 1992). Girls are increasingly accepting of engaging in traditionally male-dominated professions, whereas boys show a decreasing tolerance for crossing gender boundaries in their career choices (Kane, 2006; Perra & Ruspini, 2013). While this current situation appears encouraging, disparities in career aspirations between boys and girls have not completely vanished.

Research by Du et al. (2021) indicates that compulsory education reforms in China fosters more equal gender role attitudes among urban residents; however, in rural areas, traditional social norms regarding gender roles continue to have a more enduring influence in low-SES families. In addition, Tinklin et al. (2005) in a survey of 190 young people find that lower-achieving female students are more likely to be influenced by gender in their future career choices. Specifically, these students show a pronounced interest in professions centred around helping others, while their higher-achieving counterparts tend to view themselves as hardworking. Given the correlation between urban-rural inequalities and educational levels with economic situations, children from low-income families might find it more challenging to overcome gender barriers in career choices.

In conclusion, Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework on gender identity, especially his concepts of gendered habitus and symbolic violence, emphasises the pivotal role that family socialisation plays in the formation of gender identities. In the context of China, where there has been notable advancements toward gender equality, social and parental expectations, deeply intertwined with traditional Chinese norms, still significantly shape the educational pathways and occupational aspirations of young individuals. This situation is further complicated by the interaction between the SES of parents and their gender, which deeply influences the expectations set for children, thereby impacting the shaping and perpetuation of gender identities. The household division of labour and occupational sex segregation stand out as prominent examples of this dynamic. These deep-rooted stereotypes often restrict the educational and occupational choices available to young women, thus continuing the cycle of traditional gender roles and reinforcing longstanding social norms.

2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter explores the complexities of poverty, with a specific focus on its definition and the current state of poverty in China. It stresses how poverty significantly influences educational opportunities and the lives of rural migrant populations. The discussion extends into an exploration of Confucian educational philosophy, highlighting how traditional Chinese values fosters a relentless pursuit of academic excellence. This cultural emphasis on education is rooted deeply in Confucian ethics, which prioritises scholarship and moral development. Theoretical frameworks related to poverty are critically discussed and analysed, particularly through the lens of Bourdieu's cultural capital and John Goldthorpe's RAT. These frameworks help to contextualised the socio-economic barriers that migrant children face in accessing quality education. Bourdieu's (1986) theory illuminates how social inequalities are perpetuated through cultural mechanisms, while RAT offers insights into the strategic decisions families make within constrained resource environments. Coleman's social capital theory is compared with Bourdieu's, with a focus on Coleman's emphasis on the transformative potential of strong community and family networks in enhancing educational outcomes. Lastly, the chapter addresses the impact of social gender norms on educational aspirations and achievements. It examines the influence that traditional gender roles shape educational paths and influence the educational and occupational aspirations of migrant children.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research explores the educational experiences of migrant children, with a focus on their access to education, learning experiences, and educational attainment. Data were collected primarily from the perspectives of migrant children. This chapter outlines the methodology adopted to collect, manage and analyse the data. It looks at the philosophical positions of ontology and epistemology as the starting point because it links with the remaining core elements including methodology and methods in this research (Grix, 2018), and then presents and explains the chosen perspectives prior to expanding on the research approach. By bringing clarity to the foundations of research, it gives an account of data collection methods, followed by sampling strategies and analytical methods. Finally, this chapter concludes with ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

3.2 Research paradigm

Kuhn (2012) is the first to introduce the word 'paradigm', which is a framework covering the ways and models of thinking and working within researching phenomena or a particular scientific field. Precisely, a paradigm is a set of beliefs or worldview that guide research actions or investigations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Paradigms are significant because they provide beliefs and rules which affect what should be studied, how it should be studied, and how the results of the research should be interpreted (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It is a basic belief system and theoretical framework with assumptions about four components, namely ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Given the focus of this research and the questions I seek to explore, this research adopts an interpretivist paradigm informed by a constructionist in ontology and interpretivist epistemological, which are explained further below.

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology and epistemology are the foundations upon which research is built because the ontological and epistemological assumptions in a research determines the research methodology, methods and sources, as well as avoids misperception during theoretical discussion and debates about social phenomena (Grix, 2018). Blaikie (2000) defines ontology as "the claims or assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other" (p. 8). Briefly, ontology represents what constitutes social reality. Here is a question about social reality: whether it refers to objective reality or social constructions accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2016). For example, social reality means atoms for physicists, but not for social researchers who are studying human beings and their concepts and behaviours. In essence, there are two key ontological positions, which are 'objectivism' and 'constructionism' (Grix, 2018).

Objectivism implies that the existence of social phenomena and their meanings are external facts and beyond the reach and influence of social actors (Bryman, 2016). It indicates that social phenomena is independent and separate from participants. When looking at the alternative ontological position – constructionism, which implies that social phenomena and their meanings are constantly being accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2016). It is focused on interactions and supports the individual's role in social construction of realities, depending on how social actors look, which in turn are shaped by experience (Galbin, 2014).

3.2.2 Epistemology

The second branch is epistemology. If ontology is a study of the existence of the social reality, then epistemology is a study of the knowledge of the social reality (Thomas, 2013). Blaikie (2000) regards epistemology as "the theory or science of the method or grounds of knowledge" which refers to "the

claims or assumptions made about possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be" (p. 8). It is clear to see that epistemology stands for what constitutes knowledge of the reality, and how can knowledge be acquired or produced. Epistemology is significant because it affects how researchers conduct their project in the process of trying to gather knowledge (Scales, 2013). Two different epistemological positions are 'positivism' and 'interpretivism' (Bryman, 2016).

Bryman (2016) believes that positivism "advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond" (p. 28). It should be objective and neutral without influencing, and it only includes physical phenomena and confirmed knowledge, which is acquired through gathering facts (Bryman, 2016; Thomas, 2013). Whereas, interpretivism is the way that people interrelate with each other and how they construct their worlds based on their historical and social perspectives (Thomas, 2013). Thus, the social reality changes and so the meanings for people are shifting with different experiences and backgrounds.

Given my thesis research question, 'How does being a rural migrant student influence access to education, experiences of learning and educational attainment in Beijing?', an ontological position of constructionism and an epistemological position of interpretivism are appropriate for this research. The research question focuses on migrant children's educational experiences as a social phenomenon of educational inequalities. This social phenomenon cannot exist without the participation of migrant children. Indeed, it is essential to deeply analyse migrant children's social interactions with peers, parents and teachers. Also, their social interactions are not objective and are needed to be closely looked at what they are experiencing by their and my own knowledge of the world.

3.2.3 Theoretical perspective

A great deal of paradigms has been put forward by researchers but currently educational research generally applies two types of paradigms, namely positivist and interpretivist paradigms. The latter is more appropriate for this research and is discussed below.

The positivist paradigm is a worldview to research based on scientific methods of investigation, which means that experimentation, observation and reason should be the basis for understanding human behaviour (Comte, 2009). Positivism assumes that reality exists separately from humans. It is governed by immutable laws rather than being mediated by human senses (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Thus, positivists ontologically emphasise that education is an objective reality, which exists independently of human's knowledge. In accordance, on an epistemological level, researchers should act as objective observers to study reflect a single social reality and they gain knowledge which progressively approximates the real nature of what is being investigated (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The key assumptions of positivism are to measure and quantify social behaviour to explicate the regularities of such phenomena. By matching the complexity and rigor of physical science, the relationship between them can be observed with the purpose of establishing general and universal laws such as statements, which is the whole purpose of scientific methods (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Because of these assumptions, the positivist paradigm highlights measurement, comparison and objectivity with a heavy rely on the methodology of experimentation (Cohen et al., 2018). It often generates numerical data and advocates the use of quantitative research methods like surveys and closed questionnaires as the foundation for researchers to accurately describe the parameters and coefficients in the collected, analysed and interpreted data.

Although positivism and the objective scientific method are suitable for studying natural objects, its application to individuals and social phenomena is insufficient (Grix, 2018; Richards, 2003). It has been criticised for denying philosophical speculation or ignoring the subjective influences of researchers' critical thinking and value system. Indeed, interpretivist disagrees with the opinion that a single,

verifiable reality exists independent of human senses, and predominantly attempts to understand the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It ontologically acknowledges that what goes on in a social reality is consisted of complex layers of meanings, interpretations, values and attitudes (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Applied to educational contexts, the interpretivist paradigm stresses the diversity of contexts, as Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) stating "schools, classrooms and their participants have histories and careers, teachers and pupils have their own educational and life histories, departmental members engage in interpersonal relations, conflicts and alliances emerge, responses to innovation and institutionalization ensure that schools and classrooms have cultural and ethos" (p. 26). Based on this view, interactions among different groups are considered as socially-constructed by creating multiple truths and realities. It is necessary for researchers to understand, illustrate and explicate the various and diverse interpretations of reality, their distinctiveness, causes and consequences (Cohen et al., 2018). Thus, interpretive research does not set out to discover universal, and value free knowledge and truth but to attempt to understand the interpretations of individuals within the social phenomena they interact with.

The interpretivist paradigm faces criticism from researchers such as Grix (2018) and Picciano (2004) for its perceived limitations in generating theories that can be generalised to larger populations. Critics argue that this paradigm often relies on smaller qualitative data sets, which might compromise the reliability, objectivity, and validity of its conclusions because personal subjective feelings might be overstressed in the involvement of the researcher with participants. Despite these criticisms, Richards (2003) holds an opposite opinion and asserts that interpretivist research demands "rigour, precision, systematicity, and careful attention to detail" (p. 6). Although positivist research has its advantages, particularly in terms of scalability and replicability, it is more appropriate to investigate social phenomena under the interpretive paradigm.

The aim of my research is to explore the specific educational challenges facing migrant children, from the perspective of teachers and the students, and what support migrant families need to ensure the best educational outcomes for their children. After discussing and comparing the positivism and constructivist paradigm, the latter is more suitable to understanding migrant children's educational experiences and challenges. Educational inequalities cannot be investigated by relying solely on positivism with the methods of surveys, closed questionnaires and experimentations, which, whilst valuable, cannot explore the complexities and problems of the extremely complex migrant atmosphere in schools and in the society. Migrant children actively construct their own meanings of school and social situations in a deliberate, intentional and creative way, and make sense of their educational experiences and feelings through the interpretive processes of peers, parents and teachers. In order to analyse migrant children's educational experiences and their educational attainment, the constructionism in ontology and interpretivist epistemology under the interpretive paradigm could be applied in my research.

3.3 Research approach

In interpretive methodology, it is necessary for researchers to suspend their assumptions about people, culture, and background, looking at a situation with their own eyes (Hammersley, 2013). Researchers need to work directly with experience and understanding, as well as collect mostly qualitative data from participants over an extended period of time to discover patterns (Cohen et al., 2018; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Therefore, given the nature of this research, I adopt an exploratory and inductive approach to explore the migrant children's own interpretation of educational inequalities so as to understand their attitudes, behaviours and interactions, using methodological approaches of ethnography and case study.

3.3.1 Ethnography

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) define ethnographic research as an approach that seeks to vividly and analytically reconstruct the culture or groups being studied. An ethnography is a descriptive, analytical and explanatory study of social interaction and culture groups; precisely, it looks at the culture, beliefs, attitudes and practices of one or more groups (Angrosino, 2007; Creswell, 2006; Denscombe, 2014; Fetterman, 2010). The main purpose of ethnography is to provide contextualised and comprehensive insights into people's worldviews and behaviours, as well as the nature of the places where they live (Hughes, 1992). Van Maanen (1982) agrees that the result of ethnographic research is cultural description, which can only emerge from a long period of in-depth research and residence in a given social environment. It requires the use of spoken language in that environment and the direct and empirical involvement in some activities carried out there, and the most significant thing is that it must rely on intensive work and draw some information from the environment (Van Maanen, 1982). In this circumstance, it is necessary for researchers to be fully immersed in the daily lives or culture of participants through paying in-depth attention into participants' views and behaviours. It enables researchers to understand how these participants perceive the world and how they interact with things around them (Angrosino, 2007).

Based on the above information, ethnography is effective and suitable for my research. My main research group is migrant children, and to learn more about their culture and educational experiences at school and at home, it is also analysed from the perspectives of teachers and parents. The research gives a rich and comprehensive description of students' attitudes towards education (attitudes), their academic performances (practice), and their aspirations of future education (beliefs). All these complex and diverse behaviours, viewpoints, and interactions are likely to describe the culture and experiences of this group of migrant children in a natural environment.

Although ethnography research has been mostly criticised for its time-consuming features, which means researchers need to establish rapport with the participants and have to spend a long time

period observing how they live on a daily basis and understand their culture, this does not challenge my research. Due to the identities of migrant children, I went back to China for seven months to be with the children so as to learn their educational views and behaviours in schools or at their homes; thus the research was conducted on-site and in a naturalistic setting in which migrant children lived. During the process, I had a dual role of a researcher and an observer to participate in the lives of these migrant children. This means that I developed an accurate and comprehensive understanding and interpretation of what migrant children did, how and why they performed in specific ways, instead of relying only on their own accounts about this (Hammersley, 2018). As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) noted, being a participant observer immersing the site is the main method of data collection. Other methods of data collection such as formal and informal interviews, the analysis of documents and records are recommended (Angrosino, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to my research, it mainly adopts participant observation, interviews and documents analysis, which are illustrated in the methods section.

3.3.2 Case study

The entire culture-sharing group in ethnography can be regarded as a case, but the purpose of ethnography is to determine how the culture works, not to use the case as a specific illustration to understand a problem. Therefore, case studies involve the study of issues explored through one or more cases in a bounded system such as an environment or a context (Creswell, 2006). The qualitative case study is an empirical in-depth approach to research that can use multiple data sources to facilitate the investigation of contemporary phenomena (Yin, 1984). It should be considered when the research focuses on answering the questions of 'how' and 'why', and researchers cannot manipulate the behaviour of research participants, or when researchers want to cover situational conditions, which are related to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 1984). Case studies try to understand and explain a complex social phenomenon from a holistic perspective, clarify its characteristics and important factors, and it is particularly significant to reveal the interactions and interrelationships among all the

elements in an effort to depict how the various parts work together as a whole (Merriam, 1988). Case study is chosen because it strives to portray feelings in specific situations to capture close-ups, rich details, and thick descriptions of participants' real-life experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the situation in real life (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, it involves looking at a case or phenomenon in its real-life context and provides unique examples of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles (Yin, 1984).

Additionally, Ritchie and Lewis (2003) further discuss the features of a case study as "being multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context" (p. 52). These perspectives can derive from people with different perspectives on what they observed (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In these circumstances, the design is structured around the context rather than a series of individual participants; for example, it is possible that the focus might be on the organisational context, like schools, headteachers, class teachers, parents and students (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The integration of different perspectives on context means that the case study design can build a very holistic, in-depth and contextualised understanding when a single perspective cannot fully explain of the research question. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) share similar opinions and state that a case study uses multiple data sources found in the settings to extensively examine the bounded systems or cases over time through organising all the collected data from interviews, document reviews, and direct observation with participants to make the best possible responses to research question. Consequently, researchers might further understand the reasons for the occurrence of instances and the importance of conducting more extensive research in future studies (Thomas, 2010).

Given the interpretive stance adopted in this research and the nature of my research question, the case study methodology is considered the appropriate research strategy for this study because of its advantages in revealing in detail the unique perceptions and concerns of individual participants in a

real-world situation (Thomas, 2010). The purpose of my research is to explore migrant children's educational experiences and their educational attainment. Each migrant child has their unique feelings and features, which are the key to understand their situations (Nisbet & Watt, 1984). If using quantitative surveys to collect larger scale data and information, each migrant children's unique characteristics and their interactions would be fade and lost in a complex migrant phenomenon. Also, children's experiences could not only be learnt from students themselves, but also be illustrated from the different perspectives of their teachers, thus the answers of teachers are regarded as the multiple sources of data in the setting, which would help provide a comprehensive description and explanation of migrant children's feelings and educational attainments in the research in the case study approach.

Furthermore, case studies in this research could help deeply and sharply understand the historical and social reasons of migrant population including migrant children in China, which would provide insights into, and interpretation of other similar situations and cases (Nisbet & Watt, 1984). For example, migrant children who cannot access to education in big cities have no choice but return to their rural hometowns to become 'left-behind children'. This group of children also face the challenges of educational inequalities. What is more, Merriam (1998) identifies four clear and useful elements of cases studies: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. All these four characteristics are suitable for my research. Particularistic focuses on a particular situation, process, event or phenomenon. Here in my research, it refers to migrant children's migrant status and educational experiences. Descriptive is the detailed and extensive description related to phenomena, which contains specific aspects, including migrant children's access to education, parents' choice of schools, teachers' attitudes towards migrant children's academic performance, as well as migrant students' educational aspirations and expectations. Both of these are heuristic, which help to understand the phenomena and the factors like poverty affecting migrant children's educational inequalities. The last is inductive. It refers to forms of reasoning used to determine generalisations derived from data, and it would summarise the reasons why migrant children still do not perform well even though they migrate with their parents to larger cities.

Although Nisbet and Watt (1984) criticise case study research because the results are unlikely to be generalisable unless other readers or researchers could see the research application, and the richness and complexity of the data collected are prone to have different interpretations and potential bias, Yin (1984) argues that case studies are used for analytical generalisations, where the purpose of the researchers is to generalise a specific set of results into some broader theoretical propositions.

3.4 Methods of data collection

As mentioned in the section of research approach, both ethnography and case study fall under the interpretive paradigm, and this study adopts qualitative research methods to collect data. Methods in this research include participant observation, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, as well as document analysis. Each method is detailed below. This research prioritises semi-structured interviews with migrant children as the primary data collection method. The choice reflects the research's focus on understanding the personal and educational experiences of migrant children in Beijing directly from their perspectives. Complementary methods—participant observation, questionnaires, document analysis as well as interviews with teachers and the headteacher—are employed to confirm and enrich the insights gained from children's interviews.

3.4.1 Primary method

3.4.1.1 Semi-structured interviews with migrant children

Interviews have an interactive nature that questionnaires lack (Fetterman, 2010). Grix (2018) notes that there are four types of interviews, namely the structured, the unstructured and the semi-structured interview, as well as focus groups. It is more appropriate in my research to adopt semi-structured interviews to deeply understand the behaviours and experiences of my research groups. I compare these four types of interviews and give my reasons below.

In structured interviews, researchers list a set of predetermined standardised questions in a specific order and have the same repeated process with each interviewee so as to more easily find and compare responses during analysis (Dunn, 2005; Patton, 2014). However, there is one serious shortcoming as this interview lacks flexibility and is not suitable to deal with the unexpected (Grix, 2018). All interviewees only answer predetermined questions, which means that interviewees cannot fully explore individual views and situations, resulting in fragmentary information (Weiss, 1995). It also strictly limits the chances of the interviewee's desire to discuss unanticipated interesting topics in the interview.

Unstructured interviews are the opposite to structured interviews. Researchers have a list of concepts or loose open-ended questions (Grix, 2018) and encourage interviewees to talk about the lives of themselves and their contemporaries at ease (Blaikie, 2000). This type of interview is more like an everyday friendly discussion or brainstorming based on each interviewee's responses, and its informality makes the interviewee more likely to open up. Nevertheless, it provides low reliability and precision because each interviewee might be asked different questions when something interesting occurs (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Thus the interview can develop in various directions, which makes it difficult to compare the answers and collect data from different interviews (Grix, 2018).

Semi-structured interviewing followed the open-ended approach that is a characteristic of ethnographic and qualitative research (Whitehead, 2005). It has the features of both structured and unstructured interviews and use both predetermined and open questions. Thus, this type has the advantages and make up for shortcomings of both methods of interviewing mentioned above. Researchers prepare several fundamental questions for guidance to ensure that each interviewee can be asked the same areas. As the interview progresses and goes deeper, the interviewee has the opportunity to elaborate or provided more relevant information (Thomas, 2010). It has a certain

degree of flexibility, which can facilitate unexpected queries during interviews, and the results under this type of interview can be compared and contrasted (Grix, 2018). My main research group were migrant children in the same culture context. The same core predetermined questions for migrant children can help collect standardised comparable data and information that cannot be done by unstructured interviews. Their migrating and educational experiences, as well as their interactions with parents and peers varied extensively from each other. It was more likely to explore and generate rich data, and more information and ideas such as their personal or sensitive attitudes, opinions, emotions for further in-depth investigation by stepping outside the structured interview protocol. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were more suitable for my research than the unstructured and structured interviews.

At the beginning of the second semester, I conducted interviews with 21 students, 3 teachers, and 1 headteacher to comprehensively address the research question. My original research design included focus group discussions, but this method proved to be ineffective. The students were noticeably uncomfortable participating in group discussions - they were able to share their thoughts more deeply with me on a one-on-one basis but struggled in a group setting. Respecting the students' preferences, and not wanting to break the relationships and trust that I had spent considerable time developing.

I changed the interviews with the migrant children to one-on-one, conducted during the breaks in the school's library, either during the lunch break or in the evening self-study session when children were available and already completed their homework. The duration of each interview varied depending on the topic; for example, discussions about families and experiences of being 'migrant children' typically lasted longer, about an hour. On average, each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and all sessions were recorded. The interviews covered several key topics including students' experiences at school, peer relationships between migrant and local children, their attitudes towards

teachers and courses, and their family life and after-school studies. All interviews were initially transcribed by myself in Mandarin.

3.4.2 Complementary methods

3.4.2.1 Participant observation

Participant observation is the most widely-used method in ethnographic studies and is essential for effective fieldwork (Fetterman, 2010). The main task is to observe participants' behaviours and activities in their natural and social settings (Cohen et al., 2018). It needs to maintain long-term close contact with the participated people and is immersed in their cultures, which combined the participation in the participated people's lives with the maintenance of a professional distance, so that the research information can be fully observed and recorded (Fetterman, 2010). The degree of a researcher's participation in research influences the quality and quantity of the data he or she could collect (Kawulich, 2005). Gold (1958) introduces four observation stances, namely, 'complete participant' (p. 219), 'participant as observer' (p. 220), 'observer as participant' (p. 221), and 'complete observer' (p. 221). Complete participant means being a group member and concealing the researcher role (Gold, 1958). It was impossible for me to be the complete participant because my research group was young migrant children enrolled in a Beijing's migrant children school. I was an adult and cannot be a group member of them. Also, it was unethical to conceal my identity in the research. The opposite stance from the complete participant is the complete observer, who is completely hidden from view while observing, and the observation is unknown to participants (Gold, 1958). It would be a good way for observation because migrant children would be less likely to be aware that they were being observed which means that they would act in a more realistic and genuine way. Compared with participant as observer, the observer as participant is the more ethical observation method, because a researcher's observation activities is already understood by the people under the study, and the focus of the researcher is to collect data, not to participate in the activities (Kawulich, 2005). Thus,

according to my research focus, I decided to be the observer as participant during the data collection, as well as the complete observer at the beginning to help me quickly establish my personal relationships with the informants and integrate into the school setting as soon as possible.

In my research, participant observations took on different instructional practices such as migrant children's class discussions, group work, and active learning exercises. The method was not used as an evaluation of teaching or learning events. I only looked at migrant children's interactions in class, by observing how they learnt, how they interpreted and understood the subject, what they did when they did not understand the material or the teacher's instructions, and so on. For example, when the teacher put forward a question, it was necessary to observe migrant children's response behaviours and the ways to manage difficulties and express their opinions. Observations of migrant children's interactions with peers was also important. For example, whether a child was willing to stay alone or integrate into a bigger group in the class, in the canteen or in the playground, which was closely related to his or her behaviours and emotional feelings. Such kind of phenomenon cannot be noticed in a short time. It was a process, moving from descriptive observation (migrant children's performance in schools) to focused observation (some migrant children had high / low scores and values in education), and on to selective observation (to find further evidence affecting their attitudes) (Flick, 2014). I was involved in and stayed with migrant children and teachers for 7 months (November 2020 to May 2021) from Monday to Friday in a Beijing's migrant children school to build trust with my informants and gather this detailed information about students' learning environment and experience at school. Through being immersed with them for a long time, I also noticed how migrant children's behaviours, and interpersonal relationships changed over time to understand the dynamics of their family backgrounds, academic performances, personalities, aspirations and so on. It provided a more holistic view to explain the interrelationships of factors. It is important to note that this method is also used to help verify behaviours and interactions noted in interviews and to observe non-verbal cues that children might not have explicitly discussed.

Participant observation, however, has a disadvantage in that students might change their behaviour, and not reflect what they would normally do in their 'natural setting' (Grix, 2018) when they noticed that they were being observed (Thomas, 2010). This was minimised as a result of building trust with them through a few visits to their learning environment. Migrant students started 'being as familiar as a piece of furniture' (Watts, 2011) and therefore were more likely feel at ease with me.

3.4.2.2 Questionnaire

Questionnaire survey is a widely used and excellent tool for fieldworkers to tackle questions and collect survey information, which is usually comparatively easy to analyse (Cohen et al., 2018; Fetterman, 2010). There are several ways of administering questionnaires. They involve electronic computer assisted questionnaires, which can be delivered to respondents by email or by smartphone; telephone, post, drop-off and self-administration (Bowling, 2005; Cohen et al., 2018). In this research, I chose to use questionnaire which were completed in my presence with a paper and pencil data-collecting method as shown in Appendix 1. Given that migrant children were young and most of them came from relatively poor families with little access to Internet and telephone at home, it was convenient and cost-effective for them to conduct a traditional paper-based questionnaire. Additionally, they might had some queries or uncertainties about the meaning of the questions, which my presence would help to address immediately (Cohen et al., 2018) and my presence was not guide them to complete their questionnaires. What was more, it usually ensured a good response rate with my presence to check whether participant children finished all the questions, which meant that the questionnaires were completed fully and guaranteed that all respondents handed in their questionnaires (Bowling, 2005). However, self-administered questionnaires have some disadvantages. For example, Cohen et al. (2018) mention that respondents are likely to feel stressed about filling in a questionnaire in the presence of researchers. This was not a big problem in this research because I spent time getting to know my participants and, through getting along and being familiar with them

for a long time before conducting the questionnaire, they felt more comfortable to participate and finish their questionnaires. In addition, it is difficult or impossible to be aware whether the researcher and each respondent are on the same wavelength to share common understandings about all the questions (Fetterman, 2010). It is also highly possible that respondents present their own idealised images on the questionnaires and answer questions that they believe should be consistent with a certain image (Grix, 2018). Researchers cannot control this type of responses, and would affect the real interpretation of the responses. Thus, it is necessary to conduct in-depth individual face-to-face interviews (as discussed in section 3.4.1.1) after questionnaires to reduce the chance of misunderstandings and misrepresentations.

There are many types of questionnaire. Cohen et al. (2018) suggest that more structured questionnaires are preferred when the sample size is larger; "the smaller the sample size, the less structured, more open and word-based questionnaire can be" (p. 474). Thus, the choice of questionnaire type heavily depends on a researcher's sample size. The sample size of migrant children in my research did not reach the number of thousands of migrant children in Beijing, but it was not less than the number of several children in a class. Thereby, I chose to adopt semi-structured questionnaires which included highly structured closed-ended, as well as less structured open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions in my research contained dichotomous questions, multiple-choice questions, and rating scales (Cohen et al., 2018). The first two response modes were more straightforward for me to know participants' gender and educational level, and also straightforward for participating children to clearly understand concrete selections. Rating scales (graphic) were chosen because they help simplify data collection, comparison and analysis in research, which provides a more precise description of migrant children's attitudes towards education instead of just saying 'agree' or 'disagree'. Open-ended questions can receive an honest, candid, and in-depth comment from respondents (Cohen et al., 2018). This is an open-ended example question: please tell and explain where you mostly want to stay after graduation. This question provided an opportunity

for migrant children to express their opinions and experiences in a straightforward way. It also helped me know their views and satisfaction about the current living and learning atmosphere, as well as their future aspirations.

In my questionnaire, the first part collected students' personal and family information, including the choice of accessing to schools. The second part focused on their future expectations and attitudes towards education. Whether education was significant and beneficial for life in their perspective. Their answers indicated the relationship between attitudes towards education, academic performances and aspirations. The last part collected the information of their migration experience. It aimed to investigate whether longer migration experience had an effect on migrant children's academic performances and their decisions on staying in big cities or returning to rural hometowns. All the information that they provided supported the preparations for individual face-to-face interviews. Toward the end of the first semester, having spent over three months building trust with both students and teachers, I conducted the closed-ended questionnaires that took less than five minutes to complete. Additionally, I modified the open-ended questionnaire into a one-on-one face-to-face interview format, with each student spending up to 15 minutes maximum. Although this research included closed-ended questionnaires, my research methodology was qualitative, not mixed-methods, as the quantitative component was very minor. The focus of the study remained primarily on qualitative methods such as open-ended questionnaires and interviews.

3.4.2.3 Document analysis

Document analysis is another form of qualitative research in which researchers interpret documents to express opinions and attitudes around a topic (Stoker & Evans, 2016). There are three main types of documents, namely public records, personal documents, as well as physical evidence (O'Leary, 2017; Stoker & Evans, 2016). I adopt these three types of documents, including students' transcripts, school

and teachers' annual reports, and personal reflections in my research and they provide a background understanding and context for the children's verbal responses and learning attitudes and behaviours.

In public records, I checked the transcripts of all my participants, especially the scores of core subjects such as Chinese, Mathematics and English, which can represent the academic performances of migrant children to a certain extent and played a major role in their future access to higher-secondary schools under the Chinese education system. Also, school and teacher's annual reports can illustrate school official attitudes towards migrant children's education and quality. Bearing witness to past events on educational events and assessment, these documents provided background information and historical insight, which helped me understand school history, the situations of policy implementation towards migrant children, as well as the conditions that affected the current educational phenomena under investigation in this school (Bowen, 2009). In personal records, I accessed migrant children's reflections, and teacher's records on children's growth, which can help know children's process of academic, social and extra-extracurricular activities. These personal records had high subjectivity and I selected children who had achieved high or low scores to analyse. Children's growth reflections also provided a way to track their changes and development, thus I was able to compare and identify the changes of students' learning experiences and interactions with teachers, parents and peers over time (Bowen, 2009). Also, migrant children's school library records can be regarded as physical evidence to reveal their reading habits and indicate their use of time in education after class (Moss & McDonald, 2004).

Patton (2014) notes that these documents are valuable "not only because of what can be learned directly from them but also as stimulus for paths of inquiry that can be pursued only through observation and interviewing" (p.377). That is, the information contained in documents are likely to raise more questions and help interactively complement other qualitative methods during the research process (Bowen, 2009). Goldstein and Reiboldt's (2004) study demonstrates that interview

102

data is helpful to focus on specific participant observation activities, document analysis contributes to generating new interview questions, and participant observation in a natural setting provides an opportunity to collect documents. Additionally, analysing these documents is a way to corroborate findings from other sources (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). If the documentary evidence is contradictory, it is necessary for the researcher to have a deeper inquiry. When the collected information from other sources tends to be consistent and corroboratory, there will be a higher credibility of the research findings (Bowen, 2009).

3.4.2.4 Semi-structured interviews with the headteacher and teachers

One-to-one interviews with the headteacher and teachers were conducted in the headteacher's and teachers' office respectively, and lasted about 20 minutes. These interviews offered additional adult perspectives on migrant children's situations, providing a professional viewpoint that supported or contrasted the children's narratives, thus adding depth and a multi-faceted understanding to the interview findings from the children. Teachers' interviews focused on their personal and educational backgrounds, experiences with migrant children and their parents, and feelings about support and educational policies. The headteacher's interview, lasting about 30 minutes, covered basic information about the school, its financial status, student recruitment, and policy implementation. Details of the interview questions can be found in Appendix 2.

3.5 Sampling

Sampling is an important step to achieve the aims of the current research. In order to answer the research questions, it is not possible to collect data from the entire population, because of time limitations and lack of resources to analyse; so it is necessary to select a sample from the population to reduce the number of cases and make inference about a population (Taherdoost, 2016). The action of selecting a subset from the entire population is called sampling, which can either be probability

sampling and non-probability sampling (Bornstein et al., 2013; Tyrer & Heyman, 2016). Probability sampling has the greatest freedom from bias as each element has the equal chance to be chosen, but it is expensive and time-consuming so not selected for this study (Sharma, 2017). Therefore, non-probability sampling is chosen in this research, which allows researchers to choose units which represent the entire population under study, based on subjective judgements (Etikan et al., 2016). In contrast with probability sampling, non-probability sampling is not related to random selection, but mainly selected samples from population which are accessible and available (Setia, 2016). In qualitative social researches, it is common to use non-probability sampling, especially when probability sampling is difficult to put into practice in terms of feasibility (Etikan et al., 2016). In this research, I used three non-probability sampling techniques, namely convenient sampling, purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Below I explain how I selected the districts and schools. I also focus on whom I carried out my research with and why this group and not another. Finally, I discuss how I contacted parents and staff at schools.

3.5.1 The chosen data collection site: Beijing

As discussed in Chapter 1, children's access to education is closely linked with the household registration system. Once a child has a local Hukou, he or she can obtain a place in a local state school. With the relaxed restrictions on the household registration system released by China's central government; the State Council and Central Committee (2019) and National Development and Reform Commission (2019b), the restrictions on household registration system in urban areas with a permanent population less than 3 million is intended to be fully eliminated, while the points-based household registration policy in megacities with a population of more than 5 million should be improved. It is clear to see that there is no relaxed restrictions on Hukou in larger cities, with restrictions in megacities still in place. Thus, the limitation of migrant children without local Hukou accessing to education in megacities – namely, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin and

Chongqing, which has a population more than 10 million (State Council, 2014a) has been relatively strict, posting a negative impact on migrant children's equal access to education.

For this research, the focus was on Beijing. The rationale for choosing Beijing is that Beijing as the capital of China, has provided migrant people more employment opportunities and higher wages compared with working at their rural hometowns (Qi et al., 2018). It therefore attracts a dense population of 7.46 million migrant workers to Beijing, accounting for 34.6% of the permanent population of 21.54 million in 2019 (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2020b). Thus, many migrant children migrate with their parents to live and study in Beijing state schools and migrant children schools, which provides a large sample base for this research. Also, although it is the political, cultural and education centre of China, Beijing local government adopts a conservative approach towards central policy of migrant children, lacking support for migrant schools in its policies and has been one of the most resistant cities in complying (Pong, 2015). The gaps between central-level policy and the local reality bring serious consequences for migrant children's educational inequality. Under these circumstances, it is valuable and relevant to take Beijing as a sample to further investigate as it has many features that can be representative of other megacities. Finally, the existing literature on Beijing are extensive and can be used as a concrete basis for the research. In conclusion, given the large migrant population base, the conservative policy adoption, and previous research resources, the sample was selected from schools in Beijing, and the target population was all migrant children in Beijing.

3.5.2 The chosen district and schools

At the time of the study, there were 16 districts in Beijing, including 2 core districts, 6 urban districts, 5 extended urban districts, and 5 suburban districts. There were 127 migrant children schools with nearly 100 thousand migrant children in 2014, while the number of migrant children schools dramatically declined to 102 with 47 thousand children in 2018 (New Citizen Program, 2018). Most of

these migrant children schools were located in 6 urban districts and 5 extended urban districts, while there was only one migrant children school in 2 core districts and 5 suburban districts, with less than 800 migrant children. According to New Citizen Program's (2018)'s statistics, Changping district, which belonged to an extended urban district, had the largest number of schools for children of migrant workers, with 27 schools, and a migrant student population of 10.58 thousand, ranking the first in these 16 districts. With this in mind, I chose Changping as my sample district, because it can represent the largest overview of migrant children's education in Beijing.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, migrant children can attend two different types of schools – state schools and migrant children schools. Migrant families can only apply for state schools as long as the 'Five Documents' are provided. Among them, the 'Proof of Employment' must include an employment contract and social insurance individual record of rights and interests. For migrant workers with flexible employment and informal employment, this is basically an unattainable threshold, and is something which has caused their children to have almost no chance to enter state schools. Thus, their children have to choose migrant children schools, and my sample schools were typically focused on migrant children schools.

When looking for sample schools, I asked for help from one of my friends, who worked in New Citizen Program, which is the largest organisation for migrant and left-behind children' education in China. He launched a project of libraries for migrant children in three schools in Changping district and had close contact with these schools. Thanks to his help, I had the chance to register to be a volunteer in the libraries and had access to these three migrant children schools in Changping district. These three schools were the earliest schools for migrant children established in Beijing, with a history of more than 20 years, which had stable school operation and provided a large number of migrant participants. School A was closer to urban areas, only 20 minutes away from my home by car so was convenient for me to reach. School B and C were located in the farthest place in Changping district, but they were

close to each other, 10 minutes away by car. Unfortunately, school A was planned to be sold to another institution in the following year, so I narrowed down my sample schools to two schools – school B and C, which were both registered schools with the highest proportion of migrant children in Changping district. When contacting with these two schools, school B only agreed to let me serve as a library volunteer, while school C, in addition to agreeing to my role as a library volunteer, also welcomed me to attend classes, which provided me greater opportunities to closely communicate with migrant students. In the end, I chose school C as my sample school. This process of sample selection is referred to as a convenient sampling technique. It is the most applicable, least time-consuming, and least expensive sampling technique to carry out, and all participants are chosen due to easy accessibility and availability to the research (Bornstein et al., 2013). Evidently, I had more chances to directly contact with migrant children in school C with convenient sampling technique. I also learnt that since school C had no official website, its enrolment was largely based on recommendations from parents and visits to kindergartens in nearby villages. School C basically had few requirements for enrolling students who did not have a Beijing registered permanent residence. As long as migrant children and their parents were willing to enter the school, school C would accept them without any other restrictions. Thus, school C's admission criteria were lower than the policy requirements of Beijing government meaning the students who entered this school were basically not in line with government policies. Migrant children enrolled in school C were my target population to explore their access to education and their educational experiences in Beijing.

3.5.3 The chosen group of students

When choosing the group of students, I used a qualitative purposive sampling technique, which is described as the random selection of sampling units among the population with the most relevant information (Guarte & Barrios, 2006). The strategy intentionally selects people to provide significant information that other options are unlikely to obtain, and is used when a researcher is familiar with his or her research field (Maxwell, 2012). The students' age in these three schools ranged from 8 to

16 (Year 1 to Year 9), and I chose older students in Year 9. There were two rationales for choosing this group and not a younger group. First of all, older students are generally considered to be more capable and confident in expressing their feelings about their educational experiences compared to younger students. The students in my study were in Year 9, which is the final year of lower secondary education in China. Secondly, at this stage, they faced a critical decision about their educational future – whether to continue to higher-secondary education in their rural hometowns or stay in Beijing for vocational training. This decision would not be as pressing for younger students, who have not yet developed a clear sense of their future educational paths. Consequently, analysing the educational experiences and aspirations of older students was particularly meaningful as they were at an essential point in making significant educational and life decisions.

Before determining my sample size, I had conducted to do a simple questionnaire for the whole migrant students' information in Year 9. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part gathered students' basic background information, including gender and current living arrangements; the second part was about students' learning experiences, which contained their scores in the last examination, and their attitudes towards learning. Taking gender into consideration was important for ensuring a balanced representation of both boys and girls to minimise gender bias. This consideration was essential since my research targeted migrant children, and an equitable gender ratio would more accurately reflect the distribution within the sampled population. For the selection criteria, I chose students whose scores were below 80 on a hundred-point scale, but I also included students whose scores were above this threshold. This approach allowed me to explore the differences in learning experiences between higher and lower-performing students and to assess their levels of satisfaction with their educational experiences and their status as migrant children. My final sample size was initially intended to be defined by the responses in the questionnaire. However, during the fieldwork, I discovered that the number of ninth-grade students was small with only one class. Consequently, my final sample size included all the migrant students in that class, totalling 21

students – comprising 10 boys and 11 girls. It was worth to note that there were 22 children when I first accessed to the classroom in the Autumn semester, and one migrant girl returned to a state school in her rural hometown for SHSEE preparations in the second semester. Therefore, I deleted all data collected from her during the first semester and only 21 children participated in this research.

3.5.4 The contact with parents and staff at schools

Because my friend launched a library project in these schools, he established close relationships with the headteachers and a few teachers. He introduced me to them, so I established initial contacts through his network. To expand this network, I employed snowball sampling, a non-random technique that influences existing study participants to recruit future participants, thereby increasing the sample size quickly (Brewerton & Millward, 2001). Some of the teachers I interviewed helped by introducing me to other teachers to expand the scope of interviewed teachers. For these teachers, I purposively chose homeroom teachers (*Banzhuren*), or teachers who were responsible for the core subjects of Chinese, English and Mathematics. These teachers typically have more frequent interactions with students and parents. The headteacher was also included in my research. I had hoped that these teachers would also introduce me to the parents of their students that could provide me with access to migrant parents. Indeed, it was worth noting that migrant parents were too busy because of physically-demanded work and therefore were too difficult to access, as they had little time to communicate with teachers about their children's school performance (Li et al., 2010a), like attending parent-teacher meetings, and also had no time to participate in my research. Thus, I gained the information about migrant parents through the perspectives of migrant children and teachers.

3.6. Data analysis

For the closed-ended questionnaire, I used Excel spreadsheets for descriptive statistics to analyse the data, which included counting the number of responses for each option and calculating percentages.

I also created charts and tables to visually represent the data. When processing children's transcripts and their exam scores, in addition to calculating the average, I used the 'standardisation' method to standardise and eliminate the influence of dimensions, making the data comparable. This involved dividing the average score of each subject by its respective highest score. Also, I performed a Shapiro-Wilk test (see section 6.2.1.1 for more details) to determine if the scores were normally distributed (a P-value > 0.05 indicated that the data followed a normal distribution).

For the qualitative data, I took deductive coding and used Thematic Analysis (TA) with six steps to analyse the primary interview data collected from children to identify, analyse and report the patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is widely used in qualitative research, because TA can be commonly applied within the theoretical framework of interpretivist.

I identified broad themes from the literature review. In the context of migrant children's educational experiences in China, the literature highlighted four themes like systemic barriers – household registration that affected children's educational access. Another theme was the role of family, like how family background, parental education, and parental involvement influenced children's educational experiences. There was also a theme of educational outcomes to look at children's academic performance, and their long-term educational attainment; and the last theme was peers and social integration to discuss how migrant children integrated into new educational environments and social settings.

When analysing the qualitative data with six steps of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), I began by thoroughly reading through all collected data such as interview transcripts and observation notes – to get immersed in the details and context. Then, I generated my initial codes by marking segments of the text that seem significant or represent key ideas related to the broad themes. For example, educational access could include direct codes references to 'school availability', 'school cost

and affordability', 'the changes of home and school' as well as 'the influence of social networks. There was another instance in coding children's responses, when a migrant child expressed 'I'm not sure' or 'I don't know why or how' as their attitudes towards their aspirations, I used a shorthand label of 'unclear' to describe their content. My step three was collating codes into potential themes to ensure these themes reflected the codes. At this stage, individual codes can combine to form broader themes such as 'barriers to education', 'parental support in education', 'children's educational experience', and 'social interactions and peer relationships.' Next, the fourth step was to review my themes by checking if they worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data; and the fifth step was to refine the themes to provide a clear and identifiable label for each theme. For example, 'school choices' was a theme where I discussed policies and systemic structures uniquely influencing migrant children. The last step was to write my result, discussing how they related to my research questions, and linked back to the literature review. For key sentences which were not marked as codes, I highlighted them with underlines or different colours to remind myself that they also expressed valuable information.

In terms of coding, I did not use NVivo although it is a powerful, convenient tool for organising, storing, and retrieving data. I found that manual coding, using physical documents and highlighters, allowed a more active engagement with the data. Also, coding by hand offered flexibility that software cannot always match. I can easily switch between different documents, make marginal notes, and adjust my coding strategy on the fly without being constrained by the functionalities or layout of a software program. Therefore, I found manual coding kept me directly in control, and it was a more researcher-driven analysis.

For the analysis of complementary methods, my approach included examining documents such as migrant children's reflections and teachers' records on the children's growth. I discovered discrepancies in the authenticity of both students' reflections and teachers' feedback. From my observations, I noted that the feedbacks were hastily made and often copied from the Internet, so I

did not analyse these documents as they cannot truly reflect children's and teachers' reflections. In terms of school and teachers' annual reports, these were analysed not just for statistical data but also to deepen understanding of the school's history and staff structure, including details on teaching tenure and educational backgrounds as detailed in Section 4.2.

In my observation notes, I carefully read through my notes, identifying recurring patterns of behaviour, types of interactions, or specific contexts among the children. For example, in most classes, students frequently engaged in chatting, sleeping, and using their phones, but in Mathematics and Physics classes, due to strict supervision, there was hardly any chatting or sleeping. These observations were then cross-referenced with interviews from migrant children to validate or supplement their interview data, revealing potential inconsistencies or alignments. Additionally, interviews with principals and teachers were analysed using thematic analysis to explore themes such as teaching challenges, views on migrant children, and the impacts of educational policies. I also paid close attention to the language expression teachers used, which reflected their attitudes towards migrant children or their educational philosophies. I further compared these insights with the views from migrant children's interviews and my observational notes to identify consistencies and differences between different perspectives.

3.7 Trustworthiness and credibility

Quantitative and qualitative research reflect the worldview of researchers in accordance with different research paradigms, and in view of this, methodology, methods and data analysis naturally are different (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Therefore, with the purpose of guaranteeing the quality of research findings, different criteria are applied for quantitative and qualitative research (Stumpfegger, 2017). Bell and Bryman (2011) describe quantitative research as "entailing the collection of numerical data and exhibiting a view of the relationship between theory and research as deductive, a predilection for a natural science approach, and as having an objectivist conception of social reality"

(p. 150). Data is usually generated through surveys and experiments, and analysed through statistical tests, which is on focus to ensure the replicability of results. The quality assessment of quantitative research mainly focuses on two points: reliability and validity. In short, reliability is fundamentally concerned with whether the result is replicable, while validity addresses whether the research accurately and truly measure what they are intended to measure (Joppe, 2006). However, qualitative researchers hold different views on the concepts of reliability and validity, believing that these concepts and criteria defined in quantitative research are insufficient and cannot apply to the qualitative research paradigm, because qualitative research accepts a variety of subjective realities and aims to gain deeply comprehensive insights (Golafshani, 2003; Stumpfegger, 2017). Qualitative researchers prefer to use different terminology, and hence reliability and validity are conceptualised as trustworthiness in the qualitative paradigm (Golafshani, 2003). The best-known criteria of trustworthiness, created by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In these four criteria, credibility is the most significant criterion, which means researchers are required to clearly link the research results with reality to prove the truth of the research results. Compared with the other three criteria, credibility also has been widely used and has the most techniques to build it (Statisticssolutions, 2017). I focus on two essential strategies (triangulation and member checking) in credibility to ensure rigour in my study.

Credibility depends on the richness of the collected data and analysis, not on the sample size intended to represent the entire population (Patton, 2014). The most suitable strategy for validating data relies on triangulation (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984). In other words, it validates the phenomenon being studied from different angles. I employed Denzin's (1978) methodological triangulation and data triangulation to have a trustworthy groundwork. In my research, I involved different methods of data collection such as participant observation on migrant children, semi-structured interview, as well as document analysis to study children's educational experiences and challenges. Such triangulation compares and cross-verifies the information obtained from different methods. For example, when children shared

the learning challenges in their interviews, observations in the classroom and responses from teachers' interviews could either corroborate these challenges or provide different perspectives. . Also, while the children's voices from interviews are significant, the additional data sources provide necessary context, verification, and enrichment to complement the primary interview data. For instance, interviews with children might reveal their feelings about school, observation could illustrate their actual behaviours in school settings, and document analysis (like reviewing school reports) could reveal how institutional frameworks affect their experiences.

The other type was data source triangulation, which includes three units – time, space and person (Denzin, 1978). Time and space are emphasised because they help recognise the interactive relationship with participants. For instance, I compared a migrant child's learning status and behaviour when he or she was in class and in library, or it compared students' learning patterns during examination periods and other times.

The second strategy is member checking, which is the most significant one to reinforce a study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Checks concerned with the accuracy and completeness of data were conducted during and after the data collection. I shared my collected data with the informants, including their recorded articulations of dialogues and transcripts of interviews in which they had participated, so that they could clarify whether their words matched what they actually had intended, corrected errors and provided additional information.

3.8 Ethical issues

The research follows the ethical principles of British Educational Research Association (BERA), British Psychological Society (BPS) and British Sociological Association (BSA), and the Code of Ethical Research of the University of Reading. The key ethical principles show that researchers should treat participants fairly and sensitively without any prejudice from significant characteristics such as gender or ethnicity

(BERA, 2018), and respect the dignity of individuals, whose words and behaviours should be treated truthfully, objectively and accurately (BPS, 2018). Additionally, researchers should have the awareness of responsibilities to guarantee that research studies cannot have potentially negative influences on participants' physical and psychological status (BSA, 2017), and make sure to keep the trust of others unabused (BPS, 2018). Confidentiality and anonymity of participants' data is paramount in research (BERA, 2018), and it is necessary to take appropriate and practicable measures to store collected data in a secure way (BSA, 2017). On the basis of these principles, I provided honestly written information about my research, and obtained the informed consent of all children and adult interviewees, including the headteacher and teachers at schools before conducting my interviews.

The target population of my research were migrant children in Year 9, because of their age, they belonged to a vulnerable group who cannot protect their rights and interests (Cohen et al., 2018). Before talking to them, I obtained parental permission when there was no parental supervision. Meanwhile, I also received oral and written consent from the children before asking questions. In order to reduce children's embarrassment and emotional insecurity (de Siqueira Sigaud et al., 2009), I collected data in the school environment that children were familiar with. In addition, children could possibly feel powerless and insecure in my presence (Greig et al., 2007), thus I spent time to get to know the children in advance and observe them for a while to make them feel familiar with me. All participation was voluntary and so I obtained informed consent in an accessible and understandable language, which ensured the safety of the participants. By guaranteeing these practices I ensured that the participants' views were not misused and they did not feel that there was any risk of any threats due to this research. The students themselves had the right to decide whether to participate and when to terminate, and they were not forced to participate in my research because of the pressure of teachers' suggestions. When a child verbalised or showed signs of fatigue or distress, or struggled to leave the site or withdrew from the intended activity, participation was interrupted and terminated at any time (de Siqueira Sigaud et al., 2009).

In qualitative research, it is crucial to be cautious about the potential risk of harm to participants. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) define harm as not only physical injury but also psychological damage, including emotional distress and stress-related illnesses. In my study, I took measures to protect my participants and prevent any form of harm. For instance, during an interview, I learned that a migrant student was experiencing bullying, self-doubt, and self-mutilation. Despite the confidentiality of the interview and my promise not to disclose the conversation, the severity of the student's situation compelled me to act ethically, and the student's health and safety took precedence over confidentiality agreements in this case. Researchers should not make participants, especially vulnerable groups of people, feel distress or ask things which make them sad, but equally, when participants disclose issues that are causing them significant harm, researchers have a moral obligation to take protective actions (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012).

After completing my data collection, I maintained a relationship with all my participants for one year. I believed this was necessary both morally and ethically. Having earned their trust, they shared their experiences with me, which I considered a privilege. I chose not to simply conclude our interactions with a thank-you at the end of the data collection phase. Instead, I provided them with my contact information, including my professional phone number and WeChat account, so that they could reach out to me if needed.

Regarding maintaining the privacy of all interviewees and ensuring the confidentiality of the collected information, I kept the names of interviewees and schools strictly confidential, using pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). In respect of protecting the security of the collected data, including field notes, other documents, audio-and video-recordings, and transcriptions, I used physical storage for paper documents by locking them in my safe, and stored electronic documents in my personal computer with password protection (Hammersley & Traianou,

2012). In addition, I did not pass on information about what I had observed and obtained in the field to others as stated in ethics forms.

3.9 Limitations

There is no denying that using qualitative research approaches and methods have some advantages in this study. It gave a 'thick' in-depth description of migrant children's feelings, attitudes towards education, aspirations and expectations, as well as educational experiences and interactions at school and at home through using research methods like participation observation and interviews. Thereby I collected data based on children's experience which was rich, detailed and powerful, and sometimes more compelling than quantitative data. Through discovering the migrant children's inner experience, it also helped figure out how these children and their families struggled, and what kinds of resources can support them in the context of educational inequalities.

Qualitative research in this research, however, has its obvious limitations. To begin with, because this study was based on individual perspectives of migrant children, it is almost unlikely to duplicate the results that have been found. Children's opinions might change and have different perspectives especially when they are in the critical year of lower secondary school, which means that the collected data is difficult to verify, and the generated results can be questioned. Moreover, the study involved a small number of migrant children and teachers. Due to the necessity of building trust and collecting data over a long period, the research process is inherently time-consuming. Given the limited time and the practical impossibility of covering all migrant children in Beijing, the study has to accommodate a smaller sample size. This smaller sample size, primarily selected through purposive sampling from a single migrant school, raises concerns about the generalisability of the findings to other migrant children in Beijing or nationwide. Additionally, if the sampled 21 migrant children provided highly subjective and varied responses, systematic comparisons might become challenging. Finally, although efforts are made to minimise the influence of the researcher's presence, such

presence is often inevitable in qualitative research and could potentially affect the behaviours and responses of the migrant children during class observations or interviews. This, in turn, might introduce bias into the conclusions.

Chapter 4: Research Context

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides detailed information about the place where the fieldwork took place. It also gives a rich description about the school, migrant children's life and study in the school, as well as the researcher's work during the fieldwork phrase.

4.2 Basic school information

The school covered a total area of 10,000 square meters and a building area of 4,000 square meters. The school consisted of primary school, and lower secondary school with 15 teaching classes, 35 in-service faculty members and 505 students. There were 450 primary school students and 55 lower secondary school students. According to the school size and the number of students, 'Zhenyu' school was a fairly small 'nine-year' school[2], because the statistics of the Ministry of Education of China (2002) and Ministry of Construction of the People's Republic of China (2002) showed that the largest 'nine-year' school had 45 classes with a total of 2,250 students, which was 4.5 times the total number of students in 'Zhenyu'.

In the primary school sector, there were 6 Grades and a total of 12 classes. Except for the Grade 2 with three classes and the Grade 6 with only one class, the rest of the grades all had two classes. The lower secondary school sector was divided into three grades, and each grade had only one class. Therefore, there were 12 classes in primary school and 3 classes in lower secondary school. The specific number

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[2] In 2006, China revised the 'Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China'. It was mentioned that most of the nine-year compulsory education consists of six years in primary school plus three years in lower secondary school. Some regions and schools also adopted five years in primary school plus four years in lower secondary school.)

of students in each grade was as follows: 70 first graders, 92 second graders, 81 third graders, 82 fourth graders, 76 fifth graders, 49 sixth graders, 20 seventh graders, 12 eighth graders, 21 ninth graders – there were 22 ninth graders in the first semester, but one migrant girl back to her rural hometown to receive education and prepare for the SHSEE in the second semester.

It was obvious that the number of students had dropped sharply from the sixth grade. A school teacher explained that because migrant children without Beijing Hukou cannot take the high school and college entrance examinations in Beijing, and there were differences between the examination content and textbooks in Beijing and other places, most parents and children preferred to go back to their hometown to attend local lower secondary schools. To enter a better lower secondary school, students needed to get a relatively good score in the local lower secondary school entrance examination, so some parents chose to send their children back to the Grade 6 at their hometown primary school after their children finishing the fifth grade in this school. Under this circumstance, there was only one class left in the sixth grade almost every year. Many students also transferred back to their hometown lower secondary schools after completing the sixth grade, resulting in fewer students remaining in 'Zhenyu'. In addition, 'Zhenyu' was mainly a day school. Most of the students in the school were day students who lived with their families in rented places in nearby villages. 'Zhenyu' also provided dormitories for students who lived far away. There were 14 boys and 13 girls in the school dormitory, accounting for only 5.3% of the total number of students.

Beijing Municipal Education Commission (2015) stipulated that in the nine-year compulsory education stage, there was a consistent overall setting of courses, offering Morality and Life, Morality and Society, Ideological and Moral Education, History and Society (History, Geography), Science (Physics, Chemistry, Biology), Chinese, Mathematics, English, Physical Education and Health, Arts (Music, Fine Arts), Comprehensive practical activities and other courses, as well as local courses and school-based

courses. The significance of focusing on science education was particularly emphasised at the elementary level by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2017).

In accordance with the policy of Beijing Municipal Education Commission, 'Zhenyu' School provided primary school students with a relatively rich curriculum. In addition to having the three important core compulsory courses – Chinese, Mathematics and English, it offered other elective subjects, in response to the national advocate for promoting all-round development of students. For example, the third-grade curriculum included Chinese, Mathematics, English, Chinese Studies, Ideological and Moral Education, Science, Physical Education, Music, Fine Arts, and Handwriting. In primary school sector, only three core subjects, namely Chinese, Mathematics, and English, were required to have examinations, which were also the focus of teachers' teaching.

Compared with the courses in the primary school sector, the courses in the lower secondary sector were reduced a lot, and all of them were compulsory courses with examinations. What was worse, Art classes such as Music and Fine Arts, which had no required tests so were cancelled, not to mention that there was no practical course like computer class for lower secondary school students. A teacher revealed that the school believes that the main task for the lower secondary school students is to achieve good scores in the Senior High School Entrance Examination (SHSEE). The subjects assessed in SHSEE do not include Music, Arts, or Computer. Therefore, students should put their time and energy on examination subjects. In comparison, the importance of Art courses was negligible and then there was no need for students to take these classes to disperse their energy. The second and main reason was the shortage of teachers. The school was unwilling to recruit teachers in those minor subjects like Music. The number of teachers in the school was basically fixed each year. A new teacher would be recruited only when a teacher left. Hiring an extra teacher meant paying an extra teacher salary. The teaching of these minor subjects was generally digested internally by the school teachers. For

example, the Music class of third graders was taught by their Chinese teacher. Each teacher was responsible for at least 2 different subjects.

It is worth noting that these migrant children cannot participate in the Academic Tests for the Eighth Graders or SHSEE in Beijing. They could only go to high school by going back to their hometown to take these examinations. However, under this circumstance, migrant children would face a problem. The question types and textbooks of the SHSEE in their original hometown were different from those in Beijing. Precisely, different from the College Entrance Examination questions which were unified by the province or the municipality, the SHSEE questions were assigned by the prefecture-level cities or county-level cities of each province. Therefore, Beijing's SHSEE questions were different from those of any other prefecture-level city or county-level city in China. As of the end of 2019, China had 333 prefecture-level divisions and 387 county-level cities, each with its own SHSEE. In addition, there were also different editions of the 'nine-year' compulsory education textbooks, such as the PEP edition (published by the People's Education Press) and the Shanghai Education edition (Published by Shanghai Education Publishing House), SJ Edition (published by Jiangsu Education Publishing House), ZJJY Edition (published by Zhejiang Education Publishing House). Therefore, these migrant children received education in Beijing and had to return to their hometown to take SHSEE, which had a big difference in question types and textbooks. Most students mentioned that the knowledge that taught in their hometown was more difficult than that in Beijing, and the lower secondary students in their hometown would attend self-study classes until 9 o'clock in the evening at school, so they felt that they did not have the confidence to get good results in the SHSEE in their hometown.

The eighth graders were eligible to register for the Senior High School Entrance Examination only if their scores of the two tested subjects (Biology and Geography) were above the 'Pass' in the Academic Tests for the Eighth Graders, which were held at the end of the second term of Grade 8. The 9 compulsory courses for the eighth graders were Chinese, Mathematics, English, Physics, History,

Morality and the Rule of Law, Geography, Biology, and Physical Education. These courses were for examinations only. The school then eliminated the two tested courses of Biology and Geography for the ninth graders and added the course of Chemistry. There was a total of 8 compulsory courses, and the examinations of these courses were arranged at the end of the second semester of Grade 9.

There were 31 professional teachers, including 20 with college degrees and 11 with Bachelor's degrees. Except for the headteacher and the vice headteacher, who were not involved in teaching, there were 3 teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience, 11 teachers with 5-10 years of teaching experience, 13 teachers with 3-5 years of teaching experience, and 2 teachers with less than 3 years of teaching experience. Teachers had more than 2 years of teaching experience in school on average. Instead of going to neighbouring colleges or universities to advertise for recruitment promotion, the teachers were mostly recruited from recruitment websites, such as 58.com and Zhaopin.com in China.

During my observation in the school, I noticed that teachers spent most of their time in the school on weekdays. Teachers in charge of teaching were required to have almost 20 classes every week and each class lasts 45 minutes. They were not only responsible for the teaching of a certain subject in one grade, but also for the teaching of the same subject or even different subjects in another grade. This phenomenon was common in the school. For example, a teacher who was a class tutor teaching Chinese in Grade 8 also taught Politics in her own class and taught Chinese in Grade 9. Similarly, another teacher who taught Chemistry for Grade 9 also taught Mathematics for Grade 3 and was responsible for the boys' dormitory management work. Another point was that school did not exactly match teachers' majors with the subjects they taught. For example, the homeroom teacher of Grade 8, whose undergraduate major was Chemistry, was assigned to teach Chinese because there was a need of a Chinese teacher with no shortage of a Chemistry teacher when she first entered the school.

The fees that students had to pay for the Autumn term in the academic year 2020-2021 varied between primary students and lower secondary students. The tuition fee for primary school students was 3,000 yuan (equivalent to £340); the incidental expenses, including textbooks, learning materials and insurance) were 250 yuan (equivalent to £28); and the meal expenses was 900 yuan (equivalent to £101). The total was 4,150 yuan (equivalent to £470). For lower secondary school students, the charged items were the same but the total expense was higher – 5,300 yuan (equivalent to £699). Precisely, their tuition fee was 4,000 yuan (equivalent to £450); the incidental expenses were 300 yuan (equivalent to £33); and the meal expenses was 1,000 yuan (equivalent to £112). The boarding students needed to pay an extra 1,000 yuan (equivalent to £112) for their accommodation, which was paid together with their tuition fee every term. Some students mentioned that the fees were a burden for his family. One student who lived in the campus in last term, but being a day student in this term, with 2 hours by bus.

However, the fee for winter holiday paper homework was not included in the total fees above. For first and second graders, the paper homework fee was 30 yuan (equivalent to £3); for the third and seventh graders, the fee was 45 yuan (equivalent to £5); for the eighth grader, the fee was 60 yuan (equivalent to £7) and for the ninth grader, the fee was 25 yuan (equivalent to £3). In addition, students needed to pay extra three kinds of school uniforms, which were required to wear in the school. The cost for the summer uniform – a short sleeve vest and a pair of trousers was 100 yuan (equivalent to £11). The autumn uniform including a coat and a pair of thick trousers costed 100 yuan (equivalent to £11) while the winter uniform was a thick cotton coat, costing 150 yuan (equivalent to £17) per student. All these expenses were expansive for migrant families because their wages were low.

4.3 School schedule

The teaching, learning and living activities of teachers and students in the school were strictly carried out in accordance with the school schedule. There were two schedules – summer and winter schedule. Due to the early dawn and hot weather of the summer, the afternoon on-campus teaching and activities were scheduled a little later than in the winter. Students had 30 minutes more lunch break in summer schedule. Thus, according to the schedule in summer, the end time of ninth grader was 17:20 pm, while according to the schedule in winter, it was 16:50 pm. Here, it was worth noting that it was necessary to distinguish between autumn term and spring term, as well as the concepts of winter and summer schedule above. In China, there were only two terms – the autumn and spring term. Generally, the autumn term started on September 1st and ended in January or February next year, while the spring term usually started in February or March and ended in June. The summer and winter schedules went by season, not by term. For example, the autumn term of the 2020-2021 academic year began on September 1st, but the winter schedule began on October 9th.

To be precise, for the autumn semester of 2020-2021, for example, boarding students usually waked up at 6:20 a.m. from Monday to Friday, with two dormitory administrators calling the students to get up. Then they had 30 minutes to wash up and dress up. Students were not allowed to return to the dormitory after leaving the dormitory, unless approved by the homeroom teacher or a grade leader. At 6:50 am, they went to the canteen for breakfast, which were usually eggs, steamed bread (Mantou), rice porridge and fried dough sticks. The boarding students finished their breakfast around 7:10 am, and the day students began to enter the school at 7:15 am. The students had morning classes from 7:30 am to 7:55 am, and then lined up to do 10 minutes of running exercises on the 200-meter plastic racetrack in the playground. The homeroom teacher of each class was responsible for organising and checking the uniformity of the queue.

There were four classes in the morning, beginning at 8:25 am and ending at 12:00 am. Each class had 40 minutes and was followed by a 10-minute break, except for a 30-minute break between the second class and the third class. This 30-minute break had two parts – 5 minutes of eye exercises and 15 minutes of physical exercises, which included jogging and broadcast gymnastics. These two exercises were both listed in the national curriculum for the sake of relieving eye fatigue caused by excessive use of eyes, preventing myopia and enhancing the physical quality of primary and secondary school students. All the exercises were the same in the weekdays except for Monday. There was a national flag raising ceremony every Monday (unless the weather was bad and students cannot go out, for example, in rainy days). It was an important means of patriotism education and collectivism education, with speeches by school leaders or student representatives.

Lunch time was from 12:00 am to 12:30 am. Students of Grade 1 and Grade 2 had dinner earlier and lined up to the canteen at 11:50 am, led by the homeroom teacher, while students from Grade 3 to Grade 9 were in line to eat in order at 12:00 am. To be more specific, for example, on Monday, the third graders lined up for lunch first, followed by the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and ninth graders; then on Tuesday, the fourth graders had lunch first and the fifth graders first on Wednesday. Because of the prevention and control regulations of the coronavirus, all students (including boarding students and day students) were not allowed to go out of school and were required to have lunch at noon. They had to bring their own bowls and chopsticks to the school, and took their meal back to their class desks to have lunch, instead of eating in the school canteen. For students who had not brought their bowls and chopsticks, the school provided stainless steel rice bowls and wooden disposable chopsticks for free. Lunch generally included three dishes and one soup, with meat and vegetable as well as rice. After lunch, the students washed their own dishes and took a lunch break from 12:40 am to 13:10 pm. Because they could not leave the school, all the students had to bend down on their desks to have a lunch break. Boarding students could not go back to their dormitory and just rested in the classroom.

126

After the lunch break, students were required to have a 5-minute eye exercise at 13:10 pm and had then free activities like borrowing books.

The routine in the afternoon was similar to that in the morning, starting at 13:25 pm and ending at 16:00 pm with three classes. There was a 25-minute break between the sixth and seventh classes. During the break, each class had to clean the floor, moped the floor and opened windows for ventilation. Students were also led by teachers to borrow and return books in the library, or they played table tennis, basketball, walking and so on. The eighth class (16:10 pm – 16:50 pm) was optional, which meant that students could choose to go home from school, or continue to have this class at school. This class had the core subjects – Chinese, Mathematics, and English.

Although it was an optional class, according to a homeroom teacher and several students, first graders and second graders can choose to go home, but third graders and above had to stay for this class. But there was a charge for this class, 800 RMB per term (equivalent to £90). Although this class was optional, a homeroom teacher revealed that the school asked the homeroom teacher to encourage students in his or her class to attend this class and pay the fees. The homeroom teacher also mentioned that she was willing to persuade children and their parents because the fees paid for this class was part of her salary, and this class was helpful for students to improve their learning. All of her students paid the fees and attended the class. This phenomenon was common in Grade 3 and above. In Grade 1 and Grade 2, the subject for this class taught by the homeroom teacher was Chinese or Mathematics for four classes, one class for English; in Grade 3 and above, there were two times of Chinese, two times of mathematics and one time of English.

Day students left school after 16:50 pm and the boarding students had their dinner from 17:30 pm to 18:00 pm. Dinner was quite like the lunch but had only two dishes. Students did not think diner was as good as lunch. From 18:30 pm to 19:30 pm, all boarding students, who were around 20 students,

gathered in one classroom to have a self-study evening class and there was a teacher in charge of the management. Students were not allowed to talk, play around or do anything unrelated to study. After the evening class, students were led by the dormitory teacher in a queue to back to the dormitory and they washed up and were asked to go to bed. The lights were turned off by the dormitory administer at 20:30 pm on time. After 20:30 pm, students were not allowed to talk, play and other behaviours that affect others' rest, and nobody was allowed to go out of the dormitory.

In addition, 'Zhenyu' school's holiday time almost started earlier than that stipulated by Beijing Municipal Education Commission every year. Take the 2020-2021 academic year as an example. On December 29th, 2020, Beijing Municipal Education Commission introduced the winter holiday arrangements for primary and secondary schools in Beijing in order to cooperate with the prevention and control of Covid-19 epidemic. Among them, students in Beijing primary schools started their winter vacation in January 16th, two weeks ahead of the original schedule, while students in Grade 7 and Grade 8 started their winter vacation in January 23rd, one week earlier than the original schedule. Students in Grade 9 and in upper secondary schools had their winter holidays from January 30th, as originally planned. However, the winter vacation of 'Zhenyu' School started on January 9th for all students from Grade 1 to Grade 9. Therefore, compared with the students of the same grade in Beijing state schools, students at 'Zhenyu' school spent one week less in primary school sector, two weeks less in grade 7 and Grade 8, and three weeks less in Grade 9.

4.4 Care and support of the students

Due to the negative impacts of the pandemic, the school increased the techniques to prevent the spread for students. Since the fall semester of 2020, the school stipulated that all students had their temperature checked four times a day. Taking the ninth graders as an example, the first time to check temperatures was at about 7:15 am in the morning when the day students arrived at the school gate. The homeroom teacher checked whether all day students in her class were wearing masks and taking

their temperatures. If a student's temperature was high, the homeroom teacher must report it to the school and contact the student's parent to pick the child up and keep him or her out of the school. The second time was when students entering their classrooms. The monitor was responsible for taking the temperature of all classmates and writing down the number of each student's body temperature. The third time was before lunch and the monitor still had to take and recorded the temperature of the whole class. The fourth time was after school. It was also measured and recorded by the class monitor. Although a head tutor teacher understood the significance of this regime, because the health and safety of teachers and students during the pandemic was very important, she felt that taking body temperature four times a day would take up time, which was very cumbersome. A student felt that taking body temperature every day was a joy, because he could talk and laugh with other classmates when taking body temperature; another student was not happy or stressed with it, and felt that since the school asked to do so, he would cooperate to it.

In order to ensure the safety of all the students, there was a security guard at the school gate who was responsible for registering the outsiders, and all students were not allowed to leave the campus during the school period. The school provided lunch for all children because it was convenient for school safety management and for migrant parents' work. According to a day seventh grader, the school's noon break was only 80 minutes, including lunch time. She lived relatively close, just two stops away, but it took 40 minutes to go back and forth to school; and her parents' working place was far away from their residence. They cannot come back for lunch at noon. Thus, she herself would rather have lunch at school.

Boarding students were allowed to go home only after school on Friday afternoon and returned to their school dormitories by Sunday evening. Day students could leave campus and went home only after school in the afternoon. Unless there were special circumstances, such as sickness or family emergency, the parents of the students would pick up their children at the school gate with the

129

permission of the homeroom teacher and grade teacher. In addition, the campus to the nearest bus station was about 800 meters from the walking distance, and there were many motor vehicles at the school gate.

Moreover, the school provided a small dance studio, where children can rehearse dance programs only in the first one or two week before the school New Year's celebration party each year. The school also offered elementary school children charged interest classes after school every day, like the Taekwondo class at 17:00 pm in the afternoon every Wednesday. This indoor class was held in the meeting room behind the library and lasts one hour with children's voluntary registration. Both the children and the teacher wore special taekwondo clothing, and sometimes they would also attend the Beijing youth Taekwondo competition. In addition to Taekwondo classes, the school also provided weekly drawing classes, mental arithmetic classes, computer programming classes for primary school children. The fee for each interest class was 800 RMB per term (equivalent to £90).

Apart from the activities mentioned above, children did not have any other time for leisure and entertainment in school. It was also worth mentioning that no student was allowed to bring mobile phones into class. Every day at 7:15 am in the morning, when the homeroom teacher checked students' body temperature at the school gate, he or she would ask the students who had have mobile phones to hand them in and return them to the students at the end of the school day. While doing the classroom observation of the ninth graders, I found that some students still used mobile phones quietly play online games and chat with friends via social applications in class. Later I learnt that some of them brought two mobile phones to school, one handed over to the homeroom teacher, and one kept secretly by them.

Even though children ate in the school canteen, it was only open for lunch and dinner. The school provided each class with a pure water dispenser, which can have hot and cold water. Except these,

there was no shop in school where children could buy snacks or drink other beverages. Students were not allowed to bring snacks into school to prevent them from eating snacks in class and then affecting their academic performance. However, some snacks such as bread or pastries were allowed to be eaten during the break.

4.5 My work in the school

4.5.1 Daily life

I did my fieldwork in the school from November 2020 to May 2021. I accessed the school as a library volunteer, and came at 13:00 pm and left at 17:00 pm as the school library's opening time. At the beginning, it took me 2 hours to get from my home to this school by public transportation, and 4 hours in total to go back and forth every weekday with including time spent on the road and on waiting for public transportation. To save the commuting time and save my energy, I rented a room in the small village where the school was located. Most of my neighbours were migrant workers except the local people. The room was so close that it only took me 10 minutes to walk to school every day. Due to the large number of migrant workers gathered in this village, there were many small vegetable markets and shops, which was convenient for me to buy daily necessities. Since I lived close, I arrived at school with the students at 7 am in the morning. When the boarding students who wished to read more books in the library or chat with me, I would close the library later at around 6 pm. During my period in the school, my job responsibilities in the school included managing the library, communicating with homeroom teachers about students' reading, and observing students' study and life in school.

4.5.2 Building relationship and trust

It was easier to establish connection with teachers and children at school, but it was more difficult to build trust, which took time and commitment. When I first joined the school as a librarian, I soon got to know all the children and the homeroom teachers. However, this was just a shallow relationship, and the topic of our communication was only limited to the borrowing and returning of books, not

involving deeper topics such as their academic performance or educational aspirations. Later, in the early stage of my classroom observation in Grade 9, although students and teachers had agreed for me to take photos and videos during my observation, some students were very restrained and uneasy about this. For example, as soon as a student who was playing a mobile game noticed that I was taking pictures, he immediately stopped playing the game and put the mobile phone in his pocket.

As I stayed with the ninth graders longer, I participated in various activities with them, including sitting in the classroom, playing games with them in the Physical Education class, cleaning the class together, and preparing for the celebration of New Year's Day activities. These children then gradually got acquainted with me, began to talk with me, and actively asked me some personal questions curiously. With the help of the homeroom teacher, I introduced myself at a class meeting and explained that I was also a student and had been a child of migrant workers like everyone else, when I was a teenager. After learning about my background, the ninth graders became less defensive and closer to me than before. They no longer regarded me as a teacher or thought that I was sent by their homeroom teacher to monitor them as a 'spy'. Instead, they treated me as a friend and called me 'older sister'. With my detailed description, students had a deeper understanding of my research and knew that my target research objects were them. They showed great enthusiasm and were willing to cooperate with my research. Such a way of building relationship is the essence to build trust. The students regarded me as a member of their group. Under such circumstances, they could relax and show their normal living and learning status at school and expressed freely in the communication process.

After 8 weeks of my classroom observations, children's relationship and trust in me gradually deepened. At the beginning of the spring semester, I further explained my research to the homeroom teacher and students of Grade 9 and informed them that I would like to interview them to obtained more detailed information. Interviews were conducted in the conference room at the back of the library, and electronic equipment like a computer and a voice recorder were shown to the students

before the interview. It was mentioned that the interview was a face-to-face conversation, instead of a serious thing like an examination. Most importantly, I repeatedly promised the students that all the information they shared with me was kept confidentially, and they did know that I did not share their information with others. Those students who had finished their interviews first would share their feelings with the other students, and some of them helped calm the nervousness of other students who did not have the interview yet.

Chapter 5: Parental influence and choices: shaping migrant children's educational experience and daily routines

5.1 Introduction

This chapter firstly explores the critical domain of school choice, a decision point that sets the stage for migrant children's subsequent experiences. Accessing education in Beijing environment is complex for migrant families. The choices parents made, often shaped by systemic, financial, and personal considerations, determine the quality and nature of educational institutions their children attend. It further explores the factors driving these choices and the ways of Hukou system's constraints and economic considerations affecting parental decisions. Moving from the macro to the micro, it then transitions into the intimate confines of the migrant household. Here, daily routines, study habits, and even leisure activities of migrant children are largely shaped by their parents' influences, and it discovers how these children's routines manifest in Beijing, and, most significantly, how these daily rhythms impact the academic and personal growth of migrant children. Lastly, the lens focus on the direct and indirect ways in which parents support their children's education. This encompasses emotional support, setting expectations, monitoring academic progress and then explores how migrant parents, often struggled in physically demanding jobs and an excess of life challenges, manage this, and how their efforts or lack of efforts in the academic and professional area, influence their children's aspirations.

5.2 School choices in accessing education

Migrant parents' decisions on school choices were closely tied to Beijing's policy and school admission practices, rooted in the Hukou system, which posed significant challenges to migrants accessing education. The accessibility and affordability of schools further complicated these choices, with many families facing financial constraints or geographic limitations. Stability of residence and school

impacted access to education with frequent changes. Finally, the social networks of migrant families who provided advice and recommendations often guided their school choices. Together, these factors formed a complex decision-making environment for migrant parents in choosing the appropriate school for their children in Beijing.

5.2.1 Policy and legislation

5.2.1.1 Beijing household registration (Hukou) system

Traditionally, Beijing's policy, guided by the Hukou system, made it difficult for migrants to access the same level of public services like education as the Beijing locally registered residents. Migrants, particularly those from rural areas in other provinces, often held Hukou for their rural hometowns, not for Beijing. This often resulted in their children either attending lower quality schools or being unable to attend public schools in Beijing at all. Even though reforms were made to reduce these restrictions with new polices, many migrant children with low socio-economic backgrounds still faced barriers when trying to enrol in Beijing state schools, as they could not meet the requirements of these new policies.

In this study's survey, all participated migrant children were registered in their rural hometowns, even though some of them were born in Beijing, which meant they held Hukou in other provinces not in Beijing. Due to their lack of Beijing Hukou, they faced limitations in school choice, as they were not accepted by local state schools in Beijing. This was evidenced in Lulu's experience, when her parents looked for Beijing state schools, and a state primary school explicitly stated that it would not accept any migrant children without Beijing Hukou.

5.2.1.2 School admission policy

While educational reforms had happened, many state schools in Beijing continued to require documents like proof of permanent local residency. This significantly limited migrant families' ability to secure admission for their children. The varied admission policies across different state schools added another layer of complexity and often listed a variety of required documents that migrant families struggled to provide. Especially for migrant families who recently moved to Beijing, their short duration of stay fell short of the requirements to obtain residence certificates and other documents necessary for children's schooling.

> *I was rejected by many Beijing state schools, saying that I did not have a Beijing residence permit. At that time, when I first came to Beijing, I did not know what a residence permit was, and neither did my parents.* (Lulu)

> *It is not easy to get into state schools in Beijing without required documents.* (Nana)

> *I wanted to transfer to a state 9-year school in Machikou village (Beijing) in Grade 3 because that school teaching quality was better, but the school rejected me as the school did not accept transfer students.* (Beibei)

Their application documents for school admission were deemed insufficient by policy standards as they failed to meet the stipulated requirements. This unfortunate situation left Lulu feeling deeply disoriented, as if there were no schools available for her in Beijing and she might have no chance to receive education. The fact that she and her parents had recently migrated to Beijing without residing there for more than six months prevented their chance to apply for a Beijing residence permit, which limited their possibility to attend Beijing state schools. Nana also experienced the same harsh reality of not being permitted to enter state schools in Beijing without the required documents, and each

school had different conditions for accepting students, just like the school Beibei originally wanted to transfer, but who did not accept transfer students. Therefore, in addition to national policies restricting migrant children from enrolling in Beijing, individual state school admission policies further impeded the acceptance of migrant students.

Considering the above, migrant families can only turn to schools for migrant children whose education quality is usually lower than that of Beijing state schools. These schools have almost no restrictions on accepting migrant children. Compared with free compulsory education in state schools, schools for migrant children were excluded from government financial allocations, so they were self-operated and largely relied on migrant children's tuition fees to manage.

My mother later found out that Zhenyu School did not have any admission restrictions or require a Beijing residence permit, so I came here. (Lulu)

I attended Zhenyu School without a registered permanent residence, and even without a student status because I didn't have. My dad just needs to pay my tuition fees in this school. (Siyu)

I enrolled in this school on the day when my mom paid my tuition fees. (Xiaojun)

Fortunately, the situation for Lulu and other migrant children in Beijing was not entirely bleak. Schools like Zhenyu school provided a valuable option for migrant families who did not meet the strict requirements for enrolling in state schools. Lulu's challenges of providing the required permanent residence due to her short duration was easily resolved as Zhenyu School had almost no restrictions on the enrolment of students. This information was also confirmed in Siyu's interview. As long as the migrant children who came to enrol paid their tuition fees, the migrant children school would accept

them without any limitations. While the barriers to state education in Beijing for migrant children were significant, the existence of schools like Zhenyu School with low-quality education showed that there were alternative paths available. These schools were willing to accept migrant children without strict residence requirements, through offering them the opportunity to receive compulsory education.

However, at the same time, Xiaojun felt that the migrant children's school was less like a school, but more like a commercial training institution, and the headteacher was like a businessman. To be precise, on the day of Xiaojun's field trip to Zhenyu school, the headteacher stopped him and his parents from entering the school, and they were only allowed to visit the campus and dormitory after paying the tuition fees in the headteacher's office. He also felt that the headteacher did not take education seriously, and that the school did not pay much attention on the migrant children's studies because the school has no pressure on proportion of students entering schools of higher schools to evaluate its teaching level and quality. All these made him feel that the schools for migrant children were more commercial in nature, as they only offer direct access to education once children's tuition fees were paid.

5.2.2 Proximity and affordability

5.2.2.1 Proximity and availability

Proximity and availability were crucial considerations in school choice for Beijing's migrant children. It involved the school's location relative to their residences; families preferred schools nearby to minimise commuting challenges in a large city. Transportation and distance to school further influenced this decision, as ease of travel and time spent commuting played into the family's daily

routine. The consideration was practical as the school was 'close to home', which was also the main reason why the vast majority of migrant children chose schools (61.9%, N = 13).

My father asks me to come here because it is very close to home. (Wenwen)

The school is in Xidakou Village, just around the corner on foot, very close to home. (Zihao)

Because this school is close to where I live, I come to this school. (Dudu)

The school is close to home. It is convenient for my dad to pick me up and drop me off after school. (Yifan)

Proximity to home was a very important factor for migrant parents and children when considering school choices. Having a school nearby facilitated easy pick-ups and drop-offs for migrant parents, and allowed children the independence of commuting on their own. When asking the places where migrant children lived in Beijing, most of the migrant families lived near the school within walking distance or a short 2-5 bus stops away. The transportation accessibility of a bus stop at the school gate significantly simplified their commute. This convenience, allowing many migrant children to go to school by bus, played a crucial role in school choice considerations for their families.

Take the bus, just 2 stops, very close. (Yulei)
Bus, just 3-4 bus stops, very close. (Lulu)
Bus, direct to school, takes 30-40 minutes on the road. (Beibei)
Take the bus at Mugongjiayuan station, about 5 stops. (Yiming)

> *I don't need to change stops, just take a bus and go directly to Mugong station around ten minutes on the road.* (Zihao)

> *It takes about 40 minutes to go home directly by bus.* (Wenwen)

The short distance also reduced the need for migrant parents to accompany their children to and from school. Due to the characteristics of migrant parents' long working hours jobs, such as leaving home early and returning late, they found it challenging to manage school drop-offs and pickups. With the short distance from home to school, migrant parents felt that their children can go home safely on their own, which relieved the pressure of parents' drop-off and pick-up schedule. It also reduced migrant parents' concerns about their children potentially encountering traffic accidents and saved time and transportation costs. This positively impact the financial situation of migrant families, especially in cities with higher living costs like Beijing. Therefore, with long working hours and limited resources, a school close to the living area emerged as a practical and realistic choice among migrant parents.

In addition, the importance of proximity in school choice among migrant parents often outweighed other considerations, even when favourable conditions such as the availability of supportive friends or acquaintances were present. For example, Siyu shared that despite having his father's good friend, who provided substantial care and support at his previous school, the school's distant location required a significant commute from his father daily routine. Consequently, Siyu transferred to a school closer to home to reduce this challenge.

> *My dad's friend works in that school and took good care of me. But the main reason was that it was a bit far away. My dad was busy at that time, and he spent a lot of time picking me up from school every day and sometimes he couldn't manage to pick me up. Later I transferred to another school in Baifu Town, which was much close to home.* (Siyu)

Siyu's interview illuminated that a significant daily commute not only affected the child but also disrupted the family's routine. The nature of migrant parents' work significantly influenced the school selection process. His father, a truck driver had his working hours determined by his clients. His employment status was temporary, resulting in an unstable work pattern. Given these circumstances, the irregularity and instability inherent in the jobs of migrant parents emerged as potential key factors impacting the choice of schools for their children. This disruption can place additional strain on parents' work schedules and the family's overall well-being. While the presence of reliable friends or acquaintances who can provide additional support and care for children in a more distant school was valuable, the importance of a short commute was still paramount.

Availability

Meanwhile, it was important to distinguish between two scenarios: migrant parents opting for a school near home versus having only one school available in their living area. While many migrant children indicated 'close to home' as a school choice factor in the questionnaire, their individual responses suggested varying circumstances behind this preference.

> *At that time, my family lived in Mugong Village, and there was only this school in this village.* (Beibei)

> *There is only one school, which is relatively close to home.* (Nana)

> *At that time, there was only this school in Qianland Village (the area where I lived).* (Lulu)

While responses from a questionnaire indicated a preference for proximity to home in school choice, the individual responses from children like Beibei, Lulu, and Nana revealed a more subtle reality. For these children, the choice was not so much a preference as a necessity due to the limited availability of schools in their residential areas. The lack of variety in school choices indicated a significant constraint for migrant families in Beijing, particularly in certain geographical areas where educational options were limited.

5.2.2.2 Cost and affordability

The migrant family's financial resources can heavily influence school choices, as higher-income families were able to afford private or better-resourced schools, while migrant families with low socio-economic background who often worked in low-paying jobs, struggled with the high costs associated with city living, including children's education expenses. The cumulative expenses, including tuition fees, school uniforms, transportation, and other associated costs, became a heavy burden that severely limited their choices for schooling. For these families, the options often boiled down to lower-cost migrant schools that did provide the lower quality of education compared with more expensive alternatives. In some cases, the financial strain became so obvious that migrant families were forced to make the painful decision to send their children back to their rural homes for free schooling which resulted in family separation.

To be precise, only few migrant children said they chose their current school because of its cheap tuition fees (9.52%, N=2). For example, Xing said he had considered another private school, but found the tuition fees were too expensive, over 8,000 yuan (equivalent to £950) for lower secondary school and exceeding 10,000 yuan (equivalent to £1,185) for a semester at higher secondary school. These

figures were nearly double the fees at Zhenyu School, making Zhenyu a more economical choice, so he finally chose this school.

However, there were many migrant children who thought that the tuition fees at Zhenyu were expensive. For example, Hui mentioned that there were several times when her father could not afford to pay her tuition fees, so she had to request for payment deferments for a few days. She even considered going back to her hometown alone to continue her studies and be separated from her father, as free education there could significantly lessened the financial burden on her father. However, the dilemma of having no one to take care of her at the hometown was also a major concern. Similarly, Xiaomei, who migrated from her rural hometown with her mother to study in Beijing, felt the financial strain of tuition fees acutely. In her hometown, compulsory education was free, but now she had to pay more than 5,000 yuan (equivalent to £593) tuition fees for a semester in this private migrant children school, which was a relatively big financial pressure for her mother.

Although a minority of students considering the tuition fees of migrant children's schools affordable, for most migrant families, these fees represented a significant financial burden. This burden was particularly heavy for single-parent households, indicating the financial challenges associated with providing education for migrant children in Beijing. Specifically, during the closure of the school due to the pandemic, all courses were converted to online courses. The recent conversion to all courses online further exacerbated this issue for some families. To save tuition fees for the next semester in their Year 8, two migrant children chose to self-study at home instead of paying the tuition fees to attend online courses.

> *I didn't go to school in the second semester of Grade 8 and studied at home as the school was teaching online due to the epidemic.* (Xiaojun)

In the second semester of the 8th grade, I stayed at home and did not go to school. Because of the epidemic, it was changed to all online classes. I believed I can study through free Internet online resources and have no need to pay tuition fees. (Lupeng)

Self-learning without joining the school's online courses reduced the migrant family's financial strain to a certain degree but impacted on their experience of learning. However, for other migrant children who chose to attend these online classes, the need for technology to support the online learning posed a challenge for them. The pandemic had not only resulted in school closures but had also profoundly impacted the livelihoods of migrant parents. Workplaces were forced to close, and income was correspondingly reduced, or they lost their jobs immediately due to the unstable nature of their jobs. Consequently, the financial burden on these families escalated, reducing children's educational costs all the more essential. Indeed, it was important to note that there were additional hidden costs associated with schooling. Beyond tuition fees, migrant parents must also account for other expenses such as school uniforms, textbooks, boarding fees, meals expenses, transportation or extracurricular activities. These costs inevitably shaped the choice of school for migrant parents.

Most of the children in this class lived near the school, which reduced their transportation expenses. Nevertheless, there were cases where children lived far away from school and then had to live on campus although their parents were in Beijing as well. These accommodation costs understandably placed a considerable burden on their migrant parents who struggled to afford such a large amount of boarding fees. Like Xing and Kai, former boarding students who transitioned to day students during their Summer semester in Grade 9 because the school's boarding fees were too expensive with 1,000 yuan (equivalent to £112) each semester.

I lived on campus from the Year 4 to Year 8… I also lived on campus in the ninth grade for the Autumn term. However, for the next Spring term, I couldn't live because of the high accommodation fees… It takes me 2 hours to get home every day from school and I had to wake up at 5.30 a.m. (Xing)

I also have two younger brothers living on campus; but the accommodation fee is more expensive, so that it is very difficult for my parents to pay the accommodation fees for all three of us. We three then do not live on campus the next term. (Kai)

Compared with the long journey to school, the expensive accommodation costs were more of a burden for migrant families. Consequently, to save on boarding fees, these migrant children had to endure nearly three hours of commuting to and from school each day.

Similarly, to minimise meal expenses of 900 yuan (equivalent to £101) each semester, children like Dudu chose to skip the pre-paid school-provided lunch. She either brought bread from home or occasionally did not have lunch. For feeling hungry at school, Dudu said,

I can bear it (hunger) and wait until after school… I can have supper at home in the evening. (Dudu)

Despite experiencing hunger during the noon hours, Dudu's understanding of her family's financial burden reflected a distressing reality faced by many migrant families. The additional costs, particularly those related to accommodation and meals, can impose a severe financial strain. If these costs were not managed through various changes or strategies by the families, the pressure could potentially lead to children dropping out of school due to unaffordability. In such situations, they would be left with no school to attend, and they would no longer receive education. Therefore, financial affordability

played a crucial role in determining school choices for migrant children. It was not just about access to education, but about maintaining that access over time.

5.2.3 Stability of residence and school

5.2.3.1 Frequent moves – lack of stable housing

As they typically lacked the necessary financial support and residency qualifications to purchase property in Beijing, most migrant families resorted to renting rooms with their children. They also experienced unstable housing situations, including substandard living conditions or overcrowded housing. Compounding these challenges, their low-skilled and unstable nature of migrant employment required them to continuously relocate in search of job prospects or affordable rents. This lack of stability in their living and working circumstances significantly complicated the school selection process for their children.

Most participating migrant children reported having moved at least once since their arrival in Beijing. Only two children indicated that their families purchased apartments in rural outer Beijing areas in an earlier time without Hukou restrictions. The majority (90.48%, N = 19) of migrant families lived in rented accommodations, primarily due to the high cost of property in Beijing and their inability to obtain the necessary Beijing Hukou to qualify for homeownership. Consequently, these migrant families often resided in remote towns characterised by a high concentration of migrant workers, dense population, and substandard housing. These houses and rooms, while offering relatively affordable low rents attractive to many migrant workers, were marked by poor living conditions and potential safety hazards. In response to the high demand of migrant families, many properties had been built unlawfully and became more crowded. However, as China's urbanisation efforts advance,

these overcrowded rental properties were primarily targeted for demolition and reconstruction, which caused frequent moves of migrant families.

There were 16 migrant children (76.19%) in the class who had experienced moves in Beijing – 4 children had moved once (25%); 4 children had moved twice (25%), 6 children had moved 3 times (28.57%), and 2 children had moved 4 times (19.05%). Among them, 7 children clearly mentioned that they had to move because the place where they had lived before was to be demolished. For example,

> *3 times, I used to live in Xixiaokou Village, but later it was demolished, then we moved to Qianland Scrap Factory, and then moved again.* (Lili)

> *After coming to Beijing, I feel like I have been moving. I remember moving 4 times, all because the place where I lived was going to be demolished.* (Xiaojun)

The density and instability of housing for migrant families in Beijing was heavily influenced by the government's demolition projects during the urbanisation process over the past two decades. This resulted in frequent relocations for migrant workers. This issue was prevalent among migrant families in Beijing. The persistent relocation of migrant parents necessitated frequent school changes for their children. For example, Wenwen elaborated on her experience of being compelled to frequently change schools due to the constant change in her residential address.

> *Constantly moving, constantly changing schools... When I lived in Habatun Village, I went to Jingrui School. When I moved to Qianland Village, I went to Shangxiang School. Now I moved back to Habatun Village and I attend this school. You know, I am always moving, always changing schools. I hate changing.* (Wenwen)

147

This constant relocation not only affected the stability of living conditions but also had significant implications on various aspects of life, particularly education for children. Considering Wenwen's experience, it became apparent that nearly every instance of relocation necessitated a change of school. Having moved three times in seven years, almost once every two years had a significant impact on her life and schooling. She developed a sense of resistance towards the constant changes in living arrangements and schools. Therefore, the instability of housing, brought about by frequent moves, emerged as a pivotal factor influencing migrant children's school choices and educational experience. Additionally, the occupational instability faced by migrant parents became a significant determinant of the relocation frequency. This instability, in turn, had a direct impact on the school choices and enrolment process for migrant children.

I attended school in Tundian from first to fourth grade because, during that period, my parents were employed at a dishwashing factory situated in Tundian Village, where we also rented a place. However, in the fifth grade, the dishwashing factory relocated to Xianiandou Village. Consequently, I transferred to Shangxiang Primary School, conveniently located next to the factory, where I continued my education through the sixth grade. Too many changes that I had to adapt to new learning environment again and again... (Jie)

Jie found herself in a situation where she was compelled to change schools frequently, a circumstance largely dictated by the instability of her parents' employment. Her educational journey was continually disrupted as her parents' job changed, which invariably led to a change in residence. This constant change seems to have a negative impact on migrant children's academic consistency, shaping a new school experience that is defined more by vulnerability than stability.

In addition to the issues of government-led demolition projects and the inconsistent nature of migrant parents' employment, the residence instability and the need for frequent relocation can also be attributed to the parents' financial strains. The challenges faced by these migrant families were often exacerbated by their modest earnings. Maintaining a stable residence became a significant struggle with their low wages, particularly rent payments. This economic factor weighed heavily on these families, driving the cycle of instability that characterised their living conditions and subsequently influencing other aspects of their lives like their children's schooling experience.

Hui said that she can feel the financial pressure of her dad to rent a room and / or a house in outer Beijing;

> *In fact, we just moved in this term… the previous landlord wanted to increase the rent… the rent used to be about 1,500 yuan (equivalent to £177.84) per month… because there were few tenants during the epidemic, the rent the landlord collected was not as much as before… the landlord then wanted to increase the rent by 300 yuan (equivalent to £35.57) per month, which was high for my dad, because his monthly salary is around 5,000 yuan (equivalent to £592.6), and the rent after the increase was almost half of the salary. In addition, he was very busy with work during that time… he didn't reply to the landlord quickly. In a few days, the landlord told us to move out, saying that it had been rented to someone else. We had to look for another room.* (Hui)

When it comes to rent, other migrant children also expressed that the expenditure on rent was a great financial pressure on the family. Several children, such as Yulei and Xiaomei, mentioned that the monthly rent alone costed about 2,000 yuan (equivalent to £237.11); 4 other children mentioned that the monthly rent was over 1,000 yuan (equivalent to £118.5); and some children did not know the amount of their parents' income or the rental expenses, but they knew parents' struggle with the rent. For example,

When my parents were chatting at home, they said several times that the rent was too expensive that they can't afford it; and the landlord wanted to increase the rent… Moreover, they were asked to pay at least 3 months' rent in advance in addition to a 1-month deposit. They have to pay a lot of money for the 3 months' rent upfront. Sometimes I want to drop out of school so my parents can spend less money. (Jie)

Paying at least 3 months' rent was common in other children's interviews.

I heard from my parents that we had to pay 3 months' rent. It is a lot to pay, and sometimes the landlord increases the rent so much that we have to move out to find a cheaper one… We've moved so many times that I can't remember… I hate moving. I basically have to change schools every time I move. I am so tired of changing schools so often. (Lili)

Both Jie and Lili expressed the forced necessity of relocating due to ever-increasing rents imposed by their landlords. Simultaneously, they highlighted the substantial difficulties posed by these high rental costs to their everyday lives. Jie had considered giving up her education, a decision precipitated by overhearing her parents frequently discuss the excessive rental expenses and the considerable financial burden they faced. This indicates that migrant families with limited income sources and financial reserves forces them to make difficult choices like reducing spending money on children's education. Additionally, because of the mounting rental costs and substantial security deposits, Lili's family was obliged to consistently change their living arrangements. This indirectly resulted in her frequent school transfers, each representing a new educational choice and schooling experience. Regrettably, as quoted above, these frequent changes led to an impoverished educational experience for Lili, leaving her feeling utterly exhausted.

In conclusion, the frequent relocations experienced by migrant families in Beijing – driven by governmental demolition initiatives, migrant parents' employment instability, and financial struggles to afford high rents – significantly impacted the schooling experience of their children. As migrant families struggled with these challenges, school choices for their children had to change based on these external factors and often became a secondary concern.

5.2.3.2 School changes

The instability of schools, such as rent increases, relocation, demolition, or closures, significantly impacted the school choices of migrant families. When schools underwent such changes, it threatened the educational consistency of migrant children, forcing them to change schools or adapt to new environments or causing disruptive gaps in their education.

The years of staying in this current school

Migrant children experienced many fluctuations and changes in schools in the process of going to school. Some remained in the same school in Beijing; some changed schools halfway through their schooling in Beijing; some previously attended school in their hometown and then came to Beijing with parents to receive education, and some others switched back and forth between schools in their hometowns and in Beijing.

The chart below shows the number of years that the migrant children in this study attended the current school in this survey. This school, which offered a nine-year education program including 6 years of primary education and 3 years of lower-secondary education, showed a polarised trend regarding the number of years students had attended.

1-3 year migrant children: Most students who had attended this school for 1-3 years had enrolled at the lower secondary level (Year 7).

Majority at 2 years and 9 years: The survey revealed that most migrant children had been attending the school for either 2 or 9 years (N=10, 47.62% with 23.81% respectively). The 2-year mark might reflect an influx of newly migrated students, while the 9-year mark might represent students who have been enrolled in the school since Year 1.

Very few at 4-7 years: There were relatively few students who had been in the school for 4 to 7 years (14.29%, N=3). This might suggest some form of transition or discontinuity at these points.

8-9 year students: Those attending for 8-9 years suggested that they had been enrolled in this school almost since Year 1. This might reflect stable relationships between the school and students and their families like convenient location near the living area.

Table 8: The years of migrant children staying in the current school
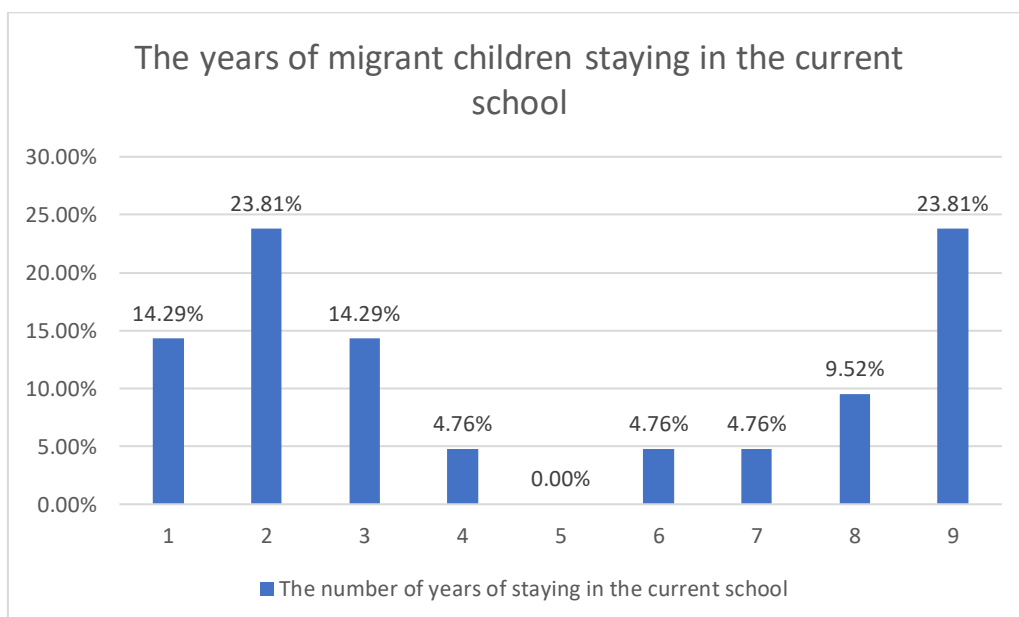
These results were also verified from interviews with migrant children. For example, Lulu said that she attended this school for 9 years since Year 1. The daughter of her mother's friend also attended the same school, and the school was very close to her home, so she had been studying at this school. This emphasised the significance of relationships with family and friends and the school's location in children's school choice. Similarly, Yulei was at this school since his kindergarten, but he went back to his hometown for education for a year and then returned to this school in Beijing again, adding up to 9 years in total. Migrant children who just came to school for 1-2 years, such as Kai, Xiaojun, Xing and Lupeng, they were at another lower secondary migrant children school in Beijing before, and they came to this school together because the previous school closed down. This revealed the educational instability that children of migrant worker families faced, along with the influence of external factors like school closures on their school choices.

There were also cases where students stayed at each school for only 2 or 3 years due to frequent transfers between schools in their hometowns and Beijing. For example, Wenwen came to a school for migrant children in Beijing for Year 2 to Year 4 after completing Year 1 in her hometown, and then switched to another school in Beijing to complete Year 5 and Year 6 as that previous school closed down. After graduating from primary school, in order to be able to take the senior high school entrance examination in her hometown, Wenwen returned to her hometown alone to attend Year 7, but only for one year as her grandparents were not able to take good care of her, and then she returned to the current school in Beijing for Year 8. During her 9 years of compulsory education, Wenwen attended a total of 5 different schools and stayed at each school for about 2 years on average. As she said,

I have been changing schools, and have to adapt to a new school environment, different teachers' teaching styles and get to know new classmates each time I go to different school. You know, I gradually feel unwilling to have close connection with my classmates and spend less time talking to classmates because I don't know when the next move is and I know I will change schools soon anyway. I know I want to have a long friendship but unfortunately, I can't, you know, I am so depressed and lonely. (Wenwen)

Wenwen's educational journey was marked by frequent transfers, attending five different schools during her nine years of compulsory education. This was partly due to reasons beyond her control, such as school closures and family decisions related to senior high school entrance examinations. Constant school changes, as experienced by Wenwen, can cause disruptions in migrant children's education. As Wenwen said above, different schools had different curricula and teaching methods, causing confusion and hindering academic progress. Building relationships with peers and teachers, fundamental to a child's development, also become challenging. Furthermore, the uncertainty and instability associated with frequent moves can create stress and anxiety for children. They may feel disconnected from their peers and educators, struggle to adapt to new environments, and experience feelings of isolation or alienation. Also, frequent school changes can bring disrupted connections to the local community and social networks, essential for the well-being of children and migrant families. Loss of these connections can further marginalise migrant families, limiting their access to community support and resources.

The reasons of changing schools

Among the 21 migrant children interviewed, only four children had not changed schools, attending Zhenyu School from Grade 1 to Grade 9, while the other 17 students had changed schools during their 9-year compulsory education. It is worth noting that the duration of education in kindergarten was not within the scope of this discussion, as some migrant children had never been to kindergarten and

started school directly from Grade 1. There were also particularly turbulent cases where migrant children had changed schools two or three times within their three-year kindergarten period, but these children cannot remember why they changed kindergartens because they were too young at the time. Therefore, the exploration of reasons of children's school changes focused on Grade 1 to Grade 9 in their compulsory education stage. Normally, students can go straight through from Grade 1 to 9 without changing schools; if primary and lower secondary schools were separate, children were expected to change schools once when they graduated from primary school.

From the information provided by these migrant children, a total of 13 students changed schools twice or more during their 9-year compulsory education. Specifically, 1 student changed schools 4 times, 4 students changed schools 3 times, and 8 students changed schools twice. Most migrant children were in a state of constant migration during the schooling period.

Table 9: Times of changing schools

Times of changing schools	None	Once	Twice	Three times	Four times
Number of students	4	4	8	4	1
N=21	19%	19%	38%	19%	5%

They were mainly divided into two groups; one was those who chose back and forth between the school in their rural hometown and the school in Beijing; the other was those who changed schools during their stay in Beijing.

One of the reasons migrant children changed schools was that they were uncared or poorly cared for, whether when they went to school in their hometown or in Beijing, and then they needed to live with adults who could take care of them. For example, Xiaomei came to Beijing from her hometown when

she was in Grade 8 because her grandparents in rural hometown were getting older and had difficulties to take care of her. She had to come to Beijing to live with her mother and change to a new school. Kai changed schools more often than Xiaomei for the same reason. He said that he came to live with his father in Beijing since kindergarten. At that time, his father went to work every day and he was left alone at home and he would go out to play by himself. Because his father had no time to take care of him and was worried about his safety, he was sent back to his hometown to attend school and was taken care of by his grandparents. When he was in Grade 2, his grandparents passed away and there was no one to look after him in hometown, so he went back to school in Beijing.

The phenomenon of left-behind children in rural China is a significant consequence of China's rapid urbanisation and economic development. As cities expanded and job opportunities arose, many younger parents from rural areas were drawn to urban cities in search of better-paying jobs. This migration often required them to leave their children behind, given the high living costs, inadequate accommodation, and uncertainty associated with city life. Therefore, it is a common for children to be left behind in their hometowns where they were looked after their grandparents as their parents went to cities for work. The children left behind in their hometowns are known as left-behind children. Once they went to school and lived in the city with their parents, they were known as migrant children. From the process of children changing schools, it can be seen that children's identities changed frequently between left-behind children and migrant children.

But at the same time, there were some problems with left-behind children living with their grandparents. For example, Nana, a child whose identity frequently shifted between a left-behind child and a migrant child. She received education in her hometown until Grade 3, and changed to Zhenyu School in Beijing during Grade 3, Grade 4 and Grade 5. Then she went back to hometown in

Grade 6 and went back to Beijing again in Grade 7 until now. She said that the main reason she chose to go back to Beijing in Grade 7 was because she wanted to be with her parents.

> *I went back to school in Beijing because I was not used to living with my grandma in my hometown. I still wanted to live with my parents, so I went back to Beijing… At that time, it was only me and my grandma in rural hometown… the school I went to was a boarding school that I could only go home once a week, sometimes once every fortnight… it was too long that I couldn't tolerate it… also, my grandma might not be able to do as much... she took care of me quite well, but there were other things that she may not be able to handle as well as my parents… specifically… my grandma didn't receive any education and was almost illiterate, so she couldn't help me with my studies.* (Nana)

Although elderly grandparents became the primary caretakers of these left-behind children and provided essential care and love, they were not be equipped to offer the modern upbringing and education that the child might have received from their parents. Also, being separated from their parents at a young age, left-behind children often needed the emotional and psychological bonding that only parental care can provide. This group of children left in the rural hometowns wanted to live with their parents, which was an important reason why they chose to change schools to Beijing. This was also the case for Xinxin, who came to Beijing from her hometown in the spring term of her Grade 6 because she was unwilling to stay in her hometown and wanted to be with her migrant parents. Similarly, Wenwen came to Beijing to see her parents in her Grade 1 summer holiday. After spending time with parents, she felt so happy that she did not want to go back to her hometown, so she stayed and went straight to a new school in Beijing. This shows that left-behind children have a natural longing and need for parental companionship with emotional, psychological, and physical closeness with their parents. Therefore, they often chose to live with their parents and attend school in cities.

In addition, some migrant parents seem to believe that the educational quality in Beijing migrant schools was better than that in rural schools and then brought their children to receive education in Beijing from rural hometowns. According to Yifan's interview, he said he changed to a school in Beijing from hometowns due to his father, who worked in Beijing for many years and believed that Beijing was the capital and its educational resources must be much better with more highly qualified teachers. Although most migrant parents have low educational backgrounds, they seem to attach great importance to their children's education in primary and lower secondary schools, and are willing to provide better educational opportunities for their children.

There were left-behind children who came to Beijing to study from their hometowns. There were also some children who had switched schools from Beijing to their hometowns, changing from migrant children to left-behind children especially after graduating from primary schools and in Grade 7 and Grade 8 of lower secondary schools, such as Tian and Yiming. One of the obvious reasons they mentioned was that both migrant parents and children believed that the education of state schools in their hometown was better than that of migrant children schools in Beijing. This was closely related to the fact that migrant children cannot take the SHSEE and cannot attend any higher secondary schools in Beijing because they did not have Beijing Hukou. Migrant parents who wanted their children to receive higher secondary education had to send their children back to rural hometown to attend a local state higher secondary school, so that children could have the access to take the SHSEE in their hometown and have the opportunities of entering a local higher secondary school based on their exam scores. Such changing school decisions implied migrant parents' expectations for their children's education. They believed that only when they went to higher secondary school would they have the opportunity to go to university, which represents that the higher the education degree, the better the job they could find and the higher the salary they could get. On the contrary, with only a lower secondary school diploma or a vocational school diploma, it would be extremely difficult to find a good

job in the labour market. This is also discussed in the following section on parental qualifications and occupations.

However, going back to their hometown from Beijing to receive education was also difficult for these children. Both Tian and Yiming mentioned that they went back to the migrant school in Beijing after only one term of lower secondary school in their hometown. To be precise, Yiming said that she went back to her hometown for lower secondary school in the autumn semester of Grade 8, but was unable to adapt to the teaching intensity and learning pressure of her hometown school. She then switched back to Beijing Zhenyu School before finishing the summer term. Her stay in the hometown lower secondary school was for about 5 months, which indicates that she was not fit in or cannot keep up with the teaching progress of her hometown school. As Nana said in the interview, the teaching pace in her hometown school was faster, the teachers taught more knowledge points, and the curriculum was more difficult than that taught at Beijing Zhenyu School. She felt that she had learnt less in Beijing school.

Nana's school changes:

Kindergarten, Grade 1 – 2 in hometown primary school;

Grade 3, 4, 5 in Beijing Zhenyu School;

Grade 6 in rural hometown primary school;

Grade 7, 8, 9 in Beijing Zhenyu School

My parents wanted me to successfully attend the hometown lower secondary school, so I went back to my hometown primary school for a year in Grade 6, and later came back to Beijing school again in Grade 7… but I really couldn't catch up with the learning

progress of my hometown primary school. I was so shocked when I went back to school in Grade 6… I couldn't understand the courses you know… the hometown primary school was already teaching the Year 6 learning content and students had already learned almost half of the Year 6 textbook in their Year 5. What they learned in the autumn term of Year 6 was what they should learnt in the summer term of Year 6, which meant that they were teaching ahead of schedule to leave enough time for review and preparation for the lower secondary school entrance exams in the summer term of Year 6… however, at Beijing Zhenyu School, the teaching and learning was step-by-step and what I learnt in Year 5 was just limited in Year 5 textbooks… I felt very frustrated from the first day I went back to my hometown primary school because I did not understand anything in class… I had extremely poor academic performance and had very low exam scores, so I went back to Beijing Zhenyu School in Year 7… (Nana)

The parents of migrant children who originally receive education in Beijing let their children to go back to rural hometowns alone during primary and lower secondary education in order to have the access to take the SHSEE and have an opportunity to go to high school and university. However, as the teaching pace and even the teaching materials varied a lot in different provinces and cities, these children struggle to keep up with the local teaching progress when they went back to their hometown schools and then their academic performance was worse instead. Moreover, the frustration of the children not being able to keep up with the learning process can make them more likely to flee their hometowns and go back to school in Beijing.

It is also worth noting that whether children came to school in Beijing from their hometowns, or went back to the hometown to study, such frequent school and identity changes between the two places seem to have a negative impact on children's psychology to a certain extent. Children appear reluctant to change their lifestyle after being accustomed to a way of life for a long time, resulting in unwillingness to change places and schools. For example, Xiaomei was reluctant to come from her hometown to live with her mother in Beijing. She had been living in her hometown with her

grandparents and was relatively unfamiliar with her mother without living with her. Then she was resistant to go to Beijing. Differently, Dudu was unwilling to go back to her hometown. Although her parents felt that the education in her hometown school was better and wanted her to go back to receive education, Dudu said that she was reluctant go back to her hometown because she was alone and could only live in a boarding school, and more importantly, she did not want to be separated from her parents. Children changing schools is not just a change of learning environment, they also needed to re-adjust to the new living environment and people they would live with, which can be a huge challenge for children.

In addition to the group who switched schools back and forth between schools in their hometown and Beijing, there was also a group, there was the other group who changed schools during their stay in Beijing. The most significant reason for school changes as migrant children mentioned was that schools had been demolished or closed down due to poor management. The vast majority of migrant schools were located in remote suburban areas. As the government vigorously promoted urbanisation, some migrant schools had their leased land expropriated and was demolished, and the schools had to close down when they lost their teaching sites. In addition, the low quality of teaching and poor management of migrant schools resulted in the loss of students. When the school cannot retain old students or recruit new students, it is not sustainable. There were 6 children (28.57%, N = 21) that mentioned that they had encountered school closure in Beijing migrant schools, which indicates that migrant schools were unstable and schools closing down is not an uncommon occurrence.

Significantly, this fieldwork took place in the period of severe COVID-19 pandemic, which also had an impact on migrant children's study and school change decisions, while it also led to the closure of some migrant schools. Xiaojun said that in May, 2020, the second term of Grade 8 in the previous migrant school, students were forbidden to come to school and had to take online courses at home

to keep a social distancing for preventing spread of virus. However, there were very few students who paid tuition fees for online classes. As a result, the school had lost a lot of tuition income but the school had to pay teachers' salaries and rent of the school site on time. These financial expenses were too large for the school to sustain and it closed down. With schools closed and all Beijing schools on lockdown during the pandemic, migrant children had to reconnect with other schools to access the online courses or self-study at home not enrolling in any school. However, Lupeng said he played at home during the second term of Grade 8, and did not find a new school until the Grade 9 because his academic performance was poor, and the online courses did no help. It was thought better not to waste the money to pay his tuition fees as he said. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of some migrant schools and the teachers were forced to teaching online, thus changing the way migrant children learnt. They were less supervised than at school, and some of them needed to find a new migrant school to receive education.

5.2.4 The role of social networks

The choices that migrant parents make can be significantly shaped by their social networks with suggestions and advice from friends or other reliable sources. The impact of positive shared experiences, commendatory reviews, and favourable word-of-mouth communication can make a big difference in this process, particularly in the context of schooling decisions for migrant children. When faced with new schools in a new living area, migrant families lacked relevant information and consultation channels about the Beijing education system, as well as admission requirements for nearby schools. They were unfamiliar with admission policies, school selection, and application processes, making it challenging for them to find suitable enrolment opportunities. These parents then relied a lot on their trusted circle of friends and family for advice.

The survey results confirmed that recommendations from friends or classmates represented the second most important factor in migrant parents' school choices, accounting for 42.86% (N=9) of the responses. The circle of friends referenced here encompassed both the friends of migrant parents and the friends of migrant children. Some migrant parents, upon their initial arrival in Beijing, were unfamiliar with schools in their living area. In such instances, relying on their social networks to ask school recommendations became a crucial factor in their decision-making process.

A friend of my mother, her daughter was also in this school at that time. She said this school was good and persuaded my mom to visit the school. My mom found it was also quite close to her home and decided this school. Then I am here. (Lulu)

With Lupeng's mom's recommendation, I came to Zhenyu School. (Kai)

It was the parents of a child who were more familiar with my parents, and his parents recommended me to come to school here. (Wenwen)

My dad found Pengying School, which was recommended by my dad's friend; Later, because a friend of mine, whose parent happened to know my mom, she changed schools and then my mom let me change with her. (Lili)

For instance, Lulu shared her experience explaining her enrolment in Zhenyu School, which was largely influenced by a friend of her mother. This friend, whose daughter attended Zhenyu School and was a grade above Lulu, stated the advantages of the school. Convinced by these positive experiences and reviews through word-of-mouth chats, Lulu's mother chose Zhenyu for Lulu's education. She further added that her residential proximity to her mother's friend offered additional benefits. In scenarios when her mother couldn't pick her up after school, her mother's friend was available to fill this role, thus providing an additional layer of support and convenience.

Similarly, Siyu also went to this school because of the recommendation and support of his father's friend.

> *I came to Zhenyu to go to school in Year 1, mainly because my dad's friend worked in this school. Although this school was a little far from home, my dad felt that this school was more reliable and not an informal school because he had an acquaintance who worked at this school. He also thought that with it would be safer for me to be at school with someone he knew… it (safter) refers to my studies and safety at school… my study is secondary, maybe the main reason is that if something happens to me at school and my dad can't make it because of his work, that uncle (my dad's friend) would help me deal with it.* (Siyu)

A trusted acquaintance of Siyu's father worked at the school greatly reinforced his confidence in choosing this school for Siyu's education. The inclination of migrant parents towards choosing certain schools for their children was often heightened when they had friends with children already attending these schools, or when they knew someone who worked there. Positive feedback about schools, whether it was a good review or a story about a great experience, can have a big impact. This was because migrant parents and children saw these personal stories as real and believable that they can relate to. Therefore, it was no surprise that they can play a big part in choosing a school for migrant children. Hearing about other children's experiences can help reduce worries, boost positive expectations, and guide migrant parents to make better decisions in a new and challenging situation. Moreover, the shared experiences and common identities of these migrant parents and their friends, who were often migrants themselves, lead to the strengthening of their mutual bonds. They tended to form supportive groups, readily offering assistance to one another in various aspects of daily life. This collective dynamic not only enhanced their sense of community but also further reinforced their choices in schools for their children.

Alongside the recommendations from migrant parents and friends, the selection of a school for migrant children often included suggestions from their classmates as well.

> *Come to Zhenyu School… it was Xiaojun who found this school at first. We were classmates in the previous school. He was looking for other school outside, and then I came when he found this school. He recommended this school and I came directly because I believed him.* (Lupeng)

Take the case of Lupeng, for instance, who joined Zhenyu in the autumn term of Year 9 largely due to the recommendation of her previous classmate, Xiaojun. Their former school was compelled to shut down due to an epidemic, prompting Xiaojun to transition to Zhenyu school and subsequently recommend it to Lupeng. Interestingly, Xiaojun demonstrated considerable initiative and assertiveness in his school choice process. During the epidemic, with many schools closed and a limited number of migrant schools accepting new students without sufficient admissions qualifications, Xiaojun took it upon himself to search the admission information of various migrant schools online. Subsequent to this, he visited several schools in person with his parents before ultimately choosing Zhenyu. His proactive approach served as an example of how migrant children themselves can play a significant role in the school choice process under such extraordinary circumstances and can positively influence other migrant children's school choice as they were reliable classmates.

Migrant families' social networks were instrumental in shaping these decisions. Trusted friends, family members, and community members can provide invaluable guidance and suggestions, particularly for migrant parents who were new to Beijing or had recently relocated to a different district with limited information.

Interestingly, there were 2 migrant children (9.52%) who mentioned that they did not know why their parents choose their current school. As Xiaomei said, she was not clear about school choice. Before she came to Beijing to study from her rural hometown, her mother had already chosen this school, and she never asked her mother the reasons because she felt that finding a school was a matter for her mother. In addition, she mentioned that she was used to living with her grandparents in her rural hometown, she rarely lived with her mother and was relatively unfamiliar with her. After coming to Beijing, she behaved as an obedient, well-behaved child in order to make her mother feel happy. As her mother had arranged the school, she just directly followed her mother's decision to go to school without asking reasons.

5.3 Children's study and routines at home

This section illustrates the learning activities and routines that migrant children engage in at home. This included doing homework and online learning activities, daily routines that support learning, such as having a regular sleep schedule, a designated study time, and a space for studying at home. For migrant children in Beijing, these home study routines can be influenced by various factors such as housing conditions and financial constraints.

5.3.1 Home learning environment

5.3.1.1 Study space

In densely populated cities like Beijing, living conditions can be cramped, especially for migrant families who might not have the financial capacity to rent or own spacious homes. Consequently, finding a quiet, dedicated space for studying became a challenge for many migrant children. Moreover, the financial constraints faced by migrant families can further impact the quality of the child's learning environment at home.

Yifan said 'my parents rent an entire property…mom and dad share a bedroom, I have my own bedroom, and my brother has his bedroom'. He was very happy that he had his own bedroom, because he said that some of his classmates did not have their own bedrooms. The questionnaire revealed that some migrant children shared a bed in the same room with their parents. Beibei said 'I live near the school with my parents, my brother, my sister-in-law and a new-born nephew… I share a room with my parents…I slept with my parents when I was a kid, but now that I'm 15! I need my own space at home!'. There were even 3 migrant children sharing only one bed. Kai said 'my parents and my twin younger brothers, 5 of us live together in a rented suite with two bedrooms… I have to sleep with my younger brothers in a bed in a bedroom... I prefer to live on campus rather than at home… staying at home is more crowded and boring'. Children feel uncomfortable to live in cramped living conditions and eager to have their own space.

There were also migrant children who lived with only one parent because their parents were divorced. In this class, one child lived only with her mother, and one another lived only with her father. For example, Hui said 'my parents got divorced a long time ago, almost when I was 3 years old, and I have been living with my dad. I have no contact with my mother… after they divorced, there is no contact with my mother… actually, my mum hasn't contacted me since I was 3'. She expressed that it was not convenient to live with her father as she was a girl, because 'I don't have my own bedroom, we just rent a room in a house… my dad and I sleep in the same bedroom, but we have two beds, and the kitchen and bathroom are shared with other tenants'. Although she wished to have her own bedroom, she accepted current living conditions because she knew that the rent would definitely rise if her dad rented a house with two bedrooms.

From migrant children's experience, their living conditions were frequently overcrowded and inadequate, which made it virtually impossible to find a quiet, private space for study. Cramped living conditions were not merely inconvenient; they can also have severe impacts on children's mental and emotional well-being. Feelings of crowding and lack of personal space can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression.
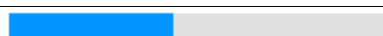
5.3.1.2 Homework/assignment completion

When children talked about how they arranged their studies, in addition to studying at school, there were 10 children said they would study at home after school (47.62%, N=21).

Children who only studied at school said that they would finish their homework at school and then would not take it home to do it. Occasionally, when teachers assigned a large amount of homework, some children, such as Beibei and Xiaomei, said that they would only take the homework home to complete if they did not finish it at school. The time for their homework to be done at home was between half an hour and an hour.

Furthermore, when children encountered difficulties in doing their homework at home, the vast majority of children said they would try to solve it by themselves (85.71%, N=21), and nearly half had asked friends or classmates. In contrast, it was surprising to find that few children had turned to their parents (4.76%) or other family members (9.52%) for help.

Table 10: Children' responses when they have difficulties with homework

Multiple Choices	Amount	Percentage	
Ask my parents	1		4.76%
Ask another family member	2		9.52%
Ask my friends	9		42.86%
Ask teachers	3		14.29%
Try to solve by myself	18		85.71%
Do nothing	1		4.76%
N	21		

One distinctive characteristic of migrant children's daily routines was the lack of dedicated study time at home. Many of these children completed their homework during school time, rather than bringing it home. As a result, when they return home, they seldom engage in learning-related activities. Only a few migrant children expressed the intention to study when they arrived home and dedicated time to their academic pursuits. This suggests a lack of academic reinforcement outside school hours among migrant children.

Generally, I will not take homework home to write. I try to finish it at school. (Kai)

I do all my homework at school, so I never have any homework to do during winter break. After finishing supper, I just go back to my room and lie down on the bed. (Xing)

I am lazy at home and basically do not study at home. I have to get up early the next day to catch up, so I will go to bed early at around 8 o'clock in the evening. (Dudu)

When I get home from school, it's usually time for dinner, and I'm basically playing with my phone after supper. (Xiaojun)

It was evident that a significant number of migrant children frequently completed their homework at school, spending little time in their studies once they returned home. After dinner, these children often engaged in leisure activities such as mobile gaming or short videos before going to bed. None of them mentioned having a specific study hour allocated in their family's daily routine. It was not surprising given the educational background and work demands of their migrant parents. Only a few migrant children spent a limited amount of time studying at home but not on a daily basis.

Sometimes, when I come home, I will study or review my lessons. (Kai)

The study time now accounts for approximately 20% at weekends. (Xiaojun)

When I'm alone at home, if I have free time, I usually finish my homework first and then spend some time browsing on my phone or doing other things. After that, there isn't much else to do. (Fei)

After school, if I have homework, I spend about an hour doing it. If there is no homework, for example, if the teacher assigns revision at home, it depends on my own initiative, but I generally don't review. (Jie)

In the context of migrant children's study routine at home in Beijing, there was a consistent trend of passive completion of learning tasks among both children who never study after school and those who left limited time to homework. They often lacked the initiative to engage in independent studying. At the same time, when describing their lack of study habits at home, migrant children barely mentioned any support or involvement from their parents. This indirectly reflects that the migrant parents were

either not providing adequate supervision for their children's home study, or they were not participating in their child's learning process at all. As previously highlighted, this absence of an established home-study routine was not surprising considering the educational background and occupational demands faced by their migrant parents. The unfamiliarity of the parents with the education system in Beijing, coupled with their demanding nature of their jobs and the limited resources available, made it exceedingly difficult to consistently allocate a study period in children's daily schedule at home.

Consequently, when migrant children returned home from school, each individual sought their own way of entertainment and relaxation. They immersed themselves in digital games, diverting their focus away from academic pursuits. The lack of a structured study routine at home hindered the development of self-discipline and independent learning skills among migrant children. Without a supportive learning environment, it became difficult for these migrant children to cultivate a proactive approach towards their education or establish consistent study habits.

It was evident that there were two types of children who still studied at home after school. One was the passive learner who had to do their assignment at home when they did not finish it at school, and the other was the active learner who could initiatively study at home with more focus on their studies, expecting to have test scores. There were very few children who study actively at home, only the three children mentioned above – Xiaojun, Fei and Wenwen, accounting for 14.29%. They would take the initiative to search extra learning materials online when they at home. Wenwen even revealed that she had registered three free online courses and would listen to a lecture for about 30 minutes at home to help her consolidate what she had learned at school in the daytime.

All the children who chose to solve the difficulties by themselves in their assignment mentioned that they had used smartphones to search for answers online through search engines, and free APPs for learning, such as "Little Ape Search" and "Help Homework", which had a function called "Photo Search Questions". As long as they easily took a picture of the questions with their mobile phones, the APP would give children the answers and the explanations, which was convenient for children to solve the difficulties in their homework on their own. The availability and use of smartphones played a huge role when children encountered difficulties in doing their homework at home. Most children had their own smartphones, but a small number of children like Nana said that she had to borrow her parents' smartphones to search for questions at home because her parents would restrict her from using smartphones to prevent her from playing mobile games or falling in love early through chatting online with others.

There were also two types of students who were unwilling to study at home. The first type were children like Lili, who said that she was too tired after studying at school for a whole day. The only thing she wanted to do when at home was to rest and refused to do anything related to her studies. Yulei added that he would be lazy after returning home, and he would be even more reluctant to study because there was no learning atmosphere at home. The second type of children, were completely different from the first type, they had to do housework or help their parents in work when they go home. For example, Dudu mentioned that she had to help her mother sell fruit after she came home from school, which took up a lot of her time and energy, so she had no time put on her study and then rarely studied. This indicated that the backgrounds, familial responsibilities, and living conditions of migrant children can heavily influence their study habits.

5.3.2 Regular routine maintenance

5.3.2.1 Family regular daily schedule

A regular daily plan, commonly referred to as a routine, related to a consistent and predictable sequence of activities that unfold throughout the day. For migrant children, this encompassed designated periods for waking up, having meals, doing household chores, engaging in recreational activities, and sleeping. However, it was found that parents and children in migrant families had quite different schedules at home due to parents' long working hours.

The occurrence of time mismatch among migrant family members was a widespread phenomenon. This observation was evident among some interviewees, specifically in the considerable discrepancy between the children's school commute times and their parents' work commute times.

> *Because their time schedule is different from mine.* (Fei)

In most migrant families, individual members often lead independent daily routines, resulting in limited interaction and communication among them. Despite residing with their parents in Beijing, migrant children experienced minimal parental involvement in their daily lives due to factors such as parents' long working hours and intense job demands. Most migrant parents engaged in physically demanding and time-consuming work, leaving them drained and in need of rest and recovery at the end of the day. This need for recuperation inadvertently reduced the time available for parental engagement with their children. As a result, although not physically separated like 'left-behind' children, migrant children often faced a similar lack of parental involvement in their day-to-day lives.

My parents… after they finish their tiring work, they just do their own things at night and then go to bed. For instance, they spend some time browsing their mobile phones to relax before going to bed. (Yifan)

My dad arrives home at 4:30 p.m. and my mom at 5:10 p.m.… because he is on the middle and night shift, he has to go to bed very early and get up at 8 p.m. for work. (Zihao)

The interviews with Dong Jiale and Wang Xiaolei revealed that the demanding nature of migrant parents' work, which exhausted both their physical strength and time, significantly impacted their family routine. Particularly, Zihao's father's night shift employment deviated from the typical daytime schedule. Working during the reversed day-night cycle, he was required to stay on duty until the early morning and consequently needed more daytime rest, which reduced the overlap with Zihao's family routine. The nature of such physically demanding and exhausting work created a situation where, despite sharing the same living environment, the daily routines of migrant parents did not align with those of their children, resulting in separate schedules for each family member.

Moreover, the unstable and extended work hours characteristic of migrant parents' jobs also contributed to a significant mismatch in the family routine between parents and children. As a result, many students expressed often feeling alone at home for extended periods when they returned from school in the afternoon, as their parents were still engaged in work outside and were unable to return home. By the time the parents ended their long workday and endured lengthy commutes, it was often quite late in the evening. By this time, the children already completed their supper and were preparing for bedtime. This disparity in schedules further accentuated the disconnect between the daily routines of parents and children in migrant families.

My dad is very busy with work, and every day he comes home very late, and he can't get home until after 10 p.m. (Lupeng)

Because they are very busy at work, every night they back home at 8 or 9 o'clock, I will be going to bed at this time, so they let me go to bed early. (Jie)

My mother usually comes back at night and I fall asleep. We communicate on Saturdays and Sundays, but before I wake up, she leaves and goes to play cards. My mother and I can't get together. Usually, if she doesn't go to play cards, she will chat a few words… but you know, playing cards is her job. (Xing)

From the children's interviews, it was evident that migrant parents often returned home late, typically after 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening, in some cases even as late as 10 o'clock. Unfortunately, this late return coincided with the children's bedtime, further limiting interaction time between parents and children. For some parents, like Xing's mother, frequent late-night homecomings led to a substantial mismatch with Xing's schedule and significantly reduced their opportunities for efficient communication. In summary, due to the heavy workload, extended work hours, and night shift work, migrant parents found it extremely challenging to have shared family time with their children, resulting in minimal or even no involvement in their children's daily routines.

The mismatch between the schedules of parents and children in migrant families can adversely impact the children's healthy dietary habits and rest cycles. This situation posed challenges to children's daily nutritional intake, indirectly influencing their learning experiences. This issue was particularly evident in the mornings. From Monday to Friday, migrant children needed to arrive at school by 7:20 a.m. For children residing in close proximity to the school, waking up around 6:30 a.m. was necessary. However, for children with a commute of an hour or more, they had to leave for school before 6:20 a.m.,

requiring them to wake up at 6:00 a.m. or even earlier. Under such circumstances, many children were compelled to miss breakfast and endure hunger in school. This was often due to their migrant parents, who often arrived home late from work the previous day and had not yet woken up to prepare breakfast for their children.

The commute to school takes about an hour. I have to wake up at 5:30 am and leave at 5:40 am. I don't eat breakfast regularly. Sometimes I buy something to eat on the way, and sometimes I don't eat at all. At that time, my mom is still asleep because she doesn't come back until midnight. (Xing)

I didn't have breakfast today. Breakfast... I mostly don't have breakfast. (Fei)

I skip breakfast, and then I get hungry by noon, so I always rush to be the first one in line for lunch. I always feel like I don't have enough time to have breakfast in the morning, and I have to rush to school in a hurry. When I arrive, the gate is not open yet, so I have to wait there impatiently. (Siyu)

No, I don't have breakfast at all. I do get hungry, but I try to hold on and endure the hunger. My parents are aware of it, but there is not much they can do about it. (Jie)

Among migrant children, only a fortunate few were able to have breakfast, like Tian, who lived next to his aunt and could have breakfast with her children.

I have breakfast in the morning, usually prepared by my aunt who lives downstairs. When I wake up, my parents are usually still asleep, so I go to my aunt's place for breakfast. She also has children, and we all have breakfast together before walking to school. I usually wake up around 6 o'clock in the morning. (Tian)

For these migrant children, the absence of breakfast in their daily routine had significant consequences. It forced them to endure hunger from the previous night's supper until around 12:00 noon the next day, depriving them of a vital meal to fuel their day. This led to an inadequate start to their day, compromising their nutritional needs and potentially impacting their concentration and energy levels during school hours. Alarmingly, this prolonged period of fasting even caused digestive disorders among some children.

I have a stomach condition now, and I have had it since elementary school. In the morning, I have to wake up early for school, but my parents are still asleep. I have to wait for the bus, and there is not enough time to buy breakfast. Previously, I tried eating a popsicle, but it made me vomit. Later, I can't eat much either in the morning; even having porridge gives me diarrhoea. (Jie)

Thus, such daily pattern of skipping breakfast undoubtedly impaired the children's ability to absorb necessary nutrients, indirectly influencing their academic performance and learning outcomes, and what was worse even leading to digestive disorders, harming migrant children's health. As has been noted, the bedtime of migrant children was hardly influenced by their parents. They were able to independently go to bed before their parents arrived home. However, the irregularity in children's meal routines, especially the lack of having breakfast, became apparent as a result of parents' long working hours and late return. In the busy morning schedule, migrant children hardly had an opportunity to have breakfast without parental help and preparation. Consequently, they were left with no option but to endure hunger by skipping breakfast. This situation further presented notable challenges to their learning progress and overall well-being.

5.3.2.2 Household chore assignments

The arrangement and execution of domestic duties significantly influenced the academic life of migrant children. Given the unstable nature and lengthy working hours associated with migrant parents' work, many of these children were burdened with a variety of household responsibilities, ranging from cleaning, and cooking to assisting with the care of younger siblings, and even participating in their parents' work. These familial tasks undeniably impacted the daily routines of migrant children, encroaching on time that could otherwise be dedicated to their studies. The substantial workload at home further accounted for the tendency of migrant children to refrain from engaging in academic activities after returning home from school.

Upon returning home from school, several migrant children opted to partake in their parents' domestic chores. This participation signified not just a demonstration of familial responsibility, but also one of the scarce opportunities for migrant children to collaborate with their parents. Such instances of cooperation provided a valuable avenue for interaction and relationship-building within the context of migrant family dynamics.

> *When I come back to help my mother, sometimes I cook some meals, stir-fry vegetables, and wash dishes when I don't cook.* (Lulu)

> *When I go home, I help my parents chop and wash vegetables first, and then wash the dishes after eating. At home, I usually help my parents with housework.* (Zihao)

> *My brother-in-law almost come back with me at the same time. If there is nothing else, he cooks first, and I will steam the rice when I go back.* (Fei)

This involvement often served as an additional support mechanism. With migrant children lending a hand, parents were able to expedite domestic chores, such as preparing dinner more quickly, thereby enabling the family to dine earlier. However, there was another scenario wherein migrant children whose parents had demanding workloads and returned home late found themselves shouldering responsibilities independently. They needed to handle household activities like cooking and cleaning without their parents being present after school. This situation showed the responsibility shouldered by these children within their migrant family structures.

I cook all the meals for the whole family. Although my parents are doing catering, they bring some vegetables and meat when they come back at night, and I will cook some porridge. My younger brothers do the cleaning and sweeping, and I do all the hard and heavy housework. (Kai)

When I was 13 years old and just entered the first grade of junior high school, I witnessed my father's exhaustion each night. He lay down at eight or nine o'clock (after returning home) completely drained. He usually wakes up at four o'clock in the morning, and then returns at eight or nine in the evening, maintaining this level of work intensity for a considerable period of time. To alleviate the burden, I take on various household chores independently, including sweeping, mopping, cooking, and doing laundry. (Hui)

These children shouldered a greater burden of household responsibilities and dedicated more time to household tasks, which indirectly reflected the economic strains faced by migrant families. As described by Hui, her father often worked extended hours, particularly during periods when her tuition payments were due, to financially support the family. Consequently, daily household chores such as cooking, laundry, and cleaning tended to fall upon the children.

In addition to the significant economic pressure, the family structure of migrant parents also played a role in determining the extent of housework undertaken by migrant children. Some migrant children, for instance, resided in single-parent or re-organised households. Under such circumstances, these children were required to undertake a greater share of chores to help maintain the functioning of the household.

My stepfather and my mother both go to work, and when I come back at night, I will cook. This father is busy earning a living during the day. When I come back, we (my mother and I) will cook for him. After cooking, he will play with his mobile phone or relax for a while, and then fall asleep after a while. (Xiaojun)

In migrant families, beyond the typical household chores of cooking and cleaning, some migrant children also engaged in the family's economic endeavours. They lent a hand in supporting the family business, such as assisting in store management or working directly in the store. In doing so, some even strived to earn their own spending money. Thus, the participation of migrant children extended from the domain of housework to the realm of economic contribution, highlighting their integral role as part of the workforce in the migrant family structure.

Just pick up the used empty plastic bottles and sell them. We three (brothers) will share the money equally – more than ten yuan (equivalent to £2) at a time, and then share it among three people. It was my parents who asked me to pick up the bottles... I am also working in my parents' prepared-food store, and then I will get more pocket money like 100 yuan (equivalent to £11.33) per month. (Kai)

On weekends, I must help my mother to sell fruits. (Dudu)

While the number of children involved in their family's economic activities was few, such involvement had notable implications on their academic pursuits and even their future plans. For instance, Dudu expressed her intention to assist her mother in selling fruits after her junior high school graduation. Alongside domestic chores and certain economic activities, in migrant families with multiple children, the care of younger siblings or nephews often formed an integral part of the division of responsibilities among migrant children. These myriad responsibilities invariably shaped the childhood experiences of these young individuals.

> *Sometimes when my parents go out or return home late, I have to also look at my younger brother.* (Yiming)

> *I also have to help look after my brother's child, who was born this year. They are too busy at work.* (Lili)

Generally, migrant children participated in all aspects of family division of the labour to varying degrees, which encompassed routine domestic chores, care of younger siblings, and involvement in family economic activities. This increased responsibility was driven by a range of factors. Economic pressure, family structure, and educational considerations intertwined, placing a greater burden on migrant children in terms of household responsibilities. Unfortunately, excessive involvement in housework indirectly consumed children's time and energy after school, leaving limited opportunities for personal pursuits such as studying and socialising.

5.3.2.3 Family interaction and communication time

For many migrant families, the limited interaction and communication between parents and children was most evident during the after-school hours. After returning home, the shared meal served as the

unique opportunity for these families to sit together and exchange experiences from their day. However, some migrant children do not engage in communication with their family members during dinner time. Once the meal was over, individual migrant members often engaged in their own activities and leisure, which reflected that it was difficult for migrant children to foster regular and meaningful interactions with their parents.

> *We don't talk much at dinner time. After finishing dinner, I usually just tell my parents that I go back to my own room.* (Jie)

> *After dinner, my parents usually go out for a walk, but I prefer to stay home and relax.* (Siyu)

The absence of shared activities or intentional conversations during this crucial time hindered the depth of connection and understanding between parents and their children. The possible reason behind this sense of distance within migrant families was the lack of consistency in the daily schedules of both migrant parents and children. Due to the physically demanding nature of the migrant parents' work, which often involved irregular or extended working hours, the work and rest time arrangements of migrant parents did not align with those of their migrant children, resulting in limited opportunities for communication and interaction.

> *I don't spend much time with my mom. Usually, if she is not out playing cards, I am happy to talk a few words. As for my stepfather, there is not much communication. Even though we live together as a family of three, he leaves in the morning and comes back around noon to cook a meal before leaving again. He returns around six or seven o'clock in the evening. He prepares dinner, but after the meal, I usually go back to my room without much conversation because I don't know what to talk about.* (Xing)

I have very few conversations with my dad. His return time is unpredictable. Sometimes he comes back early, and sometimes he comes back very late. I cannot find the time to talk with my dad for quite a long time. (Nana)

Based on the accounts of migrant children like Xing and Nana, it was clear that these children were eager to have communication with their parents when parents had the time. However, due to the lengthy work hours of their parents' jobs, both parents and children struggled to find a suitable time for interaction. Consequently, children's desire for communication with parents was reluctantly given up.

On the other hand, even in cases where some migrant families managed to have some time for communication at home, the parents tended to discuss economic matters during their conversations. This was primarily because migrant parents were typically burdened with substantial economic pressures. Such focus on economic concerns during family interactions can easily overshadow the emotional needs of migrant children, often neglecting their need to share personal experiences and feelings.

Nowadays, when my parents come back in the evening, they either cook or play with their phones, and then we have a small chat. Usually, we talk about how much money they earned that day… we are all within the same room... During these moments, I don't feel inclined to share my own experiences with them. (Yulei)

This lack of sustained interaction and communication inadvertently caused an emotional distance between migrant parents and their children, resulting in a home environment that lacked the nurturing ambiance necessary for a child's overall development. This can not only impact children's emotional bond within the family but can also limit opportunities for migrant parents to actively

participate in their children's daily lives. Migrant children reported feeling isolated and alienated, as their parents, burdened by the demands of their work, found limited time and energy to fully participate in their children's daily lives.

> *I feel really bored at home, and they don't understand me at all.* (Lili)

> *Indeed, there is no one who can listen to my inner thoughts, and I don't know who to talk to. I feel like I don't fit in with my surroundings, and it feels like there are walls all around me… I feel like I'm going crazy.* (Nana)

The lack of a strong emotional bond between migrant children and their parents could lead to negative responses when these children faced the emotional needs of other family members. This phenomenon was exemplified in instances where children, due to a lack of communication with their parents, often opted for withdrawal or disengagement when confronted with the emotional demands of their siblings.

> *My younger brother used to send me WeChat messages quite frequently, but I was too busy in playing games to respond him. Yeah… and then eventually he stopped messaging me, and I didn't bother to reply either.* (Xing)

For example, Xing had limited communication with his parents due to their long working hours. When his younger brother reached out to him for communication many times, Xing often chose to ignore these requests. This indicates that the communication gap between him and his parents generated a broader pattern of emotional disconnection within the family members. Such lack of communication did not merely affect the immediate interactions but also shaped the emotional distance of these migrant children, leading to strained relationships among family members.

Aside from the aforementioned challenges, it is worth noting that some migrant families adopted positive strategies to enhance communication and interaction within the family members. These positive measures, including designating specific times for family activities, such as engaging in shared hobbies and having meaningful conversations, resulting in positive effects on children's emotional well-being and strengthen the parent-child relationship.

Now, I dedicate my weekends to learning the guitar. I go with my mom to the guitar classes and whatever I learn there, I teach my mom afterward. This allows us to engage in similar activities together... kind of like playtime. My mom can play the guitar now too, haha… all thanks to my teaching… I make sure to remember every word the guitar teacher says so I can relay it to my mom when I get home. Essentially, I have also become a teacher. My goal isn't to attain a professional level in guitar playing, but rather to be able to teach and express myself through the instrument. In doing so, I hope my mom will not reject the guitar, but instead, embrace it. (Xiaojun)

In the case of Xiaojun, he found a way to establish interaction and connection with his mother through learning the guitar. This particular form of interaction and connection allowed Xiaojun to feel a deeper sense of support and care from his mother. Despite facing the stern disapproval from his stepfather in paying the fees of guitar courses, Xiaojun's mother continued to endorse his interest in guitar learning. Learning the guitar together became a shared activity that strengthened the bond between Xiaojun and his mother. They spent time practicing, exploring new techniques, and even playing music together. Through this shared interest, Xiaojun not only felt a sense of companionship but also experienced a genuine connection with his mother.

My mom has supported me immensely since I was little and has made numerous sacrifices for me. Truly, she has shouldered a lot of pressure for me. I know… She has never hesitated

when it comes to paying my school fees, even the cost of my guitar lessons, which is quite high… She is willing to let me learn. She really supports me wholeheartedly. (Xiaojun)

Moreover, the act of teaching his mother the guitar also stressed the reciprocity inherent in their relationship. As Xiaojun imparted his newly-acquired knowledge to his mother, he stepped into the role of an educator, thereby contributing to the parent-child relationship. It was a compelling illustration of how their mutual learning journey was not just a source of bonding but also a platform for individual growth and self-expression. This unique arrangement offered a heartening glimpse into the resilience and adaptability of migrant families, demonstrating how love, support and encouragement can flourish even in the most challenging circumstances.

While Xiaojun's case serves as a positive example, it is, in reality, a rarity among migrant families. High work demands on migrant parents seem to limit this engagement with fewer meaningful interaction with their children. Children's interaction with family members, including mealtimes, conversations, and shared activities, was critical for their emotional development and can also contribute to their learning. It was a challenge for migrant parents to focus not just on their children's physical requirements but also on their emotional needs, so as to provide a nurturing environment that catered to children's mental health and overall well-being.

5.3.3 Leisure and downtime

Migrant children's leisure activities at home heavily depended on mobile phones. This reliance on smartphones for entertainment, while indicative of the digital age, reflected the limited alternatives available for recreational activities in migrant children's environment. With their parents often busy with work and their overcrowded living spaces, a majority of migrant children considered engaging

with their phones as the primary form of entertainment during their downtime and resorted to the digital world for engagement.

Upon arriving home, I just lie down and play on my smartphone. (Xing)

When I am home alone, I tend to finish my homework during my free time. Afterwards, I spend some time playing with the smartphone, and that is pretty much it. (Fei)

If there is homework, I will do that. If not, I spend my time on my smartphone, watching short videos through TikTok, chatting with friends online, and playing games. (Jie)

For example, from Monday to Friday, I play on my smartphone as soon as I get home from school. (Lulu)

For migrant children, their leisure activities predominantly occurred at home. Given the constrained living conditions of migrant families in Beijing, smartphones emerged as the most readily accessible and functionally comprehensive entertainment device for these children. With just a single smartphone, children can read novels, listen to music, watch short videos, and play games. Activities that formerly necessitated books, radios, televisions, and gaming consoles can now all be accomplished through this single device, rendering it an optimal choice for migrant children.

While the use of smartphones addressed most of the entertainment needs of migrant children, it also reflected that their leisure activities were largely home centred with limited interaction with the out community. It revealed migrant children's constrained social sphere, where opportunities for outdoor activities, social networking, and broader community engagement were lacking. They spend too much

time engaged in activities solely within the digital realm then limited the opportunities for face-to-face interactions, physical activities, and exploration of the external environment.

While smartphones became the entertainment device of choice for migrant children, the inherent social needs of children at this age remained an indispensable part of their lives. Interacting with peers and participating in social activities were crucial for their emotional and social development. However, it appeared that these social interactions, though mentioned by some of the children, were not commonly observed and mostly occurred online.

> *The thing I enjoy doing the most when I get home is playing on my smartphone. Chatting and talking with my friends through phone makes me quite happy.* (Yulei)

> *On the weekends, I usually sleep in until around 11 a.m. or 12 p.m., then I chat online with Fei and other friends.* (Siyu)

> *Since I live in a relatively remote area and far from my classmates, it is not convenient to meet them in person, so I can only chat with them online... There is an application called "Light Meet" that gathers many people, and we can quickly become friends through it. I really enjoy this way of making friends. If we chat well, we even add each other on WeChat and QQ for offline contact.* (Jie)

Given the dispersed residences of migrant children, particularly in the outskirts of Beijing where physical distances were considerable, it became challenging for migrant children to stay connected offline after school. As a result, online social activities helped address some of their social needs. These digital platforms helped bridge the gap created by their physical separation, enabling them to maintain friendships. These children can interact with their classmates and even make new friends online via

their smartphones during weekdays and offline social entertainment primarily occurred over the weekend.

On the weekends, sometimes I go out to play, and sometimes I just stay at home. By going out to play, I mean hanging out with friends to relax. (Xinxin)

Basically, I go out to have fun on the weekends, either by watching movies or just wandering around for leisure. (Yulei)

Another thing I do is to go out and have fun on the weekends when I have more free time. There is a small park near my home, so I often invite friends to go out for a walk or something similar. (Hui)

The use of mobile phones satisfied the limited audio-visual entertainment and online socialising needs for most migrant children. Typically, they can only play with classmates or friends during the weekends. Undoubtedly, the excessively crowded living conditions of migrant families and the lack of safe outdoor spaces restricted the children's modes and opportunities for recreation. Besides using their mobile phones and engaging in limited social activities, a small proportion of migrant children had other forms of home-based entertainment, such as physical exercise, learning to play the guitar, playing chess, or interacting with pets.

Sometimes, I would set up a game of "Five in a Row" or chess, or play with a Rubik's cube by myself. They are smart games that I like the logic of them and the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction after completing the game. (Siyu)

Now, I spend my two days on the weekend learning to play the guitar. (Xiaojun)

After I get home, sometimes I exercise, such as running and doing push-ups. I like physical exercise. It makes me happy. (Kai)

I have a kitten at home, and I play with it a lot… very interesting and relaxing. (Yiming)

These activities, although relatively uncommon, did demonstrate a certain degree of resourcefulness and creativity among these children in finding ways to make the most of their limited leisure time and restricted environment. Engaging in hobbies and interests can boost their self-esteem, cultivate a sense of achievement, and serve as a release from academic pressures and the monotony of daily life.

Nevertheless, the financial constraints commonly faced by migrant families limited the range of hobbies migrant children can explore, especially those that required special equipment or lessons. For example, only Xiaojun mentioned learning an extracurricular music skill (guitar), which required a fee of 1,500 yuan (equivalent to £170) for 10 lessons. For migrant families, this is a significant expense that few can afford. Consequently, the ability of a migrant family to pursue such hobbies remains limited and they are usually unable to pay extra expenses.

It is worth noting that in the limited scope of recreational options for migrant children, some migrant parents undervalued the importance of leisure and down time for their children's development. They viewed these activities as distractions from academic work rather than as vital components of a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Additionally, due to safety concerns, they further restricted their children's leisure activities.

I study at home... it depends... If I am at school, I will definitely study, but when I am at home, it depends on whether my dad forces me to study or not. I love playing, and my dad always says that I have to finish these tasks before I can go and play. (Siyu)

I just want to hang out with my classmates, but my parents don't agree. They're afraid I might get into an early romantic relationship or even worse. Sometimes they even restrict me from meeting my classmates, and it's only on rare occasions that they allow me to hang out with them. Moreover, they watch a lot of news and worry about me being kidnapped or something like that. (Wenwen)

I rely on my mobile phone quite a lot. My mom and dad say that if I avoid touching my phone, my academic performance will improve and won't be as poor as it is now. They believe that it is the smartphone that hinder my studies, but that's not true. I'm just annoyed by their constant nagging every day. (Tian)

In the minds of migrant parents, influenced by the dominant Confucian ideology, they believed that education is of utmost importance in children's life. Therefore, they viewed non-academic activities such as leisure and recreation as potential distractions that could hinder academic performance. This mindset further exacerbated the poor situation for migrant children, who were already restricted in their leisure activities and only relied mostly on using mobile phones for entertainment. Moreover, despite having various interests and needs, their physical activities, recreational pursuits, and offline social interactions were limited due to economic constraints and overcrowded living environment. The entertainment options for migrant children exhibited a predominantly singular pattern, and the combination of environmental limitations and parental control posed a challenge for them to explore diverse avenues of entertainment.

5.4 Parental support in education

 5.4.1 Parents' educational and occupational backgrounds

Understanding the educational and occupational backgrounds of migrant parents was crucial because it provided essential insights into how parents perceived education, their expectations for their children, and how they influenced their children's educational achievements. The migrant parents' cultural capital and SES not only influenced their own educational beliefs but also had a deep impact on their children's education and quality of life.

5.4.1.1 Parents' educational qualifications

The educational qualifications of migrant parents can directly influence their understanding and ability to support their children's education. Parents with higher educational qualifications may have a deeper understanding of academic concepts, a more comprehensive awareness of the education system, and a more positive outlook on educational achievements. On the other hand, migrant parents with limited educational qualifications may face challenges in supporting their children's education.

From the interview, I was able to find out migrant children's knowledge of their parents' academic qualifications. In the chart below, most of the educational backgrounds of both parents were at the lower-secondary school level (57.14%, N= 12; the lower-secondary school level here referred to those who had attended lower-secondary school, including those who graduated and those who dropped out of school). After lower-secondary schools, only seven parents (16.7%) continued to go to school, either in secondary school or high school; It was worth mentioning here that in the Chinese education system, technical secondary schools referred to specialised secondary schools, which usually took place after the completion of the nine-year compulsory education and were equivalent to higher-

secondary schools in terms of level. The main difference between higher secondary schools and technical secondary schools is that the former focus on the teaching of basic knowledge and after graduation, one usually took the National College Entrance Examination (commonly known as "Gaokao") for university admission, while technical secondary schools are mainly vocational education. None of these parents attended college or university. Although some of the children did not know their parents' qualifications, they were certain that their parents had not attended any college or university.

Table 11: Migrant parents' academic qualifications
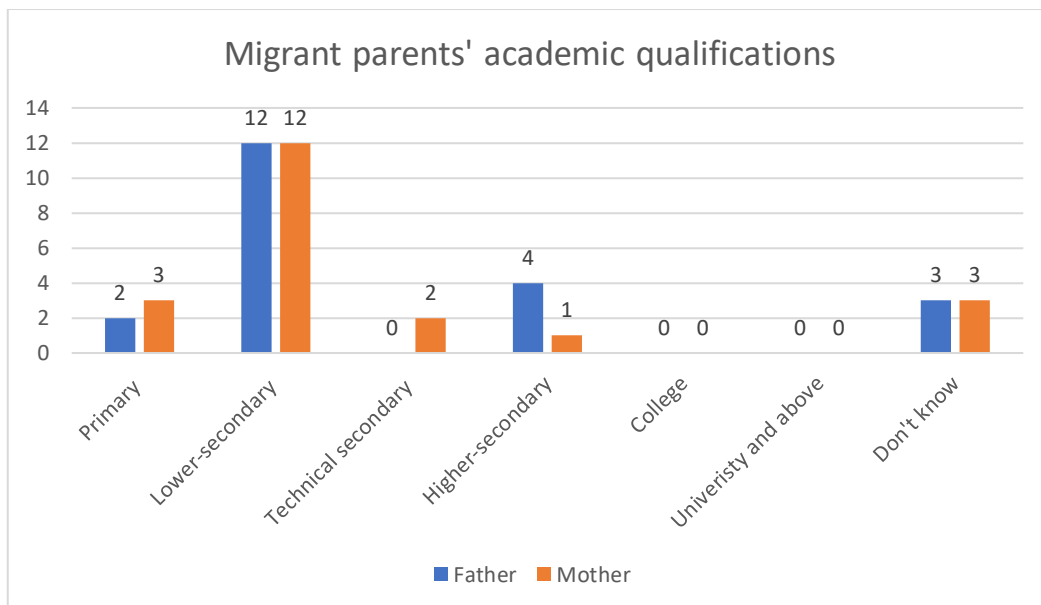
Migrant children's parents generally had low educational qualifications, with the majority having received education only up to the lower secondary school level, which suggests they possessed limited cultural capital. Migrant parents with limited educational backgrounds may face significant challenges in supporting their children's education. This educational disadvantage can potentially impact the quality and extent of educational support these parents were able to provide to their children. In the following section, specific examples are presented to illustrate the practical implications of this situation.

5.4.1.2 Parents' manual occupations

Occupations can generally be classified in three categories – professional and managerial, skilled non-manual, and manual occupations (Croll et al., 2010). As shown below, all the migrant families' occupations were manual, which meant their work were highly hands-on and physical. For father's occupations, being a worker occupied the largest number (28.57%, N = 6), and doing food-related work and being a driver took up the second and third highest respectively (23.81%, N = 5; 19.05%, N = 4). Migrant father did not have a job, that is, father was the main labour and source of money for the family. Compared with the father's jobs, the mother's work was less physical. None of the mothers did heavy physical work, such as moving bricks on a construction site or mixing sand with cement. The most common occupations for mothers were selling food and fruit (28.57%, N = 6), including cooking together as a couple and selling on a market stall, or renting a small storefront to sell fruit. In addition, cleaning was one of the most popular work options for mothers (23.81%, N = 5), cleaning office buildings and staff quarters.

Table 12: Migrant parents' occupations

	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation
Worker	Factory (2)	
	Waterproof	
	Welder	
	Construction site (2)	
	(28.57%, N = 6)	**(0%, N = 0)**
Driver	Moving company	Moving company
	Truck driver (2)	
	Taxi	
	(19.05%, N = 4)	**(4.76%, N = 1)**
Sales	Car paint	Car paint
	Second-hand car	Second-hand car
	(9.52%, N = 2)	**(9.52%, N = 2)**
Cleaner	Washing dishes	Washing dishes

	Rinsing animal cages **(9.52%, N = 2)**	Cleanser (4) **(23.81%, N = 5)**
Food-related	Sale cooked food (4) Cook **(23.81%, N = 5)**	Sale cooked food (5) Sale fruits **(28.57%, N = 6)**
No work	**(0%, N = 0)**	No work, at home (3) **(14.29%, N = 3)**
Don't know	Divorced-disconnected father Don't know father's work **(9.52%, N = 2)**	Divorced-disconnected mother (2) Don't know mother's work (2) **(19.05%, N = 4)**

From the above data, it was evident that many migrant fathers were engaged in physically demanding jobs that may require long working hours. This can leave them with limited time and energy to focus on and participate in their children's education. On the other hand, migrant mothers often found employment in cleaning and service industries in Beijing. Their lower educational qualifications restricted their job options, leading them to take on low-income jobs that demand physical labour and consume much of their time. As a result, they struggled to provide sufficient academic support for their migrant children. This situation not only decreased parental involvement in the education of migrant children but also affected their ability to offer guidance on their children's future educational and career planning (see section 5.3.3).

5.4.2 Educational engagement

Many migrant parents worked long hours with multiple jobs, which can limit the time they had available to support their children's education. This can affect their ability to attend parent-teacher meetings, supervise homework, or engage in other supportive activities.

5.4.2.1 Parental monitoring and assistance with children's homework

Parental limited supervision of study time

Due to the unstable and time-consuming occupation of migrant parents, they had to spend a lot of time on their work and cannot have enough time to accompany their children at home. Therefore, when children encountered difficulties of their studies, they cannot get parental help in time.

My parents are very busy with work, they usually start work at 5 a.m. and back home at 7 p.m.… I leave school at 5 p.m., earlier than they get off work, and by the time they get home, I have already finished my homework and have nothing to ask them for help in study… It has been like this since my primary school… (Beibei)

I study on my own, and they don't participate in my learning. They are busy with work, and they usually don't get home until 8 or 9 at night, which is the time I need to go to bed. So, they ask me to sleep early. Since I started lower secondary school, I cook for myself when I get home. I eat without waiting for them because they come back late, and there is no time for them to help me with my studies. (Jie)

They are not able to accompany me while studying because they come back quite late. My mom and dad usually arrive home around 7:50 p.m., so there's hardly any time for them to be around when I study. You know… our schedules are different, so it is impossible for them to be present while I study. (Fei)

It is apparent that migrant parents' long working hours prevented them from being actively involved in their children's education. Many parents started work early in the morning and returned home late at night, leaving little time to engage with their children's studies. As a result, migrant children found themselves unable to seek help from their parents for their studies. Whether it was a matter of

academic difficulty or needing advice on educational choices, the lack of available and equipped parental guidance can pose significant challenges to these children's education.

5.4.2.2 Parents' low educational background – failure to support

Regarding the fact that children rarely asked their parents for help when they encountered difficulties in homework, most children responded that their parents not only lacked time but also had low educational qualifications and were unable to help them with their homework difficulties of Year 9. As mentioned earlier, most migrant parents had only completed primary or lower secondary school education, which further emphasised their limitations in providing academic support. As a result, migrant children were often hesitant to ask their parents for help.

> *My parents don't actually help me study because they probably don't understand either. They used to encourage me to study, but not anymore. They know that I cannot catch up.* (Yiming)

> *My dad could help me with my homework before the Year 4, but he can't understand the homework after the Year 4, because my parents have only completed primary school education. They haven't been able to provide much assistance with my studies for a long time.* (Dudu)

> *During primary school, my mom used to help me with my homework, but now they are not able to provide assistance because they can no longer understand the subject matter. As I've progressed to higher grades, the difficulty of my studies has increased.* (Kai)

> *My dad checks my younger brother's homework, but he doesn't check mine. My brother is currently in Year 1, so it's easier for my dad to help him. However, when it comes to my homework, he probably wouldn't be able to help much. My mom, on the other hand,*

wouldn't be of much help either since she has only completed primary school education. So, I mostly handle my own homework without their assistance. (Lili)

Indeed, the low educational qualifications of migrant parents presented a significant obstacle for their children when seeking help with homework difficulties at home. Due to the parents' limited educational backgrounds, they were unable to provide the necessary support and guidance that their children require to overcome academic challenges.

However, these children did not express disappointment in relation to their parents' low academic qualifications that prevented them from providing academic help. Instead, a significant majority of them (85.71%, N=21) used their smartphones to search for answers, indicating that they found alternative ways to overcome academic difficulties. As a result, they did not perceive their parents' low educational qualifications as a major hindrance to their studies. This observation demonstrated the adaptability of migrant children to new technology and information, enabling them to independently address learning challenges.

5.4.2.3 Parents' attitude towards monitoring and assistance

The working hours and limited academic abilities of migrant parents indeed restricted their ability to support their children's learning at home. However, it is crucial to note that this does not imply a lack of care or a positive attitude towards monitoring and assistance from these migrant parents. Many migrant children expressed that even though their parents rarely provided direct help with their studies, they verbally checked on their homework completion and encouraged them to study regularly, highlighting the importance of education.

Although my mother doesn't help me study, she usually forces me to study and then lets me review the textbooks. She says that even if I couldn't memorise this knowledge point, it would be good to have a look at it. Occasionally, my mother competes with me in recognising words, and she is very good at recognising words. (Xiaojun)

My parents ask me if I have finished my homework, and I always say yes, and I had finished it in class at school. They ask about my homework situation every day, and I always tell them that I finished it at school. (Kai)

Nevertheless, parents' efforts might not necessarily result in the desired outcomes. From the interviews with children, there was a huge gap in words and actions of parents' concern for their children's study. Although parents verbally cared about their children's study at home, they did not supervise or check children's homework. The migrant children, on the other hand, perceived this verbal concern for their study and homework as somewhat superficial or ineffective.

My parents verbally ask me about my studies; they think that doing homework is quite important. They often ask about my homework situation. But in fact, they won't really check, they just know to ask, and sometimes I feel annoyed by it. (Xinxin)

Sometimes they just ask, 'have you finished your homework?' If it's not done, they tell me to do it first. Anyway, when my mom comes back, she sometimes asks, 'is your homework done?' Then she goes to cook or something, and I say it's done, she just believes that it's done. (Lulu)

My parents ask about my homework every time, and I always tell them it's done, even when it's not. They don't really know. (Jie)

They sometimes ask about my homework. When my mom remembers, she'll ask, and I just respond that I've done it, and that's it. Every time I'd say I've finished it, then they wouldn't ask anymore. They just ask verbally and have never looked at my homework. (Xing)

While the migrant parents expressed concern and understood the importance of homework, their lack of direct involvement and follow-up illustrated their inability to provide meaningful academic support due to their working conditions and educational background. Migrant children might interpret their parents' verbal encouragement as empty words and tended to give perfunctory responses to their parents. Parents appeared to be concerned but in fact knew nothing about their children's learning or homework. The lack of adequate parental involvement in their academic life can negatively impact these children's learning progress and academic achievement. This resulted in a disconnect between the parents' intentions of motivating their children and how the children interpreted this encouragement.

In addition, migrant parents' violent attitudes and behaviours could discourage children from seeking help from their parents in studies. For example, Kai mentioned that when he was in primary school, his father would beat him because the homework questions he asked were too easy and recklessly concluded that he must had not listened carefully in class for not answering such easy questions. Then, Kai was reluctant to ask his father any more questions about his homework for fear of being beaten by his father. The harsh, tense and impatient attitudes and behaviours of migrant parents had a negative influence on children that prevented them from seeking help from their parents at home.

Another situation within the group of migrant children was that although migrant parents realised that their children were not performing well academically, their response was not to find ways to help their children catch up with their studies, but rather to accept this reality.

They are aware that I can't keep up with the pace of learning right now, because I didn't build a solid foundation before, so studying is quite hard for me now, and they also know this. They didn't put too much pressure on me. You know, I have a younger brother. He is studying in our hometown and he is doing quite well academically, so my parents call him every day to ask about his learning situation, whether the courses are difficult, and so on. They pay more attention to his studies. They never require me that I have to go to university or high school, but they often encourage my younger brother in this way. (Yiming)

I feel that they (my parents) think my brother's studies are quite important, as for me, it's just as it is, because my test scores are quite low, and I can't improve much in my studies… my parents don't really pay much attention to my learning. (Lili)

My parents have stopped intervening my study because my academic performance is already poor. They used to scold me for not studying after parent-teacher meetings, and even enrolled me in extra tutoring classes. But since third grade of primary school, they have stopped caring about my studies. To get extra tutoring would just be a waste of money. (Lupeng)

These individual experiences highlight the situation in migrant families regarding educational support and expectations. According to the interviews, migrant families often faced life pressures and difficulties, and they lacked the time and resources to support their children's education. When they were aware of their children's academic struggles, their attitudes, shaped by their children's academic performance and potential, negatively influenced their level of involvement and the subsequent guidance provided to each child. They preferred to invest their limited resources into the child who showed greater academic potential. This reflected a strategic yet pragmatic approach to supporting their children's education, driven by a desire to maximise the return on their investment in migrant families. Yet, this approach inadvertently created a sense of inequality or neglect among their other

children who did not perform as well academically. This differential treatment and guidance may have significant impacts on the self-esteem, motivation, and future educational aspirations of these migrant children.

In summary, migrant parents faced significant challenges in supervising their children's education. With low educational levels and long working hours, these migrant parents often struggled to provide substantial academic assistance. Even when they understood and attempted to monitor their children's studies, they were usually limited to verbal checks and reminders, without the capacity for in-depth academic guidance. While some migrant parents valued their children's education, their own limitations often prevented them from offering effective help. Migrant parents exhibited a range of attitudes towards their children's studies. Some parents, despite their inability to provide academic support, would still encourage their children to complete their homework and emphasise the importance of education. However, others might ignore or give up on their children's studies due to their own violent behaviours or a sense of helplessness about their children's academic progress, further amplifying the pressures migrant children faced in their education.

5.4.2.4 Parents' communication with teachers and school

As research shows, communication and involvement with teachers and school activities were crucial aspects of parental engagement in their children's education (Wilder, 2023). However, this aspect was severely lacking in the case of migrant children. From the interviews, it was found that migrant parents rarely initiated contact with teachers. Due to work pressures and time constraints, they often lacked regular communication with their migrant children's teachers. As a result, they may have insufficient knowledge about their children's academic progress, which further limited their influence in their children's educational journey. Moreover, their limited participation in school activities may also

result in a lack of understanding about the school environment and its impact on their child's education.

> *My parents rarely initiate contact with teachers, and I think they feel it's unnecessary. They believe as long as I attend school on time, everything is fine.* (Xinxin)

> *My mom and dad don't have time; they are both working. So, I feel they don't have time to go to school, and I also don't want them to go to school.* (Lupeng)

> *In this school, my parents are basically unaware of my academic progress. They rarely have a good understanding of my studies, like my homework or anything else. They also never asked my teacher about my performance at school, like how I am doing in my studies, or if there are any issues. None of these conversations ever happen.* (Zihao)

These statements reflected the experiences of some migrant children whose parents did not frequently initiate communication with their school teachers. On the other hand, migrant children's schools did not provide opportunities for parental involvement in their children's education. This could be due to resource limitations within the school, preventing the organisation of additional parental engagement activities. In my observations, regardless of the grade level, this school lacked regular parent-teacher meeting schedules and did not have educational consultation and support services set up for migrant parents. This lack of opportunities might further deprive migrant parents of the chance to understand their child's learning situation, provide educational advice, and communicate with teachers.

The combination of these two factors reduced the opportunities for migrant parents to participate in their children's education and constituted a significant obstacle to parental involvement. They were

unable to fully understand their children's performance and needs at school, nor can they directly influence the educational process. This not only limited their role in home-based education but may also led to children not feeling the importance their family members placed on their education, thereby gradually developing parents' sense of disconnection from children's education.

5.4.3 Parental guidance of children's future careers

5.4.3.1 Parental expectations

Parental guidance of children's future careers and children's sense of future jobs among migrant children were two interrelated but possibly differing aspects. Migrant children showed a limited understanding of their future career planning, but they could share their thoughts and ideas about their future work. For migrant children and their parents, the term 'good job' seems to encompass considerations such as stability, income, social status, and personal interests, as children received job advice from their parents. Although they provided diverse types of occupational guidance, most parents might emphasise stability and income, hoping their children can find work that provided financial security, thereby supporting children themselves or improving the family's economic situation. The table below illustrates migrant parents' expectations on their children's future occupations, and it was marked in four different colours to clearly show parents' wishes on children's occupations. 'Support himself' was more related with economic factors that parents hoped their children can have a stable and well-paid job; 'easy work' expressed parents' willingness of children not to be involved in dirty jobs; 'children's personal interest' showed parents' respect on children's passions and choices.

Table 13: Migrant parents' expectations on their children's future occupations

Migrant parents' expectations on their children's future occupations		
Yulei	NO Automotive Repair (dirty&tired)	Easy work/no dirty/no tired
Lulu	Easy work, unlike parents	
Hui	Easy work, unlike dad	
Yifan	Tour guide/train attendant	Support himself
Xiaojun	Handcrafted jewelry carving	
Zihao	Learn a skill	
Kai	Army	
Siyu	Army	
Xing	Army	
Lupeng	Electrical engineer	
Tian	A good job can support himself	
Jie	Just a job can support herself	
Wenwen	Nurse/preschool teacher	
Nana	Computer related	
Beibei	No idea, respect interests	Children's personal interest
Xiaomei	No idea, respect interests	
Yiming	No idea, respect interests	
Fei	No discussion	No discussion
Xinxin	No discussion	
Lili	No discussion	
Dudu	No discussion	

Economic factors – Earning potential to cover basic needs and stable employment

The definition of a 'good job' among migrant parents seemed to be surprisingly consistent, focusing primarily on two major aspects: the ability to earn money to ensure the child's basic needs, and the nature of the work itself being relatively easy and free from hard and exhausting labour.

> *My father that I can find a good job and live a better life in the future, so I don't have to work as hard as he does. There is no specific job… just I can earn money and no worries about food and housing…* (Hui)

> *My parents did not say anything specifically about work. They just want me to find a job to support myself.* (Jie)

My parents they probably mean that I can go to school to study, and then come back to find a good job and rely on skills to support myself. (Tian)

Some migrant parents also had the expectation that their boys would join the military and become soldiers, as the perception that military service offered stable employment and benefits.

My parents hope me to be a soldier. Serving in the military has good benefits, because it's supported by the country. When I join the army, the government takes care of food and housing, and also gives a living allowance… stable employment… I then don't have to spend my family's money'. (Kai)

My dad says that many of our relatives have served in the military, and he hopes that I might consider doing the same during or after university. The reasoning he says that being in the military provides job security and a guaranteed means of sustenance ('a permanent meal ticket'). I will never be starving to death. (Siyu)

My mom wants me to join the military because I can receive pay and benefits from the government regularly. (Xing)

The career aspirations of migrant parents for their children often centred around economic factors and stable and long-term employment. These migrant parents viewed the military as a viable and attractive option due to its job security and stability, and government support in finance. This preference stemmed from the nature of migrant parents' own often unstable work lives, where the hassle of searching for jobs multiple times can be a significant strain and they may have experienced many unstable situations and economic uncertainty or hardship. They saw a stable job as symbolic of a stable foundation for their children's future lives. Therefore, the fear of unknown and unstable future led them to prefer secured professions with tangible, long-term advantages for their children.

They hoped their children's jobs would be fully supported, including basic living needs such as food, housing, and regular allowances, which assured them that their children would be taken care of.

Nature of work – ease and dignity

Migrant parents also aspired for their children to have jobs that were less physically demanding and strenuous.

I want to do auto repair, but they don't want me to work in auto repair in the future because they think it's tiring and dirty. It involves dealing with oil every day, and my hands and clothes will always be covered in grease. Besides, it requires a lot of physical strength. They want me to find an easy job and work in an office company as a white collar. (Yulei)

My parents want all three of us (siblings) to study hard so that we can find a good job, one that is not affected by the wind or rain, and not involve doing dirty and tiring work like they do, working early in the morning till late at night. (Kai)

They don't have a specific job type in mind, they just want me to have a job that is less demanding, light work, so that I don't end up as exhausted as they are. (Lulu)

Even though there was no specific type of work mentioned, these migrant children said in their interviews that their parents did not want them to do physical, dirty or tiring work in the future. Migrant parents' preference could be traced back to their own experiences in labour-intensive occupations and the desire for a better and more comfortable life for their children. Also, occupations like auto repair as a blue collar might be viewed as less prestigious or lower-status in migrant parents' eyes compared with being in a white-collar role. From Yulei's interviews, the preference for white-collar professions represented a hope for social mobility and a better quality of life, reflecting a

207

broader aspiration to provide opportunities that may have been out of reach for the parents themselves. The daily grind of physical labour, coupled with less-than-ideal working conditions, was something parents might want their children to avoid.

Parental lack of awareness or exposure

Migrant parents might not be aware of new emerging fields that align with current market demands. Their guidance might be confined to what they know and have seen. For example, Lupeng mentioned that his mother had encouraged him to learn electricity because his mother wanted him to enter the company that his mother was working at, and Nana's dad hoped that she can have a job relate to computers like her cousin.

> *She hopes that after my graduation, I can get into her workplace in the field of electricity… because she says the full-time employees worked there in the office earn a lot more than her just a cook. In that case the job would pay me ¥ 8,000 to 9,000 (equivalent to £930 − £1,046) a month. She thinks that young people there have good jobs that are not tiring and are easy.* (Lupeng)

> *My dad always mentions my cousin, who is a postgraduate, and he talks many times about her good job, high salary, and various benefits, especially in the field of computers. My parents envy that she earns a high salary, enjoys many benefits, and works for a government-owned company. They hope that I will follow a similar path and study something related to computers. But I know I don't like it. It's too difficult and boring.* (Nana)

These interviews revealed limitations in migrant parents' understanding and guidance when it came to their children's future careers. Their perspectives on prospective occupations seemed to be influenced mainly by the experiences and outcomes of those around them. They had not taken into consideration whether the child liked or was interested in that field of work. Their focus appeared to

be primarily on the perceived benefits and stability of the job and dismissed other potential career options.

Their limited career guidance provided by migrant parents can further be understood by examining their own social and cultural capital. Migrant parents typically worked in lower level of the socio-economic structure, limiting their exposure and interaction with diverse industries and professional fields. Their social networks tended to be restricted to people with similar working conditions and social statuses, without an understanding of broader career opportunities and possibilities. This limited social circle, resulting in asymmetric information, may cause them to grasp only surface-level and fragmented information about occupations from those around them. Moreover, migrant parents with a lower level of education could constrain their deep understanding of career planning and choices. They might lack the necessary knowledge and skills to comprehensively assess the pros and cons of various career paths or to help their children explore and recognise their interests and talents. Due to this lack of cultural capital, they may find it difficult to understand and appreciate occupational fields and working cultures that differ from their own experiences.

In summary, when guiding their children in future career choices, migrant parents may have varying definitions of a 'good job', but their expectations and guidance consistently emphasise stability, economic income, and the avoidance of excessive physical labour. These limitations in their guidance also reflected their aspirations for a better life for their children. They hoped that their children can escape the labour-intensive, low-income, and low-status work environment they themselves had experienced. However, due to the aforementioned limitations in social and cultural capital, they may feel powerless to provide effective and personalised career guidance. Their views were shaped by their immediate environment and personal experiences, often lacking a broader perspective that considers diverse career paths or their children's individual inclinations and abilities.

5.4.3.2 Children's occupational aspirations

It is worth noting that based on the definition of a 'good job' by migrant parents indicates that what they hope for their children in the future does not always align entirely with the children's own interests and passions. Parents were more focused on practical economic benefits and social status, while children appeared more concerned with whether the job linked with their interests. Out of the sample, 15 children expressed that their choice of future work would be based on their interests (71.43%, N=21), whereas the proportion of migrant parents respecting their children's preferences in choosing a job was only 14.29%. This discrepancy suggested that while migrant parents were concerned with stability and financial security, children were looking for fulfilment and personal satisfaction in their careers.

The table below showed the difference between migrant parents and children's preference in children's future occupations. It was clearly that parents more focused on economic factors with a wish of children supporting themselves, while children's own expectations were most followed by their passion and interest.

Table 14: Migrant parents' and children's expectations on children's future occupations

Migrant parents' and children's expectations on children's future occupations					
Parents			**Self**		
Yulei	NO Automotive Repair	**Easy work/no dirty/no tired**	Xiaojun	Learn finance	**Money**
Lulu	Easy work, unlike parents		Siyu	Choose one that can earn money	
Hui	Easy work, unlike dad		Yulei	Automotive repair	**Children's personal interest**
Yifan	Tour guide/train attendant	**Support himself**	Yifan	Automotive repair	
Xiaojun	Handcrafted jewelry carving		Zihao	Automotive repair/cook	
Zihao	Learn a skill		Kai	Running and sports	
Kai	Army		Xing	Cook	
Siyu	Army		Lupeng	Electrical Engineer	
Xing	Army		Lulu	Preschool teacher	
Lupeng	Electrical engineer		Hui	Preschool teacher	
Tian	A good job can support himself		Wenwen	Dessert chef	
Jie	Just a job can support herself		Beibei	Dessert chef/Painter	
Wenwen	Nurse/preschool teacher		Xiaomei	Flight or train attendant/Preschool	
Nana	Computer related		Lili	Makeup	
Beibei	No idea, respect interests	**Children's personal interest**	Yiming	Makeup	
Xiaomei	No idea, respect interests		Nana	Makeup	
Yiming	No idea, respect interests		Dudu	Cook	
Fei	No discussion	**No discussion**	Tian	No idea	**No idea**
Xinxin	No discussion		Fei	No idea	
Lili	No discussion		Jie	No idea	
Dudu	No discussion		Xinxin	No idea	

The perception and interests of migrant children in future careers may be influenced by multiple factors, including parental guidance, school education, peers, and social media. Yet, the interviews revealed that only one migrant child mentioned following the parental guidance, with the others appearing more inclined to make independent career choices. The clear expression of desired work and industries among most was primarily shaped by environmental influences, stemming from peers and the portrayal of specific careers on social media like TikTok.

> *I really like the Early Childhood Education profession, so I've already made up my mind long ago that I want to become a preschool teacher. I have always enjoyed dancing, singing, and being around children, and I feel that I have the patience needed for this career. That's why I want to pursue this path. Moreover, there are children living near my house, and sometimes they call me 'big sister' after school. I take care of them when I have free time, which is like gaining early experience in the field.* (Lulu)

I want to become a preschool teacher in the future. I really like children and find them adorable. They are generally easy to get along with and I enjoy taking care of them. I often help my sister with her children, and it brings me joy and happiness. (Hui)

I know Lulu wants to become a preschool teacher, and I have also looked into it. I think it's a great choice. Personally, I'm also interested in working with pastries and desserts, as well as pursuing careers as a flight attendant, photographer, makeup artist, and railway crew member. (Xiaomei)

My parents want me to become a nurse or a preschool teacher, but I don't like the idea because I feel that I don't have the patience for young children. In the future, I want to work as a pastry chef, specialising in desserts and sweets. I feel that this profession might not require much mental effort. In my impression, it's a relatively easy job and would be more relaxing for me. (Wenwen)

I really enjoy doing makeup, and I follow makeup influencers on social media platforms like TikTok. I also practice doing makeup on myself regularly. (Lili)

I am interested in automotive modification and repair. In the future, I plan to modify my own car when I have one. I have been interested in this since the eighth grade because I enjoy playing with cars models. (Yulei)

I want to learn automotive repair because I believe it offers good job prospects. My classmates (Yulei) have mentioned that automotive repair is practical and useful, which I also think is a good job choice. So, I have decided to choose automotive repair. (Yifan)

I might want to study automotive repair or become a cook. Yulei and I are good friends, and he mentioned that automotive repair offers good pay and other benefits. On the other hand,

I think becoming a cook would allow me to cook at home and not rely on takeout when I work. (Zihao)

The interviews with these migrant children revealed a pattern in their thoughts about future careers. Their career choices were notably influenced by their personal interests, peer influence, and exposure to social media. Interestingly, parental guidance seemed to have minimal impact on these children's career aspirations. To be precise, many of the children were drawn to occupations that resonate with their hobbies or passions. Whether it was a love for children that inspired a desire to become a preschool teacher or an interest in cars that led to automotive repair, these children were seeking careers that align with their interests. Several of the children mentioned friends or classmates who influenced their career choices. The mention of the same interests by multiple students (e.g., automotive repair and preschool teacher) highlights how peers can shape one another's occupational aspirations. Also, platforms like TikTok and internet browsing habits were guiding some of the children towards careers like makeup artistry and photography. Social media served as a window into occupations they might not otherwise be exposed to. Therefore, migrant children's career aspirations were driven more by intrinsic motivations, peers, and modern technology than by parental guidance.

It is further note that although migrant parents with limited social capital could restrict their knowledge about diverse career options, children who inherited low social capital from their parents might enhance their social capital through exposure to broader social networks through school, peers, and social media. This resulted in their more diverse career interests, which were different from their parental guidance. However, the career choices of migrant children were potentially constrained by their family background and social status, and the occupations they aspired to engage in did not deviate from the categories of their parents' occupations in their migrant family. This, in turn, reinforced the existing social structure. Moreover, migrant parents' emphasis on stable, well-paying jobs reflected a focus on meeting basic physiological and safety needs. The desire for stability, income,

and avoidance of physical labour corresponded to the foundational levels of Maslow's hierarchy. Meanwhile, migrant children might be more focused on higher-level needs such as belonging (peer influence) and esteem (achieving in areas of personal interest). Many of these children were attracted to careers that closely linked with their passions or hobbies. Their motivation was not coming from external pressures or benefits that their migrant parents hoped but from an internal desire to pursue what interested them. Also, it was clear to see observational learning in their desire to pursue careers influenced by their peers (e.g., automotive repair and preschool teacher) and social media influencers (e.g., makeup artist). They were learning about these careers not only through personal interest but also by watching others engaging in them. However, such learning from peers instead of their migrant parents could be interpreted as a breakdown in the traditional modelling aspect of social learning.

5.4.3.3 Different gender expectations and aspirations in future career

From the interviews with migrant children, it can be noted that both migrant parents and children often held deep stereotypes and expectations regarding gender roles. Typically, migrant boys were expected to take on the role of providers and economic pillars, while migrant girls were often associated with household and child-rearing responsibilities. These traditional gender roles influenced the career expectations of both migrant parents and children themselves for the future.

The table below illustrated the gender difference between migrant boys and girls in their future occupations.

Table 15: Gender difference on migrant children's future occupations

		Parents			Self	
Boys	Yulei	NO Automotive Repair (dirty&tired)	**Easy work/no dirty/no tired**	Xiaojun	Learn finance	**Money**
	Yifan	Tour guide/train attendant	**Support himself**	Siyu	Choose one that can earn money	
	Xiaojun	Handcrafted jewelry carving		Yulei	Automotive repair	**Children's personal interest**
	Zihao	Learn a skill		Yifan	Automotive repair	
	Kai	Army		Zihao	Automotive repair/cook	
	Siyu	Army		Kai	Running and sports	
	Xing	Army		Xing	Cook	
	Lupeng	Electrical engineer		Lupeng	Electrical Engineer	
	Tian	A good job can support himself		Tian	No idea	**No idea**
	Fei	No discussion	**No discussion**	Fei	No idea	

		Parents			Self	
Girls	Lulu	Easy work, unlike parents	**Easy work/no dirty/no tired**	Lulu	Preschool teacher	**Children's personal interest**
	Hui	Easy work, unlike dad		Hui	Preschool teacher	
	Jie	Just a job can support herself	**Support herself**	Wenwen	Dessert chef	
	Wenwen	Nurse/preschool teacher		Beibei	Dessert chef/Painter	
	Nana	Computer related		Xiaomei	Flight or train attendant/Preschool teacher/Photographer/Makeup	
	Beibei	Respect interests	**Children's personal interest**	Lili	Makeup	
	Xiaomei	Respect interests		Yiming	Makeup	
	Yiming	Respect interests		Nana	Makeup	
	Xinxin	No discussion	**No discussion**	Dudu	Cook	
	Lili	No discussion		Jie	No idea	**No idea**
	Dudu	No discussion		Xinxin	No idea	

From the perspective of the effectiveness of parental career planning, migrant parents were highly likely to have different occupational expectations for boys and girls, possibly related to traditional gender roles. Looking at the career planning of migrant parents for boys, they seemed to have a more definite occupational plan for boys, with a hope for stable, relaxed, salaried work (90%, N=10), which reflected expectations for boys to assume financial responsibility. In contrast, when the subject was girls, this proportion was significantly reduced to 45.45% (N=11), with over half of the parents of girls lacking a definite occupational plan for them or never having discussed this aspect, which showed uncertainty about the future work role of girls. This suggested that migrant parents' consciousness of boys needing to independently support themselves was more intense compared to that for girls.

At the same time, the observed differences in occupational choices between male and female migrant children also revealed gender disparities. Migrant male children expressed a desire to earn money in

their future careers more than females. Data showed that among males, there were two individuals who prioritised their future occupations based on earning money, while among females, not one person mentioned the desire to earn money, with most choosing their work almost entirely based on personal interest and passions. This reflects the different pressures and expectations influenced by gender on career choices.

Migrant parents who provided their children with explicit career planning demonstrated strong socialisation and gender role patterns. In the eyes of parents of boys, there was an inclination to encourage their children towards military training or engineering, while parents of girls leaned towards nursing or preschool teaching for their daughters. This gender difference was further reinforced in migrant children's own pursuits for future careers, where they were subtly guided into gender roles that dictate 'appropriate' behaviours, interests, and professions for males and females.

This might lead boys and girls to be channelled into careers that are considered suitable for their respective genders. Traditional notions might prompt migrant male children to engage in more 'masculine' careers in the engineering field, favouring occupations involving systematic or object-oriented tasks, such as becoming a soldier, automotive repair, or engineer. Conversely, migrant female children pursued careers considered more fitting for females in the fields of education or nursing. These careers tended to involve empathy or human-oriented tasks, such as preschool teaching, makeup, pastry baking, or being a flight attendant. This socialisation process and adherence to gender roles were deeply etched into the minds of migrant children. It directly affects their expectations for future careers, subconsciously associating with their interests, strengthening gender stereotypes, and further limiting their career choices, economic opportunities, and social mobility.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter offers a compelling insight into the complex interplay of parental influences and choices on migrant children's educational journey in Beijing. Bound by the rigors of Beijing's Hukou system and local enrolment criteria, parental choices are starkly dictated. In many instances, the lack of essential documentation and financial constraints relegate their children to schools of lower educational quality in Beijing. Moreover, their choice is further constrained by practical considerations; for many, the proximity of a school to their homes becomes the primary determinant, a decision driven by both convenience and economic limitations. The transitory nature of migrant work brings with it the added challenge of frequent relocations. This constant movement, combined with the inherent instability of migrant children's schools, disrupts their educational continuity, which causes decline in their academic motivation and weaken their community ties. It also finds that friends' recommendations are a significant factor in parents' school choices.

Delving deeper, often grappling with poor living conditions, these children lack personal spaces supportive to academic endeavours. An additional strain on the parent-child relationship is the evident misalignment between the schedules of these young learners and their parents with long working hours. Limited communications and interactions weaken their familial bonds. Furthermore, their constrained living scenarios narrow down recreational pursuits, predominantly restricting them to mobile gaming and online interactions, raising concerns about holistic personal growth.

However, among these challenges, parents' aspirations shine through. Exhausting work hours and physically demanding jobs sap their energy, and their limited educational backgrounds further diminish their capacity to support in academic endeavours. Yet, the flame of aspiration remains. Many migrant parents, despite their limited academic backgrounds, have dreams of their children scaling

the educational ladder, attaining qualifications that open doors to better-paying, stable jobs. But this aspiration casts a shadow, emphasising the gap between their dreams and their current reality that they cannot financially or academically support children's education. Interestingly, migrant children, fully aware of their parents' academic limitations, have learned to navigate their academic challenges without leaning on parents for support.

The chapter concludes by shedding light on the evolving occupational aspirations of migrant families. Parents, with their lives marked by hardship, lean towards economic security, envisioning a less labour-intensive future for their children. But a generational shift is evident. Migrant children, especially girls, prioritise personal interests, indicating a transformative change in outlook. It also finds that children's occupational aspirations do not exceed or higher than their parents' or get rid of their current social status, but almost follow a similar occupational way to parents. Overall, the chapter provides a deeply subtle exploration of the challenges, aspirations, and realities faced by migrant families in Beijing, and emphasises the significant gap between their hopes and their current circumstances.

Chapter 6: Migrant children in Beijing: attitudes, experiences and aspirations in learning and attainment

6.1 Introduction

Higher education, often seen as a ticket to upward mobility in the eyes of migrant parents, holds varied meanings for these children. Thus, this chapter explores what education signifies for children, and how they integrate education with their life goals. While raw scores and grades provide one side of the narrative, it is the personal significance of education that draws a more complete picture. Migrant children's perception of the school environment and their level of participation are considered to help understand how the relevance of educators and the courses affected their classroom experience. Also, their interactions outside the classroom provide valuable insights into their sense of belonging.

6.2 Children's educational attainment

6.2.1 Academic performance and achievement

6.2.1.1 Exam scores and courses

Collecting the final exam results for the first semester of ninth grade at the beginning of the research provided a valuable starting point for children's learning. Although I cannot compare the scores longitudinally, I can analyse migrant children's performance in different subjects based on this exam. An excellent teacher and engaging courses have the potential to ignite children's interest and motivation, thereby improve their academic performance regardless of their socio-economic background. Conversely, some students were influenced by teaching methods, course content, or other factors in the educational environment, leading to a less favourable learning experience and consequently impacting their exam scores.

Data processing

In order to standardise and eliminate the dimensional impact, making the data comparable, I used a 'standardisation' method, dividing the average scores of each subject by their respective maximum scores. This was done because different subjects may have different maximum scores, and without this process of standardisation, subjects with higher maximum scores might create a false perspective of higher average scores. For instance, if the full marks for Chinese were 150 and for Physics were 100, the average score for Chinese might appear higher simply due to its higher maximum score. After standardising the data, the average scores became comparable across all subjects (z-score). The results are shown in Table 16. This standardisation process ensured that the average scores were not influenced by the varying maximum scores of each subject and provided a fair and meaningful comparison of migrant children's performance across different subjects.

Table 16: Standardisation of Average Scores for Each Subject

Standardisation of Average Scores for Each Subject

Subjects	Chinese	Mathematics	English	Politics	Physics	History	Chemistry
Average/Total	80.12%	34.55%	66.92%	65.74%	86.48%	75.78%	66.26%
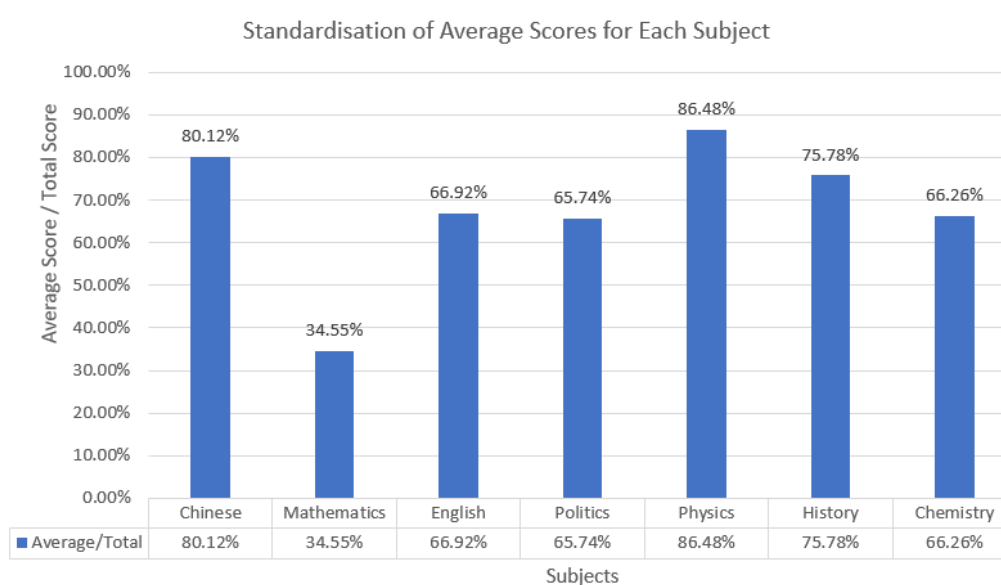
Furthermore, it is essential to consider that these exams were conducted internally within the school, and each subject's test papers were designed independently by the respective teachers. As a result, there were not standardised in terms of comparing against national or regional results, making it difficult to control or review the process for these exams. Additionally, during interviews with children,

many of them mentioned the prevalence of cheating during exams. To investigate whether there were issues with excessively difficult or easy exams or potential cheating among students, I generated histograms of the score distributions for each subject based on all students' scores.

Specifically, I conducted a Shapiro-Wilk test to check whether the scores followed a normal distribution (a P-value > 0.05 indicated that the data followed a normal distribution). This was a statistical test used to assess whether a given dataset follows a normal distribution. In other words, it helped determine if the data was approximately symmetrical around the mean, which is a common assumption in many statistical analyses. In the context of the this investigation, applying the Shapiro-Wilk test to the score distributions of each subject's exams was beneficial. If the test indicated that the scores were normally distributed, it would provide confidence in the fairness and appropriateness of the exam's difficulty level. On the other hand, if the test revealed a departure from normality, it would signal potential issues that need further examination, such as the possibility of exams being too difficult, too easy, or influenced by irregular patterns such as cheating. The results are displayed in the following figure (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Shapiro-Wilk test of Scores for Each Subject
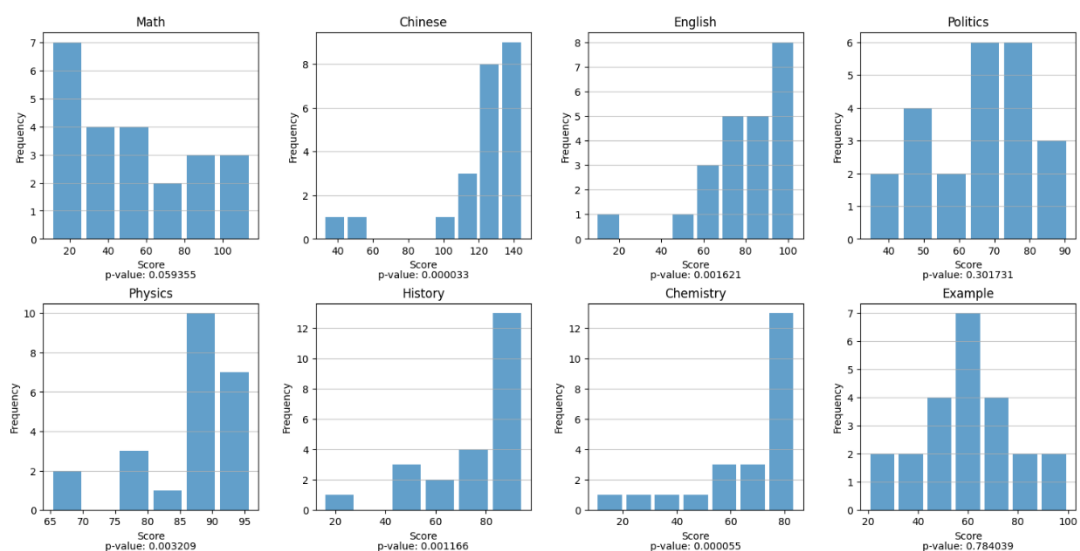
Data analysis

From the P-values, it can be observed that only Mathematics and Politics passed the normal distribution test (P-value > 0.05), while the scores for the other subjects did not meet the criteria for normal distribution. The histograms also illustrated that, except for Mathematics and Politics, there was a large concentration of high scores in the remaining five subjects. This suggested that either the difficulty level of these exams might be too easy for students, or there was widespread cheating in these subjects.

Looking at the subjects, migrant children performed the poorest in Mathematics, a subject that they commonly expressed difficulty in understanding and disliking. The average z-score for Mathematics was 34.55%. Based on my interviews and classroom observations with the children, they generally found Mathematics exams very challenging, and stated that they could not understand the test questions. However, strict invigilation prevented them from engaging in cheating. The histograms of their scores and the corresponding P-values further confirmed the authenticity of their scores, as many children clustered in the low-score range.

> *I couldn't understand the Maths paper at all. I could only guess and answer. Director Yao was invigilating the exam. I couldn't even peek at the textbook, so I could only guess and answer.* (Lupeng)

In the Mathematics exam, Lupeng scored only 18 out of 150, and his answer sheet was almost blank. His low score reflected significant challenges he faced in understanding Mathematics, as his nearly empty answer sheet suggested a lack of basic comprehension and mastery of the Mathematics exam

content. According to the Chinese examination standard where 60% (z-score) was the passing score, 17 out of 21 children (80.95%) in the class failed the Mathematics, with only 4 children (19.05%) achieving a passing grade, which indicated a widespread challenge in learning and performing well in Mathematics. Unlike Mathematics, the Chinese exam scores did not pass the normality test. This might be attributed to the fact that the difficulty level of the Chinese exam was not too high, and the Chinese teacher marked more leniently, as confirmed during interviews with the Chinese teacher. As a result, more students received higher scores, leading to a skewed distribution.

It appeared that in the other subjects, students achieved relatively good scores after standardising the averages: English (66.92%), Physics (86.48%), History (75.78%), and Chemistry (66.26%). However, it is essential to note that despite the seemingly good performance, there were indications of cheating in these subjects based on the distribution of scores and interviews conducted. The histogram distributions revealed that many students' scores were concentrated in the higher score ranges, especially in subjects like Physics. For instance, the standardised average z-score for Physics was 86.48%, with 18 out of 21 students (85.71%) scoring above 80 marks (full marks 100). Such excellent academic performance was difficult to imagine for a class that generally struggled in Mathematics, with only a 34.55% average z-score, especially considering that Physics and Mathematics were taught by the same teacher. The pattern of high scores and indications of cheating in some subjects raised concerns about the authenticity and accuracy of the students' actual learning and understanding. While the high scores might suggest good performance, they did not necessarily reflect the students' true abilities and knowledge. Cheating can artificially inflate the grades, giving a misleading impression of student proficiency.

From individual cases, Lupeng obtained scores of 18 in Mathematics (full marks 150) and 10 in Chemistry (full marks 100), respectively, while scoring 89 in Physics (full marks 100). Though he did

not admit to cheating in front of me, the results appear to speak for themselves. This cheating behaviour on the part of students confirmed the significant subject-specific disparities among migrant children. They seem to struggle to comprehend subjects like Mathematics and Chemistry, leading to poor performance in exams. Without resorting to cheating, they would probably achieve extremely low scores, as demonstrated in the Mathematics exam.

Migrant children's cheating behaviour also reflects a perceived lack of responsibility among teachers, intensified by the fact that these children could not participate in Beijing's SHSEE due to not having Beijing household registration. Consequently, their academic performance in school was not a determining factor for further education, as admission to high schools depended solely on passing the SHSEE, and vocational schools typically required just the tuition fee for entry. This situation differed markedly from state schools in Beijing and rural hometowns, where school reputations and teacher evaluations were closely tied to student performance on exams and graduation rates, which caused much stricter academic standards and expectations. Consequently, in Beijing's migrant schools, some teachers turned a blind eye to migrant children's cheating behaviours. This situation indicated the awkward position of migrant children regarding their learning experiences in Beijing.

6.2.1.2 School performance and self-perception

When migrant children were asked about their test scores achieved at school, most of them rated their scores negatively. Only 2 students (9.52%) felt that they achieved excellent and good, with most students (57.14%, N = 21) saying that their scores were average, leaving 7 students who felt that their scores were poor or very poor (33.33%). Some students said that their test scores were not satisfactory since they were young. For example, Jie said that she was not good at studying since she was a child and she still had trouble in focusing on the courses now. There were also children like Lunpeng who

spent a lot of time in hospital for medical treatment, which greatly affected study. Then, he had been doing badly in exams since Year 1 and had been studying poorly as he had not laid a good foundation.

In the eyes of migrant children, despite many of them not achieving satisfactory exam results, it did not hinder their self-assessment of their school performance, especially as they approached the final moments of graduation. Many students believed that their school performance improved compared to their past performances, but these efforts might not be fully reflected in their grades. Instead, they perceived the progress in terms of self-perception. Some students mentioned that there was not a strong correlation between their high exam scores and their good school performance. Their poor exam results did not completely mean that children were not performing well in school. Indeed, some migrant children who rated their test scores as average or poor had a self-perception that they were doing better in school than before. It is clear from the charts below that although most children's (90.48%, N=21) test scores were in the average, poor and very poor range (19 children, with only 2 children rated excellent and good), 13 of these children (68.42%, N=19) believed that they were doing much better than their previous school performance.

Table 17: Children's school performance and performance in school tests
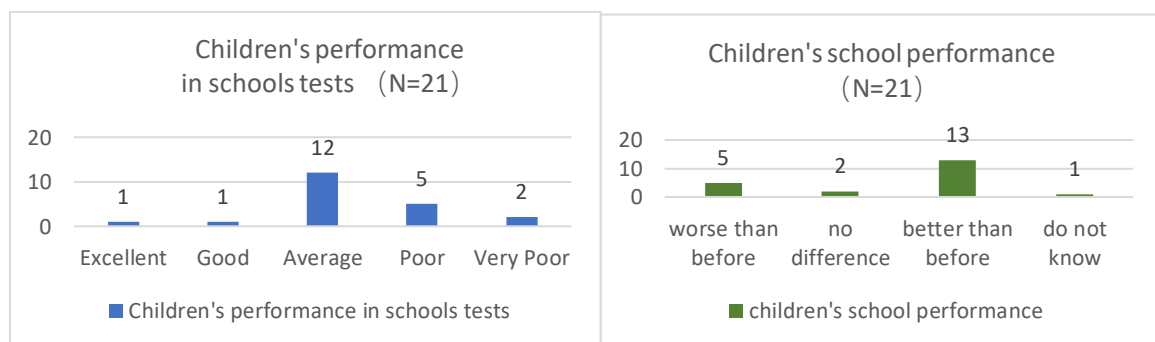
For example, Xiaojun mentioned that although his test scores were average, he felt that his school performance this year was the best.

I used to be a passive learner at the previous migrant children school… although I took lessons, I didn't study after class… I change school to Zhenyu School this academic year, which is the last year of my lower secondary school education… I take study seriously this year because if I failed the Senior High School Entrance Examination and could not get into a high school, I could enter another school if my test scores were not too bad. (Xiaojun)

Xiaojun and Nana illustrated how future prospects might influence migrant children's motivation towards education. Xiaojun, driven by the desire to secure admission into a prestigious high school, dedicated himself to achieving high test scores this semester. In contrast, Nana, facing poor test scores and a lack of a learning atmosphere, found her motivation increasing as graduation neared, despite uncertainty about her post-graduation plans. She focused on studying hard in the moment, driven by the immediate goal of graduation.

Similarly, four other students reported improvements in their classroom behaviour and performance, despite average or poor test scores. Previously disruptive, these students now showed greater respect for teachers and engagement during class, motivated by their last semester to leave a positive impression. Some noted better performance at this school compared to previous schools, attributing this to stricter classroom management and a supportive learning environment. These changes highlight how the transition to high school and a conducive educational setting can positively impact migrant children's attitudes and behaviours, which reinforced their academic efforts in lower secondary education.

It is crucial to recognise that the self-perception of improved school performance among some migrant children might not accurately reflect their actual academic progress. For example, Yulei felt he was performing better because he was completing all his homework, unlike before. However,

during classroom observations, it became apparent that although he submitted assignments on time, most were plagiarised from classmates who had already finished their work. This behaviour was just to meet the teacher's requirement of checking homework.

Teachers, pressured by potential salary deductions and negative evaluations, prioritise checking off completed homework rather than ensuring students grasp the content. Consequently, children might believe they are performing well simply because they turn in their homework, unaware that they are not actually learning the material. This situation shows a significant gap between actual learning and the activities measured as indicators of school performance, potentially hindering true academic development. Surprisingly, during my classroom observations, this copying behaviour was quite prevalent, and I reported this situation to the class teacher. Unfortunately, the teacher expressed her helplessness, acknowledging that most migrant children, due to their lack of attention in class, were unable to do the homework by themselves. Therefore, this emphasis on completing assignments could lead to a false perception among migrant children that they believed they were performing well simply because they turned in their homework, unaware that they were not actually learning the material. Such false perceptions can result in a disconnect between their perceived school performance and their actual academic achievements.

It was also surprising to find that in contrast to the migrant children with average or poor test scores, students who did well academically had a more negative self-perception of their own academic achievements and school performance. Among the whole class, only two children rated excellent and good in their test scores, but they did not take pride in their high scores in school exams. Instead, both of them felt that their current academic performance was not good or even worse than their previous academic performance. This low self-perception reflects the higher expectations and challenges these academically successful students faced. Instead of being satisfied with comparing themselves to their

migrant classmates, they now considered the significant challenge of competing with students from strict state schools in their rural hometowns if they returned for SHSEE. For example, Siyu achieved the highest scores in the class every time and ranked the top. Although his academic performance was excellent in this class, he had a negative evaluation of his current learning attitudes.

> *At the previous migrant children school I attended, in the second semester of Year 7, there was a classmate who always achieved the first in exams and I ranked the third or fourth at that time, so I studied harder to get a higher grade than him in the next exam. However, at the end of that semester he went back hometown to receive education, and since then I felt that I could never surpass him because education in his hometown was definitely stricter than that in this current migrant children school, and his academic performance would be better, while I felt that I was getting worse and worse in this school… it just feels like I don't have that kind of motivation anymore… feels like my learning motivation to learn had come to an end…* (Siyu)

Siyu's experience highlights how academic competition and the learning environment intensely affected migrant children's self-perception and academic performance. Initially, his motivation and enthusiasm for learning were driven by competing with a high-achieving classmate. However, when this classmate left for a more rigorous education back in their hometown, Siyu lost his target for success, and had feelings of inadequacy and a loss of drive. The absence of a competitive peer and the less rigorous learning environment at his current migrant children's school stifled his academic progress and intensified his negative perceptions about his academic abilities.

Coincidentally, a similar situation is also found with Fei, whose test scores and class performance were almost as good as Siyu's at the top of the class, and was highly praised by their teachers. However, he evaluated his test scores as merely 'good', feeling that his academic performance was worse than before. He said,

228

Although I am at the top of my class in exams, I know that I am not actually good at studying and my test scores are worse than last term… If I were to go back to my hometown to take exams, my scores would probably be at the bottom because the admission score for Beijing Senior High School Entrance Examination is relatively low, and the teaching methods and exams are different from province to province, usually much difficult than the exams in Beijing… I do feel that my academic performance at this school is quite good, but it is only limited to this school… I know that if I went back to my hometown, my test scores would definitely be worse than now. (Fei)

Fei and Siyu, despite being top performers in their class in terms of test scores, classroom performance, and evaluations from both teachers and students, held a poor self-perception of their academic abilities. This negative self-view stemmed from comparing themselves to students in state schools in their rural hometowns, rather than to their peers in the Beijing migrant children's school. They believed that the education back home was more rigorous, and they perceived those students as achieving higher. Additionally, their dissatisfaction with the looser class management at their current school further led to their negative view of their own academic achievements.

In an interview with Xiaomei, who moved to Beijing two years ago, it was confirmed that the academic content in her hometown was more challenging. Like many migrant children, Xiaomei had transferred schools multiple times, which caused her academic instability. She noted that since joining a migrant children's school in Beijing, her test scores improved significantly - from poor to average – largely because the curriculum and exams were less rigorous than in her hometown, where she consistently ranked at the bottom. Despite her improved scores in Beijing, Xiaomei felt that her overall school performance and learning attitude remained unchanged, which indicated that higher scores did not necessarily reflect a true improvement in her educational achievement. This reflects a discrepancy

between her external performance and her self-perception of her academic abilities, maintaining a negative view of her learning despite seemingly positive outcomes.

6.2.2 Educational aspirations and future plans

6.2.2.1 Higher education aspirations

Before looking at the educational aspirations of migrant children, it is necessary to first give the definition of three levels of educational aspirations. This research adopted Fuller's (2008) categories: low aspirers, who planned to end their education after compulsory schooling and often viewed it as irrelevant to their future; middle aspirers, who aimed to continue education beyond compulsory levels without pursuing higher education, typically valuing education for future job security; and high aspirers, who were determined to attend university, even if they were undecided about their specific field of study.

According to the survey results, the educational aspirations of migrant children, as perceived by their parents, were generally middle (52.38%) and high (38.09%), accounting for 90.47% overall, which indicates high educational expectations for migrant children. Notably, the aspirations for migrant girls to receive higher education (52.55%, N=11) significantly exceeded those for migrant boys (20%, N=10), with most parents hoping that migrant boys would complete high school or attend vocational schools to find jobs more quickly. The vast majority of migrant children had moderate aspirations for higher education, with 80.95% of them wanting to finish high school or pursue vocational training after compulsory education. The breakdown by gender showed 81.81% for migrant girls and 80% for migrant boys, which indicates that there was no significant difference in educational aspirations between genders among migrant children.

Migrant children generally adopted a conservative and cautious attitude towards their higher education and future plans. Among the 21 children I interviewed, only two children (9.52%, N=21) expressed a desire to attend university. They aspired to improve their own and their families' lives through diligent study and obtaining a university degree. Another three children (14.29%, N=21) aimed to complete their higher secondary school education, hoping that by acquiring a high school diploma, they would have better job opportunities. These children also exhibited a thirst for knowledge and expectations for life. However, most migrant children (66.67%, N=21) in this research hoped to enter vocational schools to learn a practical skill. This was not to say that they do not value education, but they placed greater emphasis on the practical needs of life and future stability. In their view, acquiring a skill might lead to a stable life more easily than a higher degree would. There was also one student (4.76%, N=21) who expressed that their only hope was to complete lower secondary school education and one student (4.76%, N=21) who stated he had not yet decided what kind of degree he wanted to achieve. This indicates that most migrant children in this research demonstrated relatively middle and high aspirations for higher education.

The poor academic performance of migrant children was a major reason leading to their conservative aspirations for higher education. Interview results indicate that when setting their educational goals, migrant children first considered their academic performance. If their grades were poor, failing to meet the requirements to enter higher secondary entrance, they usually anticipated encountering greater difficulties and challenges in regular higher secondary school, which typically demand higher academic standards. As such, the dream of attending university became even more distant, often appearing unattainable. Under such circumstances, many migrant children turned their goals towards vocational schools. Compared to regular higher secondary schools, vocational schools had lower expectations on academic performance and grade requirements. It then lowered the threshold for

migrant children to receive education, and provided opportunities for them to learn and master a skill, which was invaluable in their future lives.

I feel that it's probably quite difficult for me to attend higher secondary school now. I think I might drop out halfway because my grades are very poor, and I can't keep up with the high school curriculum… Vocational school is more relaxed, and I feel that the content is not as difficult. I won't have to study so hard and feel exhausted. (Jie)

I know that my academic performance is poor, and if I were to attend high school, I would just be passing the time. Therefore, I am considering the possibility of choosing a vocational school. (Lili)

Because I don't enjoy studying, and I can't grasp the concepts well. It's too difficult for me. My plan is to graduate [lower secondary school] and enrol in a vocational school to learn a specific skill for my future career. (Yiming)

Migrant children expressed their doubts and concerns about attending higher secondary school due to their low academic performance and struggles with the curriculum. Compared with strict higher secondary school routine and higher learning abilities requirements, they believed that vocational school offered a more relaxed environment with less challenging content, providing them with an alternative path to acquire specific skills for their future careers.

For migrant children in Beijing who had gone through the experience of transferring between their hometown schools and Beijing schools, a critical challenge they often encountered was the incongruity between the educational content and difficulty level in these different settings. Particularly, they found that the curriculum offered in Beijing's Zhenyu Schools did not align with the content and

complexity of the lower secondary school in their hometowns. The latter often covered a broader range of subjects/knowledge and delved deeper into topics, presenting a higher academic hurdle.

Due to household registration restrictions, many of these migrant children had no choice but to return to their rural hometowns to take the higher secondary school entrance examinations. In these circumstances, they expressed low confidence in their ability to qualify for higher secondary schools in their hometowns. This was because they had to compete with peers who had remained and studied in their hometown schools, familiar with the local educational content and examination style. Given this competitive disadvantage, migrant children often predicted that their exam scores would fail to meet the minimum requirements needed for higher secondary school entrance examinations in their rural hometowns.

Firstly, you know, I don't have a Beijing household registration (Hukou), so I can't participate in the SHSEE in Beijing. Secondly, there is an entrance exam in my hometown, and the curriculum taught in the two schools is different. The school in my hometown might have a slightly more difficult curriculum, and the admission scores for higher secondary schools there are too high. I am certain that I won't be able to pass the exam and get accepted. (Beibei)

I simply cannot pass the higher secondary school entrance exams. As you know, the cutoff scores in provinces like Shandong and Henan are extremely high. There is immense pressure on students, and the number of candidates taking the college entrance examination (Gaokao) is also very high. It's possible that for the same university, the admission score line in Beijing is much lower compared to my hometown Shandong. (Nana)

Migrant children's narratives reveal that curriculum differences and higher academic expectations in their rural hometown schools greatly influenced their educational aspirations, often deterring them

from pursuing higher education due to perceived academic shortcomings. The teaching quality and curriculum in hometown schools were rigorous, leading many to choose for vocational rather than higher secondary education. Additionally, the comparatively lower quality of education at their current schools in Beijing worsened these issues, and reinforced their self-perception of lower academic achievement and impacting their aspirations.

It is worth noting that although most migrant children expressed a preference for entering vocational schools over state higher secondary schools, which typically lead to higher education pathways, this choice often stemmed from the structure of China's education system. In this system, choosing a vocational high school almost invariably means these children lose the opportunity to attend university. However, this does not suggest that these migrant children fail to recognise the importance of higher education. Their preference for vocational high schools is primarily driven by their perceived lower academic performance and the inevitable compromise they faced in the fiercely competitive environment of state higher secondary school admissions in China. Indeed, most migrant children who targeted vocational schools, along with their parents, agree that attending state higher secondary schools (and subsequently entering university) would be a more desirable route.

> *I also understand my parents' perspective. They really want me to go to university or pursue higher education. If I were to go to university, it would definitely require going through higher secondary school first. However, I personally feel that it would be very challenging for me, to the point where it seems almost impossible to achieve. I prefer a vocational school.* (Jie)

> *I also understand that attending a higher secondary school would be beneficial, and my father also hopes that I will complete lower secondary school and then proceed to higher secondary school. However, to be honest, I am aware of my poor academic performance, and I feel that if I were to attend higher secondary school, I would just be passing the time. I will understand nothing there.* (Lili)

My parents both want me to attend higher secondary school, even though they are aware of my poor academic performance. They simply want me to have the opportunity to attend higher secondary school. However, if I am unable to pass the higher secondary school entrance exams, they will help me explore other alternative paths. That's what I think. (Nana)

The same sentiment was also evident among migrant children who aimed to attend state higher secondary schools. These children expressed a strong willingness for higher secondary education. For these children, their academic performance was the primary consideration. They viewed admission into a state high school as a challenging objective: if they achieved the required grades, they would attend high school; if not, they planned to go to a vocational school. They recognised the importance of education and considered the path of state high school as a better option.

My goal is also to attend higher secondary school, but there is a possibility that I may not pass the entrance exams. If I am unable to get into high school, then I will consider enrolling in a vocational school or something similar. (Kai)

My dad said that if I can get into higher secondary school, then I should go for it. My initial inclination is still to go to high school, but if I don't pass the entrance exams, then I will consider going to a vocational school. (Yifan)

Personally, I hope to at least complete higher secondary school. In fact, my desire aligns closely with my mother's perspective. Attending a higher secondary school is definitely better than attending a vocational school. (Xiaojun)

Given the context of the education aspirations of migrant children in Beijing, the data uncovered an intriguing dynamic. Despite these children voicing a desire to attend state higher secondary schools

over vocational institutions, their confidence in attaining this goal remained relatively low due to multiple challenges, including academic performance and systemic obstacles.

The three migrant children aiming to enter higher secondary school and achieve a high school diploma estimated that the probability of achieving their goal was only 50%. This low confidence was influenced by their understanding of the stringent academic requirements for state high school admission in rural hometowns. Even though state high schools might offer them broader future opportunities, these barriers made their aspirations seem out of reach. In contrast, those targeting vocational schools presented a much higher level of confidence, averaging an 81.1% success expectancy. These children recognised that vocational schools offered a more accessible educational route that catered to their unique circumstances as migrant children. The curriculum and admission requirements of vocational schools, which typically focused more on practical skills and less on academic scores, made this option seem more attainable and fitting to their current situation.

This difference in confidence levels between these two groups reflects the subtle realities faced by migrant children in Beijing. It highlights the interplay of personal aspirations and systemic factors (including Hukou system and various educational systems in different cities and provinces) in shaping their educational expectations, which was crucial to understanding and addressing the challenges migrant children faced in their pursuit of higher education.

> *I personally aspire to go to university because I believe that it can lead to a better life. I feel that higher education can open doors to improved opportunities and a brighter future. My idea is that the higher the level of education, the better the prospects for my life ahead.* (Hui)

For me, I also want to go to university. After completing university, I plan to serve in the military while still in university and then chart my own path for the future. Being in my early twenties at that time, I believe I will have the physical strength and energy to pursue my goals and aspirations. (Siyu)

These children exhibited aspirational resilience, ideally hoping to pursue university education. However, their high aspirations clashed with the harsh realities of their academic performance, strict university admission requirements, and systemic educational barriers, making their university aspirations seem distant and unattainable. Particularly, Hui and Siyu lacked specific plans or strategies for university admission, which highlighted a possible gap in their understanding or resources. Their expectations seemed based more on an abstract belief in the benefits of higher education than on concrete steps or plans. This idealism, while reflecting a desire for upward mobility, also emphasised the absence of adequate guidance and resources needed for these migrant children to realistically pursue their aspirations. The low confidence levels reported by Hui (10%) and Siyu (30%) in achieving a university degree further underlined the gap between their aspirations and their perceived feasibility, and indicated the complex interaction between personal goals, academic capabilities, and socio-structural challenges in the educational paths of migrant children.

Overall, despite being aware of the benefits that higher education can offer, migrant children and their parents often faced significant obstacles that deterred them from pursuing such paths. These obstacles primarily stemmed from academic challenges and curriculum differences between rural hometown schools and those in Beijing, especially for SHSEE. Many migrant students struggled academically due to lower quality teaching in Beijing schools, difficulty adapting to different teaching methods or curricula when returning to their hometowns for exams, and a lack of educational resources and support. These challenges, coupled with low perceptions of their academic abilities, seem to significantly influence their educational aspirations, making them less likely to aim for higher

237

education. Additionally, systemic issues within China's educational system, such as Hukou restrictions and inequalities in educational quality between urban and rural areas, intensified these difficulties. Therefore, many migrant children chose more accessible goals like vocational schooling, which offered practical skills for employment. This preference for vocational education over traditional higher education paths reflected a realistic response to the barriers they faced, rather than a devaluation of higher education's importance.

6.2.2.2 Education, qualifications, and career plan

It needs to be clarified that although migrant children generally lacked confidence in entering state higher secondary schools and then pursuing higher education in universities, most of the surveyed migrant children and their parents acknowledged the importance of education. Out of the 21 migrant children interviewed, 19 children (90.48%) expressed that they agreed or strongly agreed that 'education is important', with only one child considering it as average and another child believing education was not significant. Most migrant children believed that education was a crucial path to acquire knowledge, improve skills, and enhance employment opportunities. They clearly expressed the role of education in personal development and social progress. However, although these children agreed with the importance of education, their attitudes changed when faced with the question of 'whether education can change one's fate'. Only 8 children (38.06%, N=21) agreed, with the rest being neutral or disagreeing. This seemingly contradictory result highlighted a noteworthy status quo. Although children recognised the importance of education, they did not have much confidence when considering from their own perspective whether education can change their fate.

From the descriptions provided by the children, I can establish a simple model of 'Education – Qualification – Future Career' for migrant children (Figure 3). This can be used to visually analyse the

children's understanding of the interrelationship between education, qualification, and future career, and the factors that the children believe influence how education and qualifications can affect their future careers.

Figure 3: Model of 'Education – Qualification – Future Career'
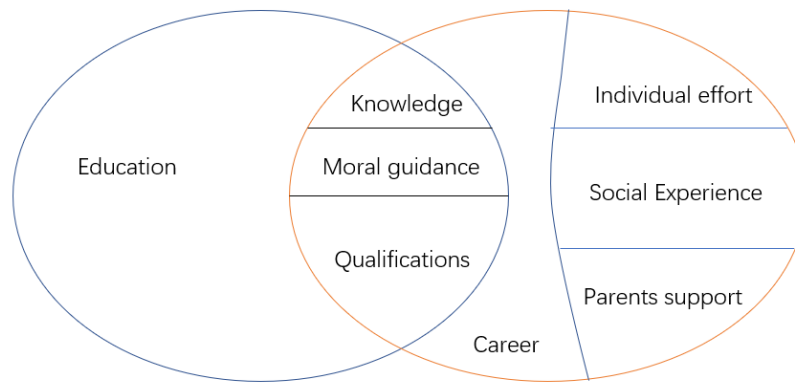
This figure reveals a subtle understanding of education among migrant students, in relation to academic qualifications and personal growth. It highlights diverse viewpoints regarding what education meant and its significance in shaping their future. Firstly, for some migrant children, they perceived education as a channel to higher academic qualifications, which in turn, they believed, could lead to better job opportunities. This perspective shows a realistic understanding of education, emphasising its instrumental role in enhancing one's employability and SES. The notion that higher qualifications could lead to better jobs is deeply rooted in societies where educational credentials are highly valued in the job market in China. This viewpoint also implies that these children associated the value of education largely with its outcome, i.e., obtaining a higher qualification for a better job. Another group of children focused on the knowledge and skills they can acquire through education. This view underlines the fundamental value of education, emphasising the process of learning rather than the end outcome. For these children, education serves as a platform for cognitive development, practical skill acquisition, and intellectual growth. A third perspective among these children was that education plays a crucial role in moral development. These students viewed education as a means to

instil moral and ethical values, shaping their behaviour and attitudes. This perspective goes beyond the instrumental and intrinsic values of education, with a heavier focus on moral education. These three aspects all give migrant children a sense of positive gain. Therefore, no matter from which aspect children understood education, they regarded education as important. At the same time, these three aspects were also the reasons why some migrant children agreed that education can change their destiny. Interestingly, those migrant children who held a neutral or negative attitude were not doubting the importance of education but believed they lacked sufficient learning abilities. Their belief suggested a sense of self-doubt and a perceived disconnect between their efforts in education and the potential outcomes.

Migrant children, while recognising the positive role of education in acquiring skills, obtaining diplomas, and providing moral guidance, also held a neutral or negative attitude towards education itself. However, this negativity primarily stemmed not from doubting the importance of education but rather from self-doubting their own academic abilities. They felt that their past academic performance had not been satisfactory, leading to a belief that education was good, but they struggled to grasp its benefits. When they found it challenging to learn, their sense of connection to education weakened, and they developed a negative attitude towards it. It was not that they doubted the usefulness of education, but rather their negative feelings were rooted in their perceived weakness in learning abilities. This attitude reflected their lack of confidence in their own learning capabilities rather than scepticism towards education itself.

> *Education is indeed important, but it doesn't solely rely on that. For example, if a student struggles to understand or learn, he might find education to be frustrating and boring.* (Lulu)

Education can indeed be helpful, but it hinges on one's desire to learn. If an individual doesn't want to study and can't absorb the knowledge, then education isn't of much help and can even feel like a waste of time. Forcing students to study is largely ineffective. Although some might argue that 'it's for your own good' from parents or teachers, I believe most children tend to become irritated and upset when they hear this phrase, making the message even harder to accept. (Tian)

In my personal view, education doesn't hold that much importance. After all, my grades are just average, so it doesn't affect me much. (Zihao)

In my case, as a student who struggles academically and has lost the desire to study, I feel like education doesn't serve much purpose for me anymore. The only use of it is to be able to read and write. (Lupeng)

These migrant children emphasised that education can be useful if one actively engaged in learning, but it became less valuable when there was a lack of interest or effective learning. Their attitudes revealed the complex interplay between education, individual learning abilities/academic performance, and the perceived impact of education on their lives. On the other hand, students believed that in terms of their future development, many aspects unrelated to education, such as social experience and personal abilities, could be more beneficial than education itself. In their view, education was just one of the many paths towards personal fulfilment. They thought that early exposure to work can lead to more practical real-world experiences.

Indeed, some individuals may not view education as highly important. For instance, when reaching the ninth grade in school, some may choose to drop out and pursue their interests independently. They might opt to attend vocational schools and engage in manual labour,

gradually accumulating work experience that cannot be gained through formal education... Learning through work experience is not as simple as it might seem. (Xiaomei)

Knowledge alone may not be the sole determinant of one's fate. Many successful entrepreneurs and well-known figures are not necessarily highly educated. Some of them started working early on and relied on their own efforts to build their businesses, while others were fortunate enough to achieve a higher social status in a short period. Their success is through their hard work and personal qualities, regardless of their educational background. (Xiaojun)

While knowledge seems to be perceived as a valuable resource, it was not the only determining factor for success. Even though some migrant children believed that many aspects unrelated to education were more crucial for their future development than education itself, this did not mean that they did not acknowledge the value of education in aiding their progress. Instead, they recognised that even without formal school education, learning can still happen in the workplace, although it was not an easy process.

6.3 Children's educational experience

6.3.1 Children's attitudes towards attending school

Migrant children exhibited a range of attitudes towards attending school, largely influenced by their family backgrounds and home environments. Even among those who shared a similar attitude, their emotions, and reasons for feeling that way differed.

A total of 12 children (57.14%, N=21) expressed a deep sense of contentment with their school experience, with many attributing their happiness to the social connections they have forged with

their peers. Specifically, Wenwen shared that one of the reasons she felt happy in school was the opportunity to reunite with her close friends and engage in enjoyable conversations with them outside of class. Similarly, Yifan agreed that,

> *I feel very happy when I go to school every day, because there are many friends in school…*
> *we talk, chat and play together. I feel quite happy because we can interact with each other...*
> *I like chatting and playing the most.*

This data highlights the significant impact of socialising with friends on migrant children's desire to attend school and their overall sense of happiness while there. Indeed, the opportunity to communicate and interact with classmates emerged as the most important factor in shaping their attitudes towards school. Furthermore, some respondents revealed that the dull or stressful family atmosphere at home had a notable impact on their school experience. In many cases, the monotonous or overbearing environment at home forced children to eagerly anticipate going to school, where they could enjoy more stimulating and fulfilling social interactions with their peers.

Xing's account highlighted the isolation and loneliness that migrant children often experienced. With his mother working long hours and returning home late, he found himself alone at home with no one to talk to except for his phone. This lack of intimate interaction made him feel bored and isolated, prompting him to look forward to going to school where he could interact with his peers and play with friends. His experience showed the importance of socialisation and companionship for migrant children and their need to connect with others.

As mentioned earlier, due to the characteristics of long working hours, migrant parents were unable to devote sufficient time to their children. This resulted in a lack of physical companionship and neglect,

leaving migrant children feeling isolated despite moving to large cities with their parents. In contrast, left-behind children in rural hometowns had the benefit of being cared for by other family members like grandparents. Migrant children, however, were left with only their parents in the cities, making their situation more challenging. When migrant parents were unable to fulfil their role and responsibility of caring for their children, the negative emotions experienced by these children, such as boredom and feelings of abandonment, are amplified.

In addition to experiencing physical neglect and a lack of companionship, some migrant children also lacked emotional support and connection with their parents, even when their parents were present at home. As an example, Lili expressed her excitement at seeing her classmates every day, as she found staying at home to be a tedious and unstimulating experience. Furthermore, she did not feel inclined to share her thoughts or feelings with her parents, as their conversations were always uncomfortable and lacking in mutual understanding. This communication barrier highlighted a disconnect between Lili and her parents, causing her to feel more at ease sharing with her classmates, with whom she shared a common language. Consequently, she preferred attending school rather than being at home, where she did not feel understood or valued.

Another example was Kai, who said that despite being able to see his parents frequently at home, he was subjected to severe physical and verbal abuse for minor mistakes, leaving him feeling stressed and anxious in his own home. This hostile environment made him eager to escape and seek refuge in the safe and positive environment of school, where he could find solace and happiness among his peers. As he said that,

I am very happy at school, so I don't want to stay at home. If I do something wrong at home, my parents always criticise me... Basically I am being criticised every day, and I am in Grade

9 and I am still beaten and scolded every day for just small mistakes, some repeated small mistakes… As long as I do something wrong, I will undoubtedly be beaten and abused, so I don't want to stay at home… My younger brothers sometimes get criticised, but I am the one who gets criticised the most… they say I am too stupid, so I just don't want to be at home… I like coming to school as it is much more relaxing than staying at home.

Due to the long working hours of their work, migrant parents were often absent, leaving their children at home alone. As a result, migrant children experienced a sense of boredom and loneliness at home, lacking the physical presence and companionship of their parents. Moreover, these children suffered from emotional neglect and a lack of support from their parents, as communication between them was limited and often devoid of emotional exchange. Some children even experienced physical and verbal abuse, which exacerbated the already strained parent-child relationship. This communication gap led to silent ideological conflicts, causing migrant children to harbour negative sentiments towards their families and homes, and making them eager to seek refuge and happiness elsewhere. School presents a welcome escape for these children, providing them with an opportunity to relax, socialise with peers, and enjoy themselves. Consequently, migrant children viewed school as a source of happiness and positivity, in contrast to the tension and stress of their home lives.

Another three migrant children expressed their willingness of going to school in relation the pleasure they derived from learning new knowledge and skills, alongside the excitement of seeing and playing with friends. One of them, Zihao, was particularly happy about the fact that staying at school was not a dull and tedious experience, as he could engage in fun and interesting activities while still learning. These positive accounts demonstrated that beyond social interactions, these migrant children perceive school as a place where they can enrich their minds and acquire valuable knowledge, leading to a sense of happiness and contentment.

Despite some migrant children finding happiness in school due to socialising with friends, there were also those who hold negative attitudes towards attending school. Out of the 21 migrant children surveyed, 9 (42.86%) said that going to school was boring because of the monotonous classes and lack of engagement. Dudu, for instance, found her dissatisfaction with the classroom environment and the lack of interactive learning, making every class boring. This sentiment was agreed – that the lessons were unstimulating, which contributed to their disinterest in going to school. Beyond just the content and format of lessons, the daily rigid and structured school schedule was also a source of boredom for migrant children, as expressed by Xinxin:

> *It feels like a vicious circle. It's just that I feel like it's Monday to Friday… one week… and then the next week all over again… relatively monotonous… I don't like school very much… I feel unhappy when I think about going to school.* (Xinxin)

Her negative emotions towards going to school were rooted in her frustration with the mundane and repetitive nature of the school routine. Thus, the monotony of the daily school routine created a sense of frustration and repetition, leading to migrant children's negative attitudes towards attending school. It is worth noting that migrant children's feelings of happiness and boredom in school were not mutually exclusive and can exist simultaneously. As previously mentioned, Lili eagerly anticipated going to school because she enjoyed spending time with her friends, but at the same time, she also experienced feelings of boredom due to the tedious lectures delivered by the teachers and the routine set by the school. This suggests that migrant children's attitudes towards school were shaped by a variety of factors, and addressing their negative experiences might require a multi-faceted approach.

A significant finding from the study was that 9.52% of the students surveyed, specifically two out of 21 participants, reported experiencing considerable distress at school, describing it as 'very painful'.

One student, Nana, felt a deep sense of discomfort and dissatisfaction, viewing each school day as tedious and unfulfilling. She struggled to keep up with coursework and felt disconnected from the class material, which led her to view school as a waste of time. This situation was exacerbated by her parents' lack of engagement with her academic and emotional needs, leaving her without support or guidance to navigate her challenges. Nana's introversion further intensified her difficulties, as she found it hard to communicate her struggles and felt isolated. She believed that her parents, classmates, and teachers could not understand her, and she felt trapped in a cycle of pain and torment, which exacerbated her negative emotions each day at school.

Like Nana, Yiming also found attending school unpleasant for her for the same reason of poor academic performance and inability to catch up with the class. Yiming found it incredibly difficult and painful to even think about going to class. Also, she was overwhelmed with guilt knowing that her parents worked hard to provide her with this education. Instead, finding a job that would allow her to contribute to her family's income while also giving her a sense of purpose and fulfilment that attending school cannot bring.

In summary, the attitudes of migrant children towards school were influenced by various factors such as their personalities, family backgrounds, parental involvement, school routines, and academic performance. For some, school served as a social outlet and a break from challenging home environments, especially for those facing neglect or abuse. However, monotonous schedules often diminished their motivation and interest in learning. Many migrant children also struggled academically, unable to keep pace with their peers, which deepened their sense of despair and made attending school a painful experience. The awareness of their academic shortcomings heightened feelings of inadequacy, discouraging them from attending classes. Therefore, a lack of motivation and

a negative view of school form a vicious cycle that further impacted their academic performance and emotional well-being.

6.3.2 Children's attitudes towards teachers

Migrant children's attitudes towards their teachers could be influenced by a variety of factors, including the children's personal experience, teacher's personality, and teaching style, as well as the teacher support in children's academic performance and well-beings. Children's positive attitudes towards teachers could encourage them to acquire knowledge and enhance their drive to succeed, while their negative attitudes can lead to disengagement, poor academic performance, and behavioural issues. Although this research does not take teacher interviews, children's perceptions of teachers are significant for their learning experiences.

6.3.2.1 Teachers' personality

A total of 15 migrant children in the class expressed their fondness for the Chinese teacher (71.43%, N=21). All of them mentioned that they only liked the Chinese teacher, because she was warm, gentle, friendly, and easy to talk to. The Chinese teacher was known to engage in conversation and shared her experiences with the children. To be precise, she would patiently listen to children's questions and respond with sufficient kindness and understanding.

> *My favourite teacher, my Chinese teacher. (She is) very approachable and beautiful. It is because she can understand our thoughts better… we like such teacher.* (Nana)

> *My Chinese teacher. She is in her early 20s, almost the same age as us, and she shares a lot of topics to talk about with us.* (Fei)

The Chinese teacher is very easy to get along with, and she also has topics to chat with us. There is no distance between us. The Chinese classroom atmosphere is very relaxed. (Jie)

The teacher's warm and friendly approach, coupled with her willingness to engage in conversation and share her experiences, allowed her to form a strong bond with migrant children. The teacher's approachability helped her to understand children's thoughts and respond to their questions with kindness and patience. Such an environment created a relaxed and supportive classroom environment and reinforced the importance of effective communication between teachers and students.

Conversely, teachers who were perceived as too strict, had a bad temper, or were unapproachable likely faced challenges building positive relationships with migrant children. Such teachers could be viewed as uncaring or uninterested in children's well-being and might unintentionally cause children to experience pressure, anxiety, or fear, which can hinder their learning and result in a negative attitude towards the teacher. For example, children viewed the Mathematics teacher as strict and intimidating, while English teacher was seen as impatient and easily irritated.

I don't like my English teacher… Several students in our class don't like her either… she is very strict… when we make mistakes in homework and have to correct it several times, she will get very impatient and yell at us directly in the class, which is very annoying and stressful. (Dudu)

Meanwhile, Nana perceived that the English teacher exhibited gender discrimination, as she seemed to favour boys over girls in her attitude and interactions with them.

What she said is very unpleasant, especially when she criticises the girls… she speaks very harshly, and she also speaks about the girls' problems in front of the whole class. She's not so serious when she criticises boys. I think it is a kind of humiliation as she has a very bad attitude towards girls… (Nana)

The personality traits of teachers, such as impatience, strictness, coldness, and gender bias, had a direct and negative impact on children's attitudes towards teachers. Moreover, these negative traits can cause psychological distress for children, making it more challenging for them to learn and grow in a classroom environment.

In addition, positive attitudes of migrant children towards their teachers were found to have a direct correlation with their academic performance in the corresponding courses. Popular teachers could create a positive and relaxed learning environment, which could in turn enhance children's motivation to learn. This point is validated in the student performance analysis of section 5.5.1.1. Overall, the impact of teachers' approachability and temperament on children could not be over-emphasised, as it had a lasting effect on their academic performance and attitude towards education.

6.3.2.2 Teachers' competency

From interviews with migrant students, some students had poor listening comprehension skills in certain courses. Part of the reason from my observations and children's interviews was that the teacher's language expression was not clear enough, such as speaking with an accent, or not explaining difficult-to-understand terms in a more comprehensible way, leading to learning obstacles for these migrant students.

The chemistry teacher's lesson was not in Mandarin but with his accent, so I can't understand what he's saying. Therefore, I can only sleep or do homework for other subjects. (Lili)

The way the chemistry teacher speaks is incomprehensible to me because he speaks with a dialect, so I can't understand what he's saying at all, and listening to his lesson becomes a barrier for me. (Zihao)

In the case of physics, the main issue is that the teacher doesn't explain the concepts or what they mean, which makes it very difficult for me to understand. (Xiaojun)

For migrant children from different provinces and cities who migrated into Beijing, having a teacher that does not standard Mandrin would inevitably lead to comprehension barriers. In addition, teachers' failure to provide detailed explanations of professional terms prevented students from better understanding the course content. The lack of language expression ability posed a fundamental disadvantage. In most state schools, teachers with teaching qualifications possess sufficient language expression ability. However, for migrant children's schools in Beijing, which faced financial difficulties and had poor occupational attractiveness, finding qualified teachers who met even the basic requirements was extremely challenging.

Secondly, whether a teacher can adopt appropriate teaching methods and strategies was closely related to the course experience of migrant students. Some migrant children reported that teachers in certain courses used engaging teaching methods, such as displaying videos or conducting experiments, to attract students' attention. These methods can even compensate for the teacher's shortcomings in expression ability. However, for some other courses, teachers may simply read from textbooks or recite from PowerPoint slides without teaching passion and engagement. This caused students to become weary and disinterested in this subject.

For example, concerning the chemistry teacher, Yifan's feelings differed from those of Lili and Zihao. He was not bothered by the teacher's accent and dialect but was very interested in the teaching methods used.

> *The chemistry teacher shows videos in class, and the chemistry videos are quite interesting. The experiments he conducts are also fascinating, so I quite enjoy attending the class.* (Yifan)

For courses where the teacher merely stuck to the textbook and only reiterated the contents of the PowerPoint, migrant children reported feeling quite bored. Especially when students were expecting information beyond the textbook, if the teacher cannot effectively expand on external content, students' attention can quickly be diverted, which led to a sense of weariness towards the course. In contrast, teachers who employed engaging teaching methods and expanded on content outside of the textbook were able to capture the students' attention and stimulate their interest in learning.

> *For example, with courses like politics and history, I simply can't understand them. Listening to the lecture is like hearing a boring chant; I feel sleepy as I listen. She just reads exactly from the PowerPoint content… I'm nearsighted and sit in the second row near the classroom podium, and I can't even see the words on the PowerPoint, nor can I understand what's being said. So, I end up falling asleep.* (Jie)

> *The political class itself should be expanded, but he (the teacher) repeated reading on that concept. So, I find it very dull, and it feels like tedious textbook knowledge.* (Xiaojun)

The interviews with migrant students revealed essential insights into their classroom experiences and their perceptions of teaching methods. A recurring focus was their need of teachers' competence of clear communication and engaging teaching strategies.

6.3.2.3 Teacher academic support

While two migrant children reported that their teachers provided academic support, this was limited to answering questions related to the knowledge points of this lesson in the classroom environment and did not extend to additional academic guidance. Unfortunately, the remaining 19 migrant children (90.48%, N=21) explicitly stated that they had not received any academic support from teachers. They reported that teachers did not take the initiative to contact students after class, and they would not communicate with teachers either. The lack of interaction and communication between teachers and migrant children outside of the classroom indicated that the academic bond between children and teachers after class was weak.

When encountering difficulties with their homework, most migrant children tended not to ask teachers for help. This lack of seeking academic help from teachers demonstrated that children might not have a close relationship with their teachers and felt uncomfortable seeking teachers' academic support. Children who had poor academic performance reported that they were hesitant to seek academic help from teachers, primarily due to their low educational attainments and fear of criticism. They believed that their academic abilities were so insufficient that they were incapable of improving their grades or understanding teachers' explanation. Additionally, they felt that teachers would criticise them for their poor performance, which may lead to a loss of self-esteem and further reluctance to seek academic help.

I feel a little embarrassed to ask the teacher for help. (Xinxin)

I just don't want to ask the teacher… (even if I do,) the teacher explains a lot, but I can't understand it. (Dudu)

I seldom ask teachers for help, because I am afraid of being criticised by the teacher. If I ask an easy question, it means I haven't been paying attention during class, so I don't want to ask anymore. (Kai)

Surprisingly, not only do migrant children with poor academic performance hesitate to ask their teachers questions, but also high-achieving children were unwilling to seek academic help from their teachers.

I feel ashamed to ask the teacher, so I don't want to go and ask. I feel like I would 'lose face'. (Siyu, rank top in class)

I used to be less talkative, so I wouldn't talk to the teacher about my difficulties. I have never asked the teacher for help before. (Xiaojun)

Siyu's reluctance to seek academic help from teachers due to feeling ashamed and 'losing face', referred to his fear of damaging his image as a diligent student in the eyes of the teacher and his peers, as well as his fear of arousing doubts about his learning abilities by other children and teachers. Siyu consistently strived for excellence, and peers appreciated his academic achievements. Asking for academic support can be acknowledged that his academic abilities had regressed or that he might be experiencing difficulties with his learning attitude. Therefore, when he encountered difficulties with

his homework, he preferred to solve them independently, such as searching for explanations online via his mobile phone, rather than asking teachers for help.

6.3.2.4 Teacher-student relationship

Migrant children's personal experience with teachers was commonly manifested in the attitudes that children held towards their teachers. When teachers demonstrated care and concern for children's lives and wellbeing, children were more likely to have a positive attitude towards teachers. Conversely, teachers who brought physical or psychological harm to children might face reluctant contact and even resentment from their students, resulting in a strained teacher-student relationship, which negatively affected migrant children's educational experience in schools.

Xing, for example, expressed admiration for all his teachers, explaining his positive experiences with a teacher at his previous migrant children school. During that time, a male teacher provided Xing with care and support, leaving a lasting impression and warmth on him. Xing's childhood was marked by parental divorce and his mother's several remarriages caused him to have limited relationship with his biological father, and he expressed strong need for a father figure in his life This need was fulfilled by this male teacher who demonstrated love and care towards Xing, providing sufficient emotional support and companionship. The teacher's positive impact on his life made Xing feel a deep sense of closeness towards him, resulting in a strong affinity towards all his teachers in general.

Another migrant child, Lupeng, also received exceptional care and attention from his homeroom teacher, who treated him with kindness and care when he was ill and made him feel as if he was being cared for by his mother. This helped Lupeng have a deep sense of respect and willingness to cooperate with teachers in the school.

These examples demonstrated the significance of teachers being compassionate and attentive to migrant children's needs beyond the classroom. Despite not performing well academically, Xing and Lupeng both had a positive experience with their school and teachers, which made their educational experience enjoyable. They both maintained a positive mental state while attending school, and the supportive environment created by the school and their teachers contributed to their overall positive experience.

Some migrant children also held a negative perspective towards their teachers, claiming that the teacher-student relationship was strained. Children's negative attitude towards teachers had various factors such as unfair treatment or a lack of respect. For example, Jie appeared to be hesitant or unwilling to engage in any form of contact or communication with teachers due to her past experience of abuse during childhood, as she said,

> *If a teacher takes the initiative to talk to me, I will feel very nervous… I will fear that the teacher comes to find my faults, that I did something wrong or said something wrong… When I was in kindergarten, there was a teacher who had a very bad attitude towards children and had abusive behaviours like physically beating and kicking students. She strangled my neck and kicked me once, so I didn't dare to face the teacher.*

Jie's experience of being physically abused by a kindergarten teacher had a negative impact on her psychological well-being. This traumatic experience left her with a deep fear of teachers, making her hesitant to engage in any form of contact or communication with them. When approached by the teacher, her initial response was fear and self-reflection, and she tended to blame herself for the reason why the teacher came to her. Due to the negative relationship, she had with that kindergarten

teacher, the image of all teachers represented a source of pressure and anxiety for her, leading to her reluctance to chat with teachers or interact with them during her studies.

Yiming, who also disliked teachers because of past negative conflicts and experiences with teachers, said,

> *Last year I knitted a scarf in class… the homeroom teacher confiscated it from me, and then she asked another teacher to come and see… that teacher picked up my scarf and knit it randomly. She didn't get my consent, and I hated her very much. She didn't ask me if I would let her knit my scarf… The homeroom teacher was right to confiscate my scarf in class, but the teacher in that other class didn't have the right to touch my things without my consent. That incident hit me hard, and I have disliked the teacher ever since.*

From Yiming's words and body language, it was apparent that she was angry at the teacher's behaviour of touching her personal belongings without consent. As highlighted in the section of children's attitudes towards attending school above, Yiming lacked interest in attending school due to her poor academic performance and lacked motivation in acquiring new knowledge. She viewed that going to school was a waste of time and money. The teacher's disrespect towards her belongings only fuelled her resentment towards the school and teachers, leading to her unpleasant learning experience and a deep sense of detachment from the school community.

In summary, the attitude of migrant children towards their teachers had a significant impact on their educational experience. When teachers showed attention and emotional support for children's wellbeing and needs, migrant children who lacked the care of their parents were more likely to have a positive attitude towards their teachers. However, some migrant children also held a negative perspective towards their teachers due to unfair treatment or a lack of respect. Such negative teacher-

student relationship created a significant obstacle to migrant children's learning and educational experience in schools.

6.3.3 Children's attitudes towards classrooms

Migrant children's participation and interaction in the classroom were limited as most children were inactive. My classroom observation confirmed this, reflecting a significant 'insufficient student engagement' when in the classroom. In almost every lesson, only two or three children actively participated in listening and answering questions. Most the students were inactive during the class, reading novels unrelated to the lesson, playing mobile games with their heads down, doing homework for other subjects, lying on the desks sleeping, chatting quietly with students around them.

Firstly, there was a lack of good learning atmosphere in the class. This was reflected by almost all migrant children, both those who did well and poorly in exams explicitly mentioned this significant factor. For example, Beibei said that only a few students learned every day in the class. Without good learning atmosphere, she was unwilling to study. Similarly, Nana said that no one sitting around her put effort on study and that she did not have learning motivation. The deterioration of this learning atmosphere gradually led the entire class into a state of low participation and engagement. The homeroom teacher also reported that except for one or two children, almost no one was studying with efforts, especially after COVID-19 epidemic in their Year 8 when all children had to take online courses at home for a whole term.

Beibei mentioned that the online courses were even less effective and that no students were listening to the class seriously. This was also reflected in interviews with the homeroom teacher. She said that when children returned to school in Year 9, she saw a precipitous drop in the test scores of the whole

class in the mid-term exams of the first term, and even the top student failed one exam. It felt like almost none of the migrant children took their studies seriously during the six months they were at home due to the epidemic.

Secondly, from my classroom observation, the classroom environment was dull and uninteresting. Many migrant children also used the word 'boring' to describe the classroom atmosphere they experienced.

> *I feel that the education at this school is quite boring, and I find the teachers' lectures extremely boring, so I don't want to listen. The classes are uninteresting, and I can't help but yawn as soon as the teacher starts lecturing.* (Siyu)

The dull classroom environment was closely related to the teachers' competence and teaching methods, as well as the students' ability to understand the course itself as mentioned above. In addition, some migrant children who had experienced transitioning between state schools in their rural hometowns and migrant children schools in Beijing had profound feelings about the differences in classroom management between different schools. For example,

> *The education here is not the same as the state-school education in my hometown. The management in this school is too lax, too perfunctory. I feel it's becoming more and more so. It was a bit stricter in elementary school, but now our teachers don't dare to be strict. They aren't as strict as they were in elementary school.* (Nana)

Thirdly, the difference in the emphasis of subjects also played a role in the classroom environment. In final exams, subjects like Chinese, Mathematics, and English carried more weight in terms of scores than other subjects. These subjects were thus referred to as 'main courses' and both teachers and

students placed greater emphasis on them. The management of the main course teachers tended to be stricter compared to teachers of supplementary subjects, leading to lower student engagement in those supplementary classes.

> *During classes, I usually don't fall asleep, especially during Mr. Yao's Mathematics classes or the afternoon English sessions with the homeroom teacher. However, I do feel sleepy during other supplementary classes. The teachers don't care much about my sleep.* (Siyu)

> *There's no need to focus on supplementary subjects; I don't feel much about them. So, when we have those classes, we don't listen to the teacher; we just do our own thing, like doing homework, reading books, or sleeping.* (Hui)

Therefore, the delineation between main and supplementary subjects significantly impacted student' engagement and classroom dynamics. The elevated importance given to subjects like Chinese, Mathematics, and English raised an environment where teachers exerted stricter control and where students focused their attention and effort. Conversely, the supplementary subjects suffered from reduced attention and a more laxed attitude, both from teachers and migrant children.

In addition, from my classroom observations, a clear connection emerged between academic performance and classroom engagement among migrant children. Specifically, children with lower academic achievements tended to exhibit reduced engagement in classroom activities, whereas those performing well academically demonstrated active participation in general. In this context, children who struggled academically suffered from diminished confidence regarding their learning abilities. Their lack of subject understanding and confidence in their capacity to succeed academically caused a barrier to active engagement in their learning, which resulted in what appeared to be a self-perpetuating cycle, where reduced classroom participation led to further academic decline.

Conversely, children who experienced academic success (in this study two – three migrant children) expressed higher levels of confidence, driving them to participate actively in the classroom. Their belief in their ability to achieve reinforced positive behaviours, such as attentiveness and perseverance, and then enhanced their learning experience.

6.4 Social interactions and peer relationships

6.4.1 Friendship formation

6.4.1.1 Similar personality traits and behavioural patterns

Shared traits and behavioural patterns were seen by many interviewed migrant children as the foundation for establishing friendships. They believed that these similarities played a vital role in creating and sustaining their friendships. These common characteristics could encompass personal traits and patterns of behaviour. Many children mentioned a preference for choosing friends with similar personalities, particularly those who were cheerful, straightforward, and sincere. These shared qualities provided them with a sense of understanding and closeness, forming the basis of their friendships.

Kai, Yifan, Nana, and Xinxin all mentioned that their similar personalities and compatibility contributed to the formation of friendships with others. Apart from their similar personalities, their common behavioural patterns as well as their shared experiences and mutual understanding, functioned as crucial bonding elements. These habitual behaviours included a shared sense of humour, an inherent understanding of each other's emotions and thoughts, and a mutual aversion to confrontational behaviour. Each of these traits among migrant children formed an integral part of their collective identity, providing them with a platform for connection and mutual understanding.

In addition, Wenwen saw a reflection of herself in Hui, recognising a strong similarity in their personalities and patterns of behaviour. For example, both were not good with words, were straightforward in their dealings with others, and had a more introverted personality. These shared characteristics created a profound sense of understanding between them. Likewise, Lulu found a kindred spirit in Xiaomei, primarily because they both possessed thoughtful and introspective minds as she said. This common trait formed a bridge of understanding between them, allowing for a deeper connection and a mutual sense of empathy. It was through these shared behaviours among migrant children that they found common ground, making it easier for them to understand each other, empathise with each other's experiences, and create deeper connections. The friendships of migrant children that resulted from these shared patterns and experiences were thus more resilient and enduring, creating a solid foundation for mutual support and growth.

It is important to note that the dynamics of friendships among migrant children were not static but subject to change. These children, being in the sensitive adolescent period, underwent significant personality and behavioural developments which can affect their relationships. Friendships formed on the basis of similar personalities or behaviours fluctuated as these children grew. Additionally, external factors such as seating rearrangements or the introduction of new classmates can also impact these relationships. For instance, Lili noted changes in her friendship with Wenwen due to shifts in their personalities – Wenwen becoming more irritable and Lili becoming more easy-going. Conversely, Jie experienced how external changes like changed seating disrupted her friendship with Beibei, although they eventually reconnected after Beibei became displeased with the habits of new friends.

In conclusion, it was evident that shared personality traits and behavioural patterns were pivotal in establishing friendships among migrant children. However, these relationships underwent shifts due to personal transformations or changes in external circumstances. Nevertheless, despite the

temporary challenges, the similarity in personalities and behavioural patterns can withstand such fluctuations, and children still maintained friendships with classmates who were similar to themselves.

6.4.1.2 Similar interests and shared experience

Engaging in activities centred around shared interests undoubtedly enhanced children's mutual communication and interaction. These similar interests, such as enjoying the same sports activities, playing games, or being interested in the same things as gossip news in the entertainment industry directly facilitated more opportunities for children to spend time together in leisure or discussion, thus creating the foundation for their friendships.

Games, playing games, that's how our friendship begins. (Beibei)

The reason for playing with Wenwen is because we share common interests… both of us enjoy going to buy delicious food and we can chat together. We talk about various topics, including learning, but in most of the time it's about gossip, entertainment gossip specifically. We both like it! (Hui)

I enjoy chatting about entertainment gossip with Xinxin at school. It makes me really happy. (Yiming)

I don't have many friends, only Hui. We both enjoy joking around and telling jokes. (Dudu)

We love playing basketball and often play basketball together with Kai, Fei, and Siyu. (Xiaojun)

The games mentioned by Beibei, the entertainment gossip mentioned by Hui and Yiming, as well as the shared jokes mentioned by Dudu all demonstrated the ability of migrant children to engage in more enjoyable interactions when they were with like-minded peers. These interactions helped develop understanding and trust among them, deepening their friendship within a relaxed and joyful atmosphere. Conversely, if there were no shared interests, establishing friendships seems more challenging.

I play very little with other students. They all like to play basketball, but we four (Yulei, Xing, Yifan) usually don't play basketball, and we just like wandering around the school every day. (Zihao)

Because everyone has different interests and hobbies. Some like to chat, some like to play with mobile phones, and some just want to relax by themselves and have their own space. (Lulu)

I don't have many friends in class. I don't need friends. They are annoying and noisy. (Tian)

When these migrant children did not share common interests or hobbies, they struggled to come together and formed friendships. This is a universal phenomenon in any social setting but perhaps more significant for migrant children who often seek a sense of belonging and friendship in Beijing.

Another point that warrants attention is the convergence in entertainment and hobbies among migrant children, as revealed through their interviews. These children did not have a wide range of recreational activities; most of their activities were confined within the school environment. For instance, migrant girls tended to enjoy casual chats, including discussing gossip and telling jokes, while boys tended to focus more on physical activities, wandering around, and playing mobile games. They

primarily established friendships within the school. This was quite a stark contrast when compared with local students attending state schools in Beijing. Non-migrant students often engaged in a rich array of extracurricular activities, such as visiting museum exhibitions and volunteering within their community. In contrast, the hobbies and activities of migrant children were relatively limited.

The limited scope of interests and activities of migrant children in Beijing was potentially a consequence of their circumstances. Most of them resided in urban villages located in the outskirts of the city and there were hardly any educational or recreational state facilities nearby that served migrant children because such resources were primarily concentrated in the central area of Beijing. This distance and the lack of accessible resources exacerbated the difficulties for migrant children to engage in a variety of recreational and learning activities. Furthermore, their families often moved to Beijing only for job opportunities and higher wages without a comprehensive understanding of the city. Adding to long working hours, these parents also lacked the time to lead their children in participating in extracurricular activities or cultivate their interests. This lack of time, familiarity with the city, and access to resources significantly limited the opportunities for migrant children to explore and develop diverse interests or hobbies.

Secondly, shared activities and experiences served as crucial cornerstones in the formation of friendships among migrant children. Through joint engagement in activities, children could build bonds and deepen understanding of each other in the process. For instance, Kai and Xiaojun's experience captured this effectively. They returned together to Xiaojun's hometown to check a damaged water meter, spending several days. It offered an opportunity for a more deep connection between them, enhancing their friendship.

Xiaojun, and Lupeng... we often hang out to play together on weekends or during holidays. The last time I went to Xiaojun's hometown with him to check the water meter. At that time, Xiaojun and I were playing outside when his mom mentioned that there seemed to be a water leakage issue with their hometown house's water meter. She asked him to go and look, and he invited me to go along. We informed his mom about our plans, and my parents also agreed. Can you believe it?! It was just the two of us there for several days! And he only invited me to go, which made me feel trusted! It's great to be friends who trust each other and can take care of each other even when we're away from Beijing! It's an amazing feeling! After returning to school, it is evident that our relationship has improved. (Kai)

In addition, shared past experiences can bring migrant children together and establish closer friendships. Given China's rapid urbanisation and the frequent migration of its population, there were instances of divorce and remarriage among migrant parents, leading to restructured families. Post-divorce, the family underwent shifts in composition and dynamics, which were then further reshaped with remarriage as it introduced new members and additional dynamics. For migrant children, these experiences of family restructuring required them to readjust their expectations, responsibilities, and the formation of close relationships.

From the survey, it was noted that four migrant children (19.04%, N=21) experienced such family restructuring. Among them, Siyu mentioned that his and Xiaojun's backgrounds as children from migrant families were similar, giving them a common understanding as they both were from restructured family. Such comparable experience made him more inclined to become good friends with Xiaojun. Thus, these shared experiences can significantly contribute to bonding between migrant children from similar backgrounds, facilitating the formation of deeper friendships.

Xiaojun... His family is not very perfect either; we are both from a blended family. I live with my father and stepmother. I lost contact with my biological mother when I was very young,

and I hardly have any contact with my three other siblings. Xiaojun is similar to me. His biological father died, and his mother remarried. Both his biological parents had a child before their marriage, and he also lost contact with his other siblings. He is actually worse than me. We became friends because we have similar family background. Sometimes, we can truly understand and support each other. (Siyu)

Siyu believed that a blended family implied an incomplete home. The experience of parents divorcing and remarrying was viewed negatively by him, as he longed for a sense of stability and a complete family with his biological parents. Therefore, when he met Xiaojun, who also came from a blended family, he felt that they both had experienced the challenges of a blended family. Both having gone through the difficulties of a blended family; they could empathise with each other's emotional journey and offer support. This bond stemming from their similar backgrounds as migrant children in blended families created a deeper level friendship.

It is worth mentioning that although 11 of the migrant children (52.38%, N=21) experienced changing schools between their hometowns and Beijing; their shared experiences of frequent school transfers did not serve as the sole basis for their friendships. Instead, it was almost their shared experiences within the school environment that formed the foundation of their friendships. This highlighted that the friendships among migrant children were built through everyday interactions, mutual support, and deepening communication they engaged in while attending school in Beijing.

6.4.2 Peer interactions and influence

6.4.2.1 Learning and role-modelling

First and foremost, mutual aid in academics study was a prevalent practice among migrant children. Despite the fact that they often did not place a high priority on formal education due to their low

academic performance, there were cases where they expressed a collaborative spirit in learning. Some children had specifically mentioned the practice of assisting each other in their day-to-day lives, which included seeking and offering help on academic matters.

[I] Having many friends feels like having brothers… the kind of friendships is more about mutual support. Sometimes we can ask each other about study or homework and provide help to one another. (Zihao)

[my friend is] Hui, sometimes I ask her about some difficult questions that I cannot answer in my studies. (Dudu)

My friends sometimes provide me with help in my studies. (Hui)

Friends have helped me study and taught me some principles of doing things. (Yifan)

Zihao mentioned that his friends were like brothers who can help each other in their studies. Dudu and Hui also stated that they sometimes engaged in academic discussion. Learning occupied a large proportion in life and making friends of migrant children. Therefore, for migrant children, when considering whom to build friendships with, his or her academic performance became an important factor to consider. For example, when Xiaojun talked about the reasons for establishing a strong friendship with Fei, he specifically mentioned, "One more thing about Fei that we become friends is that he is good at studying". In the eyes of migrant children, they preferred to be friends with classmates who had good academic performance, which indicated that they had a purpose in choosing their friends and were wished to be like them. Consequently, the modelling role of friends was also an aspect valued by migrant children when interacting with academically successful peers. Some children mentioned that they were able to learn from their peers and imitate their strengths.

This perspective stressed the migrant children's recognition of the significance of education and the influential presence of role models, even amidst their unique circumstances. For example, Lupeng, despite his struggles with academic performance and his relatively modest expectations for his grades and future, still maintained an affirmative stance towards education and admired his peers who excelled academically. He was able to see beyond his personal situation, appreciating the admirable qualities in his high-performing peers. This demonstrated an intrinsic understanding among migrant children that success, represented in this context by high academic achievement, was a commendable quality. This viewpoint held true regardless of their own academic performance. Therefore, when it came to choosing friends, migrant children's choices were not primarily influenced by their own academic performance. Instead, they were more likely to consider the other person's academic achievements and other commendable attributes.

In the context of migrant children in Beijing, these observations highlighted how education, often considered a personal endeavour, took on a communal and social aspect. Despite their migrant lifestyles and the various challenges associated with being a migrant child, they clearly perceived the value of education and acknowledged the importance of peer role models. This not only affected their attitudes towards their studies but also influenced their social interactions, including their choice of friends.

6.4.2.2 Emotional support and help

Emotional support and mutual assistance formed a critical element of peer interactions among migrant children in Beijing. Due to migrant parents' long working hours, they possibly hardly have enough time and energy to provide the necessary emotional support and attention their children need.

In such circumstances, peer support became a critical part of these children's lives, often filling the gaps left by the absence of parental attention. By standing in for family in offering emotional support and comfort, and extending help to each other during challenging times, these migrant children not only significantly reinforced their bonds of friendship, but also provided them with a sense of belonging. As recounted by the children themselves, they valued friends who provided comfort during periods of emotional distress.

One time, Wenwen seemed upset at school and I comforted her. After that, we became good friends… Xiaomei has excellent communication skills and she knows how to comfort me without being impatient. When I'm feeling down, she comes to cheer me up. It's that feeling of caring for each other. (Lili)

Sometimes when I'm feeling unhappy, Lupeng would take the initiative to chat with me or persuade me to engage in activities together. He just hopes me feel better… Also, I remember one time when my parents… my mom and her boyfriend actually… had an argument at home and I had nowhere to stay at night, I had to call my classmates… It was Xing... I lived close to Xing, so I stayed at his room at that night. (Xiaojun)

Sometimes, he [Xiaojun] would say to me, "Lupeng, I'm feeling a bit down now. How about we go out and have some fun?". I would respond, "Of course, I can help you. If there's any problem, I can try to solve it. I may not be able to assist with big matters, but I can still lend a hand with small ones." (Lupeng)

Xinxin and I share similar values, and we communicate well with each other. She is good at comforting me and has a warm-hearted nature. Only we comfort each other when we encounter unhappy situations. (Yiming)

Lili, Xiaojun, and Yiming, each illustrated the vital role their friendships that played in their lives. During times of personal hardship, their friends became their primary source of emotional support, demonstrating the unique power and importance of these relationships. Migrant children understood their friends' struggles deeply and provided the emotional support that was often lacking from migrant family environment. This support is not just beneficial, it seems to be integral to their mental well-being.

It can also be observed that migrant children tend to communicate and shared personal feelings more with their peers than with their parents. Migrant parents, as discussed above, were often engaged in heavy and time-pressing work, leaving them unable to invest sufficient time and energy in in-depth communication with their children. This situation negatively impacted migrant children, who often lacked the necessary support in terms of emotions, identity, and sense of belonging. Moreover, the limited interaction between migrant parents and children further inhibited the parents' understanding of their child's psychological state and needs, thereby significantly weakening their parent-child relationship and exacerbating the emotional gap between them. Under such circumstances, migrant children were more willing to interact and share with their peers as Nana and Yiming. This was likely because they find understanding and support among them. Their peers, also migrant children, were in the same age group and were facing similar dilemmas and challenges. Hence, they can better comprehend each other's feelings and experiences.

6.4.2.3 Share of future life planning

Interactions among migrant children were not limited to emotional support and daily chores, but even extended to future life planning. For instance, in the class, 14 out of 21 migrant children (66.67%) expressed that they had shared their future plan ideas with their peers, including prospective careers

and objectives they hoped to achieve. This suggested that migrant children sought not only emotional support in their mutual aid but also guidance and suggestions for the future.

Xiaomei is also pretty good, and she is better at solving problems. I usually go to her when I encounter problems that are difficult to solve. We also talked about future plans… Lulu, she is franker… you know, she is willing to share and she wanted to be a kindergarten teacher in the future. she tells me everything. (Yiming)

Lulu has made it very clear that she wants to study early childhood education. She has already visited schools for that purpose. Other classmates have also mentioned their aspirations for the future, but they are not as determined as Lulu. (Nana)

My classmate [Yulei] said that doing automotive repair is great. I also think it's not bad, so I would like to choose to learn automotive repair in the future. (Yifan)

I have communicated with Jie, and I want to study pastry. We also agree to discuss our choice of vocational school together in the future. (Beibei)

In conclusion, peer interactions played a critical role in shaping the futures of migrant children in Beijing, helping as a vital forum for exchanging ideas, aspirations, and solutions to challenges. For example, Yiming's understanding of Lulu's motivation to become a kindergarten teacher, or Beibei and Jie's joint decision on a vocational school, highlighted how peers significantly influenced their views on future plans. Similarly, Yifan's interest in automotive repair, sparked by his classmate Yulei, showed the direct impact of these interactions on career choices. Despite individual differences, the shared discussions about uncertainty and possibilities helped strengthen their communal bonds and provided a supportive network for navigating future decisions.

6.4.3 Acceptance and belonging

6.4.3.1 Connection with Beijing community

During the interview, it was found that although these migrant families lived in Beijing, the majority of their rented places were surrounded by other migrant families. The places they rented were called urban villages, and many non-locals gathered. As it can be seen from Table 18 below, 16 migrant children (76.19%) felt that people living around their homes were migrant workers; while only 2 children (9.52%) felt that their neighbours were mostly local people. This suggested that most of the people these migrant families came into contact with are migrant workers, and they had little contact with non-migrant residents.

Table 18: The amount of rural-registered neighbours

	Only a few	Some	Majority	Most
How many neighbours do you think are rural registered in your community now?	2 (9.52%)	3 (14.29%)	7 (33.33%)	9 (42.86%)

Interestingly, migrant children had their own way of distinguishing between locals and migrants. 6 children shared their ways to distinguish was accent identification (28.57%). For example,

I believe more migrant workers… there are mixed accents when listening to people speak in the street. (Xiaomei)

Many of the accents don't sound very local to Beijing. (Beibei)

There is a shopping centre street on the way to school… it is so crowded that sometimes I can hear various accents. (Zihao)

273

In addition to distinguishing from the accent, migrant residents can be identified from the hometowns of their neighbours and friends. For instance,

> *Basically, they are all from Henan province… those people living in that building next to our house are all from Henan… because we are neighbours… we talk to each other and have asked where they are from.* (Yulei)

From the perspective of parents' friends, Xinxin shared that most of her mother's friends were from other provinces. Some had already known each other earlier at hometown, while some others they met later in Beijing. Another obvious example was during the Chinese New Year. Xing said that the people around were almost gone during that time because they all went back to their hometowns for Chinese New Year.

As can be seen from the table below, migrant children did not have frequent contact with either their local Beijing neighbours or their migrant neighbours. None of them described always contacting their local or migrant neighbours (0%, N = 21), and the vast majority reported being in contact with their neighbours rarely both with local neighbours (71.43%, N = 21) and migrant neighbours (76.19%, N = 21). For rarely contacting with Beijing local neighbours, the reasons could be summarised in three types. The first was that migrant children had little contact with local children. For example, Xinxin said that she did not have much contact with local children in Beijing and only knew one local Beijing child. Furthermore, Yiming shared that she used to frequently play with local children during summer holidays, but now local children were in state schools in Beijing, and they did not see each other much when they went to school. Most of the migrant children living around were other migrant families and

then they had limited access to local children. Also, because they attended different schools, it was difficult to get in touch with local children.

The second reason was that migrant children themselves were less willing to contact neighbours. Jie mentioned that she had a little social anxiety disorder and she did not like to talk much when she talked to others because of fear. She was reluctant to start a conversation with her neighbours. In addition, Lupeng said that he did not have much contact with his neighbours as a result of living on campus, so there were few contacts with local children; due to living on campus for a long time, he preferred to stay at home alone during weekends. These children did not communicate and interact with their neighbours in their daily lives, so it was unsurprising that they did not know their neighbours or not contact them frequently.

The third reason was that although they knew their neighbours, these migrant children only greeted their neighbours without saying anything else. For example, Siyu said that every time he entered the village the place where he lived, he would just say hello to the group of people sitting and chatting at the entrance of the village, and he went straight home after that. There were also children who mentioned that they had no contact with their local neighbours, but they had a lot of contact with the landlord. Fei said that he lived in the same house as his landlord for a long time, who witnessed his growth and often asked him about his life and studies.

Only one migrant child mentioned having contact with his local neighbours sometimes, mainly because his father would get together with the neighbours for a chat and a drink, so he became acquainted with them as well. Another 5 children said that they did not know their local neighbours because they generally stayed at home by themselves and did not communicate with others, which

was somewhat similar to the feelings of children who rarely contact their local neighbours. In short, the frequency of contact between migrant children and local neighbours and children was very low.

Table 19: Children's contact with local, migrant neighbourhood and contact with rural relatives

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
How often do you contact with your local neighbours?	0 (0%)	1 (4.76%)	15 (71.43%)	5 (23.81%)
How often do you contact with your migrant neighbours?	0 (0%)	3 (14.29%)	16 (76.19%)	2 (9.52%)
How often do you contact with the rural relatives in your hometown?	3 (14.29%)	10 (47.62%)	8 (38.1%)	0 (0%)

Compared with contacting local neighbours, the distribution of contact frequencies of migrant children with their migrant neighbours was extremely similar. Most migrant children reported rare contact with their migrant neighbours (76.19%, N = 21) as Xiaojun said that he did not usually contact his migrant neighbours, because they were all out at work and they cannot see each other for a whole day. Migrant workers went out to work during the day and returned home at night, leaving early and returning late. On weekdays, the children got up very early in the morning to go to school, around 6 a.m., the neighbours had not gotten up yet, and in the afternoon when the children returned home from school, the migrant neighbours were still at work. Therefore, there was little chance of contacting them during the week.

The mobility of migrant workers and the instability of rental housing (i.e, forced move due to demolition mentioned previously), greatly affected migrant children's contact with their neighbours. For instance, Siyu used to live and attend a school in another village. The neighbours he knew all moved out because of the compulsory demolition. Then his family had to move to the current living

village without knowing anyone here. He did not know much about the people who lived here and had little contact with them.

As mentioned above, most migrant children moved 2-3 times during their stay in Beijing. Each time they moved to a new place; the new neighbours were just strangers for them and they were unfamiliar with the neighbours around. Sometimes they had to move again before they had a chance to get to know their neighbours deeply or have a brief conversation. Therefore, as their experience illustrated, each move to a new location disrupted existing social ties, making neighbours into strangers and severing connections that might have been cultivated over time. This migrant lifestyle often prevented the formation of meaningful relationships within the community, as the time and stability required to grow these connections were continually undermined by the necessity to relocate.

6.4.3.2 Connection with relatives and friends from rural hometowns

When analysing the frequency of contact between migrant children and their rural relatives in hometowns, the distribution of data obtained was opposite to the frequency of contact with neighbours in Beijing. Migrant workers and children generally had high ties to their rural relatives. Although 8 children (38.1%) reported that they rarely contacted with their rural relatives, 13 children (61.9%, N=21) said they always (23.08%, N = 13) and sometimes (76.92%, N = 13) contacted with their rural relatives. The way to get in touch was mostly through phone calls or WeChat voice or video chat. For example, Dudu said that her mother had a WeChat video call with rural relatives twice or once a week. She went back to the rural hometowns staying with grandparents twice a year for winter and summer holidays, and her parents usually went once a year. Lulu also mentioned that her parents were in close contact with their rural relatives, sometimes calling 3-4 times a week. If parents had

strong tie with their rural relatives in their hometown, there was a high probability that migrant children would also be in close contact with them through phone calls or WeChat videos.

In addition, Lulu emphasised the importance of rural friends in hometowns:

> Sometimes when I have free time, I'll make phone calls with my rural friends who grew up together in our hometown, because we won't forget each other… every Chinese New Year, I went back to my hometown to play with them… We've been friends since we were kids and it's impossible to forget or cut off contact.

Lulu has been in Beijing for 12 years. She was born in her hometown but went to school in Beijing all the time. She and her best friends from rural hometown got to know each other well over the winter and summer holidays, and maintained their friendship until now.

Kai was in a similar situation to Lulu. He has been in Beijing for 9 years since kindergarten, but he went back to school in his rural hometown when he was in first grade and had some good friends. Differently, he said that he almost had no contact with his rural friends because he seldom went back to his hometown, maybe once a year. Migrant children lived in Beijing for a long time and did not return to their hometowns regularly, they then had less contact with rural friends.

It was mentioned above that the motivation of parents to contact their rural relatives directly affected the motivation of migrant children, and vice versa. Migrant parents who had little contact with their relatives in their rural hometowns can also lead to children having a blurred sense of belonging to their hometowns and little contact as well. For example, Xiaojun said he rarely got in touch with them, just a phone call during the Chinese New Year holidays. Especially after his grandparents both passed

away, he and his parents rarely go back to their hometown anymore and then have little contact with other rural relatives. Not going back to the hometown for many years can also lead to children having weak awareness of their rural relatives, as Jie said:

I have been in Beijing since I was 2 years old… I sometimes don't know any of my rural relatives because I only go back my hometown once every few years… Rarely. My parents work in Beijing during my holidays, and sometimes I don't go back to my hometown because I don't know where exactly my hometown is and I prefer to stay with my parents… then I don't know my rural relatives very well. Sometimes they ask me whether I remember them or not, and I don't dare to speak at all because I don't even know them. (Jie)

Similar situations also arose in limited interactions with friends from rural hometown.

I also attempted to integrate into the group of classmates from my hometown, but I felt... well, since we weren't familiar with each other anymore, hanging out together felt a bit awkward. In Beijing, everyone speaks Mandarin, but there's a language barrier in my hometown. For example, they speak our local dialect, and my younger brother isn't very fluent in it. Sometimes, he can't understand it, even though I can comprehend it, but I can't speak it. (Yiming)

Although migrant children lived in Beijing for years, their contact with local residents remained limited, largely interacting only with their landlords and occasionally with other migrant families. The frequent relocations and limited communication with their parents' acquaintances meant that these children rarely connected with their migrant neighbours. Additionally, while there was somewhat more interaction with rural relatives driven by their parents, about 40% of migrant children still had minimal contact with their family in rural areas. Some had only visited their rural hometowns once or twice over 15 years, and others, like Beibei, were even unfamiliar with the geographical location of their rural hometowns.

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter revealed the unique educational challenges faced by migrant children in Beijing, marked by a difference between perceived and actual academic performance, and issues like cheating and lax oversight in schools. Many of these children, particularly the high-performers, perceived the education in their rural hometowns as more rigorous than what they received in Beijing, which caused their dissatisfaction with current educational approaches, and had self-doubt and low educational aspirations. Moreover, while higher education remained a goal, systemic obstacles and transitional challenges reduced its feasibility, making it seem like a distant dream despite recognising education's inherent value. Additionally, migrant children's attitudes towards education were greatly shaped by their home environments and familial backgrounds. School often played as a social channel due to monotonous home lives, and the long working hours of parents was also caused children's feelings of neglect. Teacher-student relationships were crucial, with children favouring teachers who were warm, but they frequently lacked teachers' academic support. Socially, friendships among these children were vital, and it provided emotional support amidst their parents' absence. However, limited access to recreational and educational facilities, coupled with minimal interaction with local residents and rural relatives, fostered feelings of isolation and prevented their social integration and identity formation.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This research explores the educational opportunities, experiences, and attainment of migrant children in outer Beijing, focusing on their academic achievements and aspirations. It aims to understand the varied experiences of this group – from school choice and educational reception to the influences of parents, teachers, and schools on their learning journey. Adopting a descriptive approach, the research investigates the current educational status of these children and the complexities and challenges they faced, including an exploration of the underlying reasons for these conditions. This discussion integrates several theoretical frameworks, such as Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital, Goldthorpe's RAT, and Coleman's social capital theory, assessing their relevance in explaining parental roles and children's educational experiences in the Chinese context. This also addresses the challenges of applying Western-developed theories to China, where unique socio-economic conditions and cultural values affect their applicability.

7.2 Migrant children, cultural capital, habitus and field

As evidenced by the literature review in Chapter Two, numerous studies highlighted the apparent influence of cultural capital on the education of migrant children (Ding & Wu, 2023; Huang, 2016; Lu et al., 2022; Yu, 2020b; Zhang et al., 2020). Using Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical perspective, economic, social, and cultural capitals are not only foundational but also interconvertible, with economic capital serving as the base for all other forms of capital. For the migrant families' living experiences in Beijing that this research explored, economic capital appears to be their primary challenge. These migrant parents are predominantly engaged in physically-demanding labour with unstable employment conditions and low wages, sometimes even facing the risk of unemployment. Such instability is compounded by precarious housing situations and further exacerbates their migrant dilemmas.

Additionally, the transient nature of these families inherently limits their ability to acquire significant capitals, including social capital. Under Bourdieu's framework, accumulating cultural capital is particularly challenging for migrant families. These migrant parents, often with low educational backgrounds, scarcely have the time, academic ability, or financial resources to support their children's regular or extracurricular education. This situation supposedly explains why migrant children generally exhibit lower academic performance and suggests that cultural capital among migrant parents and their children is low – when considering cultural capital in a Bourdieuian sense. Additionally, the educational journey of migrant children is further impacted by the long working hours of parents, which often results in minimal parental involvement in their children's education. This lack of engagement can lead to a gap in the support and guidance that children require for their academic and personal development. Parents play a crucial role in accumulating their children's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), with prior research identifying cultural capital as a key driver of educational equality (Hu & Wu, 2019; Lu et al., 2022; Yu, 2020b; Zhu, 2020). This explains why children born into families with higher SES possess cultural advantages. It seems clear, according to social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977), that the children from higher classes are more likely to succeed in education, career development, and income because of their richer cultural capital reservoirs, than their working-class peers. This theory suggests that social and economic advantages are inherited generation by generation not just via money but also through cultural assets such as knowledge, behaviours, and skills.

In particular, and in the literature review, Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified and institutionalised states. Objectified cultural capital comprises material objects, such as books, monuments, artworks, and technical equipment, which can be acquired through inheritance (Bourdieu, 1986). This form of cultural capital is tangible, and its accumulation often requires financial investment, making it particularly challenging for migrant families who might

already be facing economic hardships. The situation highlights a significant issue: except for the essential cost of schooling – which some families can barely afford without resorting to loans or tuition deferment application – migrant families rarely invest in their children's objectified cultural capital. This lack of investment is not merely a result of financial incapacity but also reflects a lack of awareness about the importance of such capital in their children's development and future opportunities. For example, the case of Xiaojun, who faced considerable obstacles while trying to learn an extracurricular musical skill (guitar), stress the rarity and the challenges of acquiring objectified cultural capital within migrant communities. The cost of 1500 yuan per semester (equivalent to approximately £170) represented a significant financial burden for families already struggling to meet basic needs, let alone invest in cultural enrichment. This situation highlights the issue of economic inequality and its impact on cultural access. While wealthier families can afford to provide their children with various forms of objectified cultural capital – enhancing their cultural awareness, skills, and ultimately, their social mobility – children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as migrant families, are often deprived of these opportunities.

Institutionalised cultural capital involves officially recognised degrees or certifications (Bourdieu, 1986), representing acknowledged academic achievements and thus highly valued in the job market, which signifies an individual's academic status and qualifications. This is reflected in the educational level of parents in migrant families; nearly all the parents in migrant families have not received higher education, with most having only completed elementary and lower secondary school education. This level of education is almost equal to or even lower than their children's current educational level, making it difficult for them to provide the corresponding cultural capital to migrant children. It is not just because children have been excluded from higher educational opportunities but because of institutional factors such as income barriers, geographical mobility and possible discrimination. This background puts migrant children at a significant disadvantage in a society where institutionalised

cultural capital remains a major driver of socio-economic mobility and achievement. There is much to this inequality. In the first, it perpetuates a cycle of poverty and limited social mobility among migrants. Lacking access to higher education, these families are struggling to enter jobs or industries that require formal qualifications, thereby limiting their income potential and access to resources that could enhance their migrant children's educational opportunities. Second, the lack of institutionalised cultural capital in migrant families affects the aspirations and self-perception of migrant children. Research has also demonstrated that parental educational attainment is predictive of child's learning and desire (Li & Xie, 2020; Lu et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2020; Yu, 2020b). Children from families with lower levels of education not only are less likely to have access to academic guidance and support at home, but also internalise lower expectations for their own educational and professional futures.

Embodied cultural capital, as described by Bourdieu, refers to the dispositions of the mind and body, which are directly linked to an individual's physical presence and are acquired primarily through socialisation in the family and educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1986). This form of capital is manifested in specific behaviours, habits, and skills. In the context of migrant families, however, while the verbal acknowledgment of the importance of education does not usually translate into behaviour or habits that enable ongoing learning or leverage education to improve migrant families' lives. This indicates that, despite understanding the value of education, migrant parents tend not to encourage the behaviours that promote a culture of learning within the home. After work, the focus shifts to individual relaxation and entertainment, rather than creating space for the learning environment. This non-engagement with their children's learning and the absence of a learning culture at home can have a major impact on the children' development of embodied cultural capital. The behaviours, habits, and skills that are beneficial for academic success and broader personal development are less likely to be cultivated in an environment where education is not actively valued beyond verbal

acknowledgment. This suggests that migrant families are at a disadvantage in terms of accumulating and reproducing cultural capital.

What differentiates educational performance and aspirations in migrant children, as reported in studies (Ding & Wu, 2023; Hu & Wu, 2019; Lu et al., 2022) , highlights one of the most significant features of cultural capital production and how it plays a role in the trajectory of children's lives. It turns out that the migrant children show lower educational outcomes, but higher educational aspirations. This finding is particularly striking, and is the same as Fuller's (2008) research on British girls' educational aspirations. Despite all of them being unable to enter regular high schools – thereby losing the opportunity to pursue university education and being limited to vocational schools in the future – the aspirations they and their parents held were higher. This dichotomy between reality and aspiration highlights a complex interplay of hope, ambition, and the structural barriers encountered by migrant families. In particular, the fact that two students expressed a desire to attend university and many others hoped to enrol in regular high schools rather than vocational schools reflects a strong belief in the value of formal education. It also indicates a resilience and optimism among these children, despite the obstacles they encounter. This optimism is even more pronounced among their migrant parents, who have higher educational expectations for their children than the children themselves according to the children. This phenomenon is caused possible because of the parents' awareness of the competitive labour market and the crucial role of academic credentials in securing a 'good job'. Their aspirations for their children's education are not only rooted in a desire for economic stability and social mobility but also in the hope that their children could break the cycle of poverty and achieve a better life. Indeed, the final academic performance of migrant children, as discussed, reflected the explanatory power of cultural capital and the theory of its reproduction. Despite a social consensus in China that education can change one's fate, migrant families from lower social strata have to confront the impacts of poverty, which causes a paradox where they highly value and have

expectations from education but struggle to achieve favourable outcomes. This dynamic highlights a critical issue at the intersection of social class, cultural capital, and education.

As Chapter Two discussed, a key mediating factor between family economic cultural capital and children's education is parental involvement. Previous research has established a correlation between higher economic capital and more frequent communication between parents and children, greater parental participation in school, cultural and leisure activities, and better academic achievements of children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Li & Xie, 2020; Lu et al., 2022; Yu, 2020b). Compared with low-income households that have limited economic capital, parental engagement in education has declined significantly. This less engagement directly correlates with decreased child academic achievement. Even when parents get involved, the quality and impact of their engagement tends to be compromised by their heavy physical work and inadequate education, as seen in the case of migrant worker parents. The narratives from these migrant children themselves reveal a notable lack of parental engagement in personal learning or self-improvement activities once the parents return home. This pattern points to a significant potential role for cultural reproduction and habitus in shaping the educational paths of migrant children. The concept of habitus, also from Bourdieu (1977), refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences, which in turn shapes their perceptions, actions, and reactions in various contexts, including education. This situation stresses the systemic barriers that lead to the perpetuation of social inequalities through education. Migrant children, despite possessing high educational aspirations, find themselves at a disadvantage due to the combined effects of limited economic resources, reduced parental involvement, and a family habitus that do not align with the cultural expectations of the educational system. It is important to note that this research strongly highlights the ways that economic constraints can limit what people actually go on to do – there is a distinction between ambitions and aspirations, and practice. As mentioned in Section 2.3.1, habitus, field, and capital form

a dynamic and interconnected triad (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 1989). For migrant children, the cultural capital of their families, along with their habitus, is closely related to their educational practices. Together, these elements interact within the intertwined fields of Beijing and its education system, influencing the educational performance and aspirations of migrant children.

In addition, as mentioned in Chapter Two, Goldthorpe (2007) does not view the family as the only place to acquire cultural capital, and the habitus evidence of the previous generation are not entirely inherited by migrant children (Yu, 2020a). This research also supports this observation and finds that migrant children can acquire cultural capital outside of home. They also learn and form new habitus in urban environments like Beijing and become new urban citizens. For instance, they speak standard and fluent Mandarin, know how to correctly use public transport, and utilise various public facilities—skills often lacking in their parents. This phenomenon aligns with the reality of increasingly digital and interconnected world, where the avenues through which children can gain cultural capital extend far beyond the confines of their home environments. The advancement of mobile internet technology has significantly diversified the ways in which migrant children can access cultural capital. This not only democratises access to information and learning opportunities but also introduces a variety of perspectives and experiences that children might not encounter within their immediate family circle. The fact that many children report engaging more with peers – both in school and online – than with their parents in educational matters shows the importance of peer influence as a source forming their cultural capital. This peer engagement includes learning from others whom they see as possessing admirable qualities or skills worth emulating and considering their peers' ideas and advice for future career planning. This is discussed in depth in the following section 7.6 – school, peers and teachers.

When considering the impact of family cultural capital and habitus on children's education, it is essential to acknowledge the differences in its manifestation across cultures, notably between Eastern

and Western contexts. Alternatively, if culture itself is viewed as a kind of field, then the influence of family cultural capital and habitus on children's education also shows variation across different cultural fields. The explanation for the high educational aspirations among migrant parents and their children in China can be rooted in traditional Confucian educational ideals and the specifics of the Chinese educational policy and examination system. In the UK, notions of risk might explain high aspirations, where education is seen as essential for entry into most jobs and training. Confucian culture, widely embraced in East Asia, emphasises self-effort and continuous education. This cultural ethos supports the idea that academic achievements in China are more independent of family background compared to Western countries (Davis-Kean, 2005; Li & Xie, 2020; Stevenson & Stigler, 1994). The former's reliance on examination outcomes rather than being correlated with family background (Zhu, 2020) as the sole criterion for educational advancement China's exam-oriented education system. The examination-oriented education policy in China dictates that students' progression to higher educational institutions relies solely on their performance in final exams. This meritocratic system means that the opportunity for advancement is superficially available to all, irrespective of family background, contrasting sharply with the admission systems in many Western countries, which includes evaluations of a candidate's physical or artistic talents, community service, personal interests, and other aspects that can reflect and benefit from the family's SES (Scandurra & Calero, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings by Hu and Wu (2019) suggest that for middle-class families in China, engagement in cultural activities, while enriching, inadvertently detracted from academic performance. This is because the time and resources devoted to such activities could otherwise be allocated to the rigorous practice and memorisation required by China's heavily exam-focused education system, particularly in preparation for the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao). This essential exam determines eligibility for higher education and future SES, and the competitive

nature of the Gaokao necessitates extensive preparation. Hence, time spent on cultural activities might negatively impact academic outcomes in core subjects. Conversely, migrant children from working-class families, with fewer opportunities for such cultural engagement, often focus more on academics as a means to improve their socio-economic standing. This drive is rooted in the Confucian value of perseverance and hard work as pathways to success, which suggests that a lack of cultural capital can sometimes acted as a motivator for academic achievement.

My findings agree with those of Fuller (2008) in the UK and Ma and Wu (2019) in China and indicate that, despite high aspirations, these migrant children do not achieve the exam success that would facilitate their progression within the educational system. This reflects Bourdieu's thinking on cultural capital and habitus, and implies that the challenges faced by migrant children in China are consistent with the difficulties faced by underprivileged groups in other contexts or fields in leveraging cultural capital for educational success. In depth, this reflection on the universal impacted of poverty on educational outcomes, even across cultural or political divides such as China's and the UK's, strikes a profound chord when the education system is viewed as a field. In this field, poverty is not only an individual 'deficiency' but also a manifestation of social structures where dominators consolidate their positions by maintaining unequal distribution of educational resources, while the dominated are unable to shift their social trajectories due to a lack of resources. As evidence in Fuller (2008) research, the parents are cleaners or taxi drivers, have low paid work or not work at all, and they want their children to do better than them in life and education. This highlights a commonality that transcend geographical and ideological divides: the aspiration of parents, irrespective of their SES or occupation, for their children to achieve more than they do, particularly through education. The contradiction between collectivism in Chinese society and individualism in the UK does not weak the education impact of poverty. In both contexts, poverty seems to act as a barrier to learning and academic achievement, affecting children's educational paths. Such universal struggle against the limitations

imposed by poverty points to a global challenge in education: equal opportunity for all, regardless of their economic background. This situation calls for a deeper understanding of the intersection between poverty, cultural capital, and education. Cultural and familial conditions may vary from one country to another, but poverty does play a central role, and children from impoverished backgrounds often face significant disadvantages in their education.

The findings of my research demonstrate that cultural capital and habitus play an essential relevant part in the educational paths and experience of migrant children. Many of these children fail to secure desirable high school placements, and many are forced to attend vocational schools with lower entry requirements or quitting school at an early age because of systemic disadvantages that limit their access to quality education. Despite these challenges, the educational aspirations within migrant families remains high, influenced by China's exam-centric educational system. However, these aspirations often do not translate into practical help or better life outcomes because of parents' poor education and a working life. This disconnect highlights the importance of external sources of cultural capital. My research also finds that in Beijing urban environments and its education system fields, migrant children's habitus partially breaks free from intergenerational reproduction to form their own practices. For instance, they shift from relying on family to using educational applications on smartphones for homework help or seeking assistance from higher-achieving peers to address their academic shortcomings. This illustrates a change in the patterns of habitus and cultural capital formation. In an era of information overload, the ways young people access information are changing at lightning speed. Their cultural preferences and habitus are increasingly influenced and shaped by peers and media rather than parents, indicating a shift towards more autonomous forms of acquiring habitus and cultural capital in the urban education system field.

7.3 Family and emotional capital

As discussed, Bourdieu's framework of different forms of capital – social, cultural, and economic—is a powerful instrument for studying how various inequalities are perpetuated within society, particularly through education. It effectively explains the ways in which young people can be disadvantaged by their lack of access to these forms of capital, which are often critical for success within the educational system and beyond. Yet in the case of aspirations, Bourdieu's theory encounters some limitations. Aspirations – what individuals think about the future – are shaped a multitude of factors including but not limited to social and cultural capital. While Bourdieu acknowledges that the habitus (a person's dispositions and perceptions formed by their environment) influences aspirations, his framework aims to stress the limits of one's social status rather than the possibility of one reaching outside one's situation. This is also prone to a deterministic theory of social mobility, one that gives much more weight to reproduction of social systems than to the agency people might take to change their paths.

Coleman's (1988) theory of family capital is a key frame through which to conceptualise migrant children's education, and emphasises the critical role of family structure and parent-child interaction patterns. This perspective is especially pertinent for migrant families, whose repeated moves and lack of stability in parental work have been able to break the parents physically and emotionally from their children. Such separations, in turn can reduce the frequency and quality of emotional relationships, making children feel alone and neglected, which damages social skill and academic achievements. Coleman's conclusion is that a household with mere presence of parents does not help unless relationships are healthy and caring. Family capital goes beyond the tangible resources from a family (amount of money or educational material, for example). Rather, it places an important emphasis on the intangibles of parental involvement and attachment, and the extent to which emotional attachment helps children's educational success.

Migrant children, unlike their left-behind counterparts, seem to experience a unique set of challenges in maintaining meaningful connections with their parents, despite being physically closer. This distinction is crucial as it stresses the subtle nature of parent-child relationships within migrant families, which, as this research reveals, are not as positive as one might expect. The physical presence allowed for daily or weekly interactions for day children and boarding children, but did not necessarily translate into quality communication or a strong emotional bond, based on children's interviews. This difference highlights a fundamental issue: the presence of high educational aspirations among parents from migrant families as discussed in the previous section does not automatically lead to effective support for their children's educational journey. This situation suggests a disconnect in the parent-child relationship within migrant families, where aspirations and expectations exist but without a clear pathway for realisation. The gap between migrant parents' high hopes/aspirations and the actualisation of these through supportive actions/practice points to an issue of emotional capital—or rather, the lack thereof. Emotional capital, encompassing emotional encouragement, support, confidence, and interest, is crucial for nurturing children's educational aspirations and self-esteem (Fuller, 2008). However, in migrant families, this form of capital appears to be in short supply, with external influences like schools and peers playing a more significant role in shaping the educational outlook of these children. Fuller's (2008) perspective on the roles parents played as a form of emotional capital is particularly relevant here. It implies that the effectiveness of parental involvement in education transcends mere physical presence or provision of resources; it hinges on the quality of emotional and communicative interactions. Emotional capital, therefore, becomes a critical determinant of educational success, influencing not just direct academic outcomes but also the broader developmental aspects of confidence and self-esteem in children. The concept of emotional capital, as further developed by Reay (2004) and Lareau (2018) based on the Bourdieu's capital, emphasises the importance of daily parent-child interactions in transmitting values, expectations, and attitudes conducive to educational achievement.

Through the adoption of emotional capital and the investigation of this study (although there was no direct measurement and interviews with parents), it can be concluded from the interviews with students that the migrant children are relatively lacking in emotional capital, and it is difficult for these children to obtain sufficient emotional support from their families. Poverty, as a theme that runs throughout, is still worthy of discussion in this respect, as it exacerbates the challenges migrant families faced in creating a supportive family environment conducive to learning and emotional development. Initially, emotional capital is mainly transmitted from mother to child and is reflected in class-specific inequalities. Working-class mothers, constrained by material and social backgrounds, find it difficult for their emotional capital to compare with that of middle-class mothers (Gillies, 2005; Reay, 2000, 2004). During the interviews, most migrant children stated that their parents, due to being busy earning money, had no time to participate in their education and life. Moreover, a carefully created family environment was almost impossible to achieve, with most migrant children choosing to complete their homework at school rather than bringing it home because they could neither concentrate on completing their homework at home nor expect to receive academic support from their parents. Only a few children chose to seek help from their parents when they encountered challenges in their studies. Furthermore, the research highlights the practical challenges that migrant families faced like a mismatch in the time between migrant family members. Many times, when children went to school in the early morning, their parents had not yet gotten up, and when children went to bed, their parents returned home from work. Even if they could return home to have dinner with their children, they chose their ways of relaxation (mostly playing with their mobile phones) due to being too tired after eating, instead of communicating with their children. The lack of communication and interaction between migrant parents and their children, despite living under the same roof, is particularly notable. It illustrates a common dilemma in migrant families, where the demands of labour-intensive jobs leave parents with little time or energy for family engagement.

In addition to a lack of communication, support, and guidance, some migrant parents even had a negative effect on their children's psychological well-being due to their own misconceptions, instead

of providing emotional support. More than one child mentioned that while their parents did value education, their form of guidance was limited to verbal admonishments, and a top-down directive rather than concrete encouragement and help. Many students described their migrant parents' attitude as indifferent. They seem to acknowledge their child's poor academic performance but instead of trying to help their child do better, they resign to this reality, reflecting a nearly numb sense of helplessness. Such situations lead to most migrant children being unwilling to discuss their studies or difficulties with their parents, whether due to harsh but nonspecific pressure or indifference. This can significantly impact these children's self-esteem, motivation, and future educational aspirations. In this process, children feel alienated from their family, with some choosing to placate their parents rather than seek help. For instance, when asked if they completed their homework, they would lie about finishing it to avoid potential reprimands or even cheated in exams organised by the school to please their parents, despite knowing it was unhelpful for their learning.

The additional evidence of migrant children's experiences, adding another dimension to the discussion of emotional capital, adds emphasis to the importance of nurturing this form of capital for their fullest potential. The evidence also revealed that migrant children, making their way through the school system, experience greater academic and social stress because of their transient lifestyles and the unique challenges posed by their SES. For instance, a study by Zhao et al. (2015) discovers that migrant children tend to be less engaged in school and more anxious than non-migrant peers, attributing these partly because their lives are less supportive and stable. Moreover, the experiences shared by migrant children themselves sheds light on the critical gap in emotional support. Zhang et al. (2020) in their quantitative study draw on reports of migrant children being isolated and misunderstood in urban schools, unable to build friendships and establish relationships with teachers due to the absence of emotional capital in their homes and communities. The scarcity of emotional capital in migrant families, therefore, is a lasting threat to the education and life experiences of migrant children. In

essence, strengthening emotional capital within migrant families is critical for breaking the cycle of disadvantage and enabling migrant children to navigate their educational paths and social roles more effectively.

7.4 Rationality

Modernisation theory suggests that the broadening of educational access, aims at providing greater opportunities for marginalised social groups, plays a crucial role in diminishing disparities in educational opportunities (Boudon, 1974). However, the framework of cultural capital theory encounters limitations in explaining the persistence of educational achievement gaps across different social strata, despite the expansion of education. Specifically, it struggles to account for the enduring phenomenon where children from lower social classes are still more likely to drop out of the education system or, even if they continue their education, tend to choose paths that are less conducive to their further education compare to children from higher social classes (Goldthorpe, 2010). This observation in contrast to liberal expectations, which associates social advancement – particularly within industrial and post-industrial contexts – with education as a fundamental mechanism for promoting social mobility and reducing class inequality. As discussed in Chapter Two, cultural capital critics represented by Goldthorpe (2010, 2007) question why, in the context of social changes bring about by the advancement of industrialism, the differentiating force of cultural effects remains virtually undiminished across generations. This research initially aligns with this critical scepticism. After China's reform and opening up in 1978 (though, unlike the West, China did not continuously evolve from an industrial to a post-industrial era), the expansion of education in developed societies sees the widespread, compulsory, and free provision of primary and secondary education (Goldthorpe, 2010). This leads to educational expansion Acts such as the "Compulsory Education Law", which increases

the gross enrolment rate[3] of Chinese children at the lower secondary school from 66.7% in 1978 to over 100% in 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023a), and ensures near-universal completion of lower secondary school education. Despite these advances, there is a significant gap in post-lower secondary school. In this research, not a single migrant student in Year 9 secured admission to a regular high school, while nationwide, the admission rate from lower secondary schools to regular high schools is 59.6% – in 2023, out of 16.23 million lower secondary school graduates, 9.69 million are admitted to regular high schools (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024b). Compared to the national average, migrant children are far behind in entering regular high schools, indicating that educational expansion has not yet effectively eliminated inequalities in access to educational opportunities especially for migrant children. In addition, although this research does not directly explore the concept of class, the employment patterns of the migrant parents – predominantly characterised by long hours of manual labour – aligns with Goldthorpe (2010) class categorisation based on labour market and production unit relationships. Therefore, when discussing this group, it is necessary to consider them as part of the employed class, especially in the context of discussing the failure of liberal education expectations, where the migrant family group has similarities with the working class.

Goldthorpe's RAT model provides an insightful framework for understanding micro-level phenomena within groups through the lens of methodological individualism. It asserts that individuals – children and their parents – engage in rational assessment of their choices at significant moments in their educational journeys. This theory challenges the conventional belief that young people passively adhere to prevailing social norms and cultural values without engaging in critical evaluation. The

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[3] The gross enrolment rate of lower secondary schools refers to the percentage of the total number of students in lower secondary schools to the population of the age group specified in China.

empirical evidence from this research supports this theoretical perspective, revealing that the significant majority of migrant children are aware of the educational pathways available to them. They recognise that obtaining a university degree can significantly strengthen their competitiveness in both the educational and career perspectives, as well as ensure more stable employment. However, it is noteworthy that only one migrant child demonstrates an aspiration towards higher education. The predominant preference for vocational training among migrant children should not be interpreted as indicative of lower aspirations but rather as a strategic positioning within a spectrum of middle educational aspirations. Boudon's classical formulation of RAT, alongside theories of educational aspirations, posits that educational decisions are predicated on an assessment of the costs and benefits of education, alongside the perceived probability of success, thereby guiding families towards choices that maximises perceived benefits. However, Goldthorpe critically observes that despite educational reforms expanding access and making higher education more appealing by altering its cost-benefit calculus, the evaluation of these costs and benefits by families across different social strata remain relatively unchanged. This observation suggests that the broadening of educational opportunities has not bridged the gap in how different social classes perceive the value and feasibility of educational investments. Boudon's work highlights how students with comparable academic achievements but from class backgrounds often make divergent educational choices, thereby reinforcing class-based difference in educational attainment. Building on this, Goldthorpe (2010) advances this discourse through his refined RAT framework, and argues that for children from less advantaged backgrounds, a strong demand higher guarantees of success and more compelling educational prospects is essential before pursuing higher education, compare to their more advantaged peers. The persistence of these disparities in educational aspirations and decisions, once the enduring educational resources, opportunities, and constrained across different class backgrounds are considered, can be understood as being based on rational foundations.

Goldthorpe (2010) provides a rational perspective on the cautious attitude of the employed/working class towards education in educational expansion. He theorises that these families, due to their disadvantaged SES, are likely to have a cautious approach towards the aspirations of higher education for their children. My research aligns with this direction; however, Goldthorpe's focus on economic risks and benefits does not fully resonate with the current situation of migrant families in China. In fact, under China's substantial subsidies for state education, economic risks and benefits are not the primary considerations for these migrant families. My survey shows an interesting dynamic: not a single migrant child mentioned an inability to afford tuition fees if they were to be admitted to a regular high school or university in the future, which means financial constraints are not a deterrent for migrant children to pursue higher education. This observation indicates that, despite their economically vulnerable status – similar to physical labourers in Western contexts who face risks such as wage loss due to illness, accidents, or unemployment – these migrant parents do not necessarily prioritise economic considerations when it comes to investing in their children's education. Accordingly, within groups of lower SES, the discontinuation of education due to insufficient economic resources is remarkably rare.

This deviation from Goldthorpe's RAT suggests that the actual impediment for migrant children in accessing to higher education is not financial constraints but rather the gap that exists between their current academic capabilities/performance and the aspirations for higher education. Once families perceive that their children have the potential to bridge this gap, their cautious stance significantly changes. Through in-depth analysis, my research reveals that migrant parents and children both engage in a dynamic reassessment of children's academic capabilities or performance relative to the admissions criteria of regular high schools. Such a reassessment often leads to strategic decisions aiming at enhancing educational outcomes, such as returning to their rural hometowns for intensive studies at a good-quality state school if parents believe there is a possibility for their children to be

accepted by regular high schools, and emphasise a commitment to fulfilling higher educational aspirations. An illustrative case from this research involves a 'missing' child (this research includes 22 children at the beginning, but 21 students have participated because of her leave), ranked highly for academic performance, choosing to return to her hometown's junior high school after the first semester of Year 9 in Beijing. This strategic decision, informed by a critical evaluation of educational pathways, is a practical step and reflects a rational action approach that high educational aspirations are not related to class background. Thus, while the educational choices and aspirations of migrant families aligned with the RAT, their rational evaluations were primarily centred around academic performance. I suggest that when adopting RAT, the migrant status itself should be considered, as it is a key factor affecting students' academic achievements and educational decision-making.

Regarding how migrant status influence academic achievement, I investigate this question in Chapter Five and Six, detailing how the migrant status of children of rural migrant workers in outer Beijing affects their educational opportunities, learning experiences, and educational attainment. Additionally, my research indirectly confirms that the rational starting point for the educational aspirations of migrant families is children's academic performance. A notable finding is the difference between the educational aspirations of migrant children and their parents, potentially reflecting a more grounded self-assessment by the children, in contrast to the parents' overly optimistic expectations. However, it is important to note that parents' optimism is not due to irrationality but rather to children achieving inflated "better" academic results through cheating in exams and the lack of effective communication between migrant parents and schools/teachers. Thus, the rational evaluations behind educational decisions within migrant families are deeply influenced by a realistic assessment of children's academic potential and performance, marking a difference from Goldthorpe's focus on economic determinants and enriching the discourse on educational aspirations in socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

The gap between the academic capabilities/performance and educational aspirations of migrant children call for a re-evaluation of traditional rational choice theories. Arum and Hout (1995) treat education as a linear accumulation, analogous to a financial investment. However, this analogy falters when confronted with the intricate institutional structure of contemporary education systems, which introduces a myriad of choices and constraints that challenge the simplistic economist model's linear trajectory. The decision-making process regarding educational choices by migrant families is dynamic. They often make several choices before reaching what Boudon describes as various transitions or branching points comprised by the educational system such as whether to end their migrant status. Consequently, by the time these junctures are reached, many migrant families are formally excluded from certain educational opportunities due to limitations in migrant children's learning ability and low academic performance. At such crossroads, their rational choices revert to considerations of cost and benefit, as evidenced by most migrant children in this research ultimately choosing to attend vocational schools to acquire survival skills. This process poses a challenge to the traditional RAT, suggesting that when considering the education of Chinese vast migrant children population, RAT needs to consider the migrant status to form a dynamic and accurate framework. Integrating the factor of migrant status would allow for a more precise representation of the complex decision-making processes of migrant families within the education system, and would acknowledge that their educational decisions are not made in a vacuum but are influenced by an array of factors, including but not limited to institutional barriers, familial circumstances, and personal academic challenges.

7.5 Housing and community

When discussing the housing and community issues of migrant children in Beijing, it is crucial to explore the specific challenges faced by this group and how these challenges impact their social capital and overall well-being. The theories of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) provide an important

theoretical framework for understanding the significance of social capital to an individual's social and economic success. These theories offer insights into how they relate to the experience of migrant families in general, and of poverty itself. Yet, my research suggests that housing affects migrant households and children. Because of unstable housing and economic stress, it is difficult for migrant children to have the social capital described by these theorists.

Housing conditions and socio-economic impact

The conditions of Beijing's migrant families living in outlying urban centres full of migrant workers, high density and poor housing is an indicator of urban migration and its socio-economic impacts. These areas, with their relatively lower rent, attract a large number of migrant workers despite the poor living conditions, serious safety hazards, and the prevalence of illegally constructed, overcrowded, and sometimes unsafe buildings with poor services. This situation reflects the harsh economic realities these families face. The World Health Organization (WHO) has long recognised the direct link between such living conditions and a range of health problems. Poor ventilation, inadequate living space, and exposure to mould and damp environments significantly increases the risk of respiratory diseases, allergies, and mental health disorders (WHO, 2018). For migrant children, who are more likely to live under these adverse conditions, the health risks are exacerbated, directly affecting their physical health, sense of safety, and overall well-being. These housing conditions not only impact the health and safety of children and potentially affect their academic performance but also limit their opportunities for broader social interactions. Furthermore, the socio-economic impacts of housing conditions extend to the future economic opportunities of migrant children. Issues such as poor housing conditions, health problems, and lower educational levels are interwoven, which caused the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty.

Educational challenges stemming from housing instability

Previous research consistently demonstrates a correlation between stable housing and educational success (Hu & Lu; Leventhal & Newman, 2010; Silva et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2010). Children in stable housing environments are more likely to succeed academically because stability lays the groundwork for continuous schooling and learning. Migrant workers' low skills and unstable nature of migrant employment requires them to relocate frequently in search of job prospects or affordable rent. Their living and working environments lack stability, making the school choice process for their children exceedingly complex. Moreover, with the advancement of urbanisation in China, these overcrowded rental properties are primarily used for demolition and reconstruction, which leads to frequent relocations of migrant worker families. In densely populated cities like Beijing, living conditions can be cramped, especially for migrant worker families who do not have the financial capacity to rent or own spacious homes. Unstable housing conditions often means that families live in overly crowded and noisy environments without quiet and dedicated space for children to focus on their studies. In this research, this situation severely hampers children's ability to complete homework and engage in self-study, and further widens the academic gap between them and their peers who have stable and conducive learning environments at home.

A study by Leventhal and Newman (2010) highlights that children experiencing housing instability face numerous challenges, including higher absenteeism, lower test scores, and difficulty concentrating in class. Due to housing instability, migrant children in Beijing often change schools and face educational disruptions. My research findings show that Wenwen has to change schools with nearly every move. She moves three times in seven years, nearly every two years a move, significantly impacting her life and studies. She develops a resistance to the constantly changing living arrangements and schools. Moving frequently to find affordable accommodation leads to gaps in school education, difficulties in adapting to new educational environments, and challenges in maintaining consistent academic

support. Migrant children who move frequently are at a particular disadvantage, with each move potentially setting them back academically, as differences in curriculum, teaching methods, and academic expectations between schools lead to learning gaps. Moreover, the process of adapting to new school environments can cause stress for children, affecting their mental health and, consequently, their ability to concentrate and perform academically. High student mobility is associated with lower grade scores and higher dropout rates (Rumberger & Larson, 1998), emphasising the adverse effects of housing instability on educational outcomes. These educational disruptions are not merely logistical challenges but deeply affect the children's sense of belonging and self-esteem, which are crucial for academic motivation and success. These disruptions disrupt children's educational continuity and limit their opportunities to receive ongoing educational support. The isolation of migrant families into specific urban areas exacerbate the issue of educational inequality, as schools in these areas often lack the resources and support found in wealthier communities.

Bourdieu's perspective: the migrant community and social capital

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital stresses the value of networks and relationships in accessing social, economic, and cultural resources, highlighting the importance of resources within social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). Furthermore, his theory of social reproduction suggests that the social and economic conditions into which a person is born greatly influence their future opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). However, for migrant families in Beijing, influenced by poverty and often relegated to the city's peripheries characterised by densely populated and poor living conditions in remote urban towns primarily inhabited by other low-income migrant worker families, accessing resources that can elevate their social status becomes a significant challenge. My research involving 16 migrant children (76.19%) finds most of them reported that their neighbours were predominantly migrant workers; only 2 children (9.52%) believed their neighbours were mostly locals. This indicates that

these migrant families are mostly in contact with other migrant workers, with minimal interaction with Beijing local residents. They primarily socialise with other families of similar low SES, making it difficult for migrant families to access resources that could improve their social capital. Such situation leads to the formation of a closed social circle, where members share similar disadvantages. The environment of these communities restricts their interaction opportunities with individuals of higher SES, limiting their access to information and resources that can facilitate socio-economic advancement and further exacerbating social isolation. This segregation means migrant families are unable to access key social capital that might provide channels for educational and vocational advancement.

It makes a big difference. It means that the social capital offered to migrant families is largely 'bonding' rather than 'bridging'. Bonding social capital embodies the good provided by close-knit relationships – emotional and immediate resources, although limited – while bridging social capital, which crosses groups and provides access to multiple resources and opportunities, is crucial for socio-economic mobility (Putnam, 2000). The lack of bridging social capital among migrant families restricts their ability to break out of the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

Bourdieu's (1986) perspective on social capital and its implications for educational opportunities and social mobility provides a valuable framework from which to view the challenges faced by migrant families. The inability of migrant families to access higher-tier communities directly impacts their children's educational opportunities and social mobility. The lack of interaction with higher socio-economic groups deprives these families of the chance to access information, support, and resources, leaving migrant children without the social networks that can provide cross-class insights and advice. This lack of guidance and support hinders migrant children's ability to achieve educational success and improves their SES. They lack access to information about quality school choices, study guidance, advancement advice, or career counselling. My research shows that migrant worker families, when

faced with new schools in new residential areas in their school choice, lack relevant information and consultation channels about the Beijing education system and the enrolment requirements of nearby schools. Unfamiliarity with admission policies, school choices, and application processes make it difficult for them to find suitable enrolment opportunities, often relying on recommendations from other migrant parents, which almost invariably points to lower-quality school choices. This information gap not only limits their current learning opportunities but also hampers their long-term socio-economic development. They are confined within a social cycle, where the potential for social advancement is limited by the nature of their social relations. This restriction perpetuates their current state of poverty and also hinders their children's ability to transcend class barriers through education and vocational advancement.

What is more, for migrant children in housing poverty, access to learning materials and supports, such as tutoring, extra-curricular activities, school health and counselling are also severely constrained. These resources are vital for closing gaps in knowledge, emotional healing, and improving the academic and social performance of children. However, frequent relocations and the lack of integration into stable, high-quality community networks might prevent these families from ever knowing about or accessing these services, and therefore deprive children of the extra support they require for success at school. The disruption of their social networks and the lack of stable cultural capital transmission can impede their ability to access these educational opportunities. Their families often focus on immediate survival needs and might lack the resources or knowledge to navigate the education system. This results in the perpetuation of educational inequalities, and potentially leaves migrant children behind their peers in academic achievement and future educational prospects.

Coleman's Perspective: the role of stability in building social capital

While Coleman (1988) share much with Bourdieu's (1986) theory, Coleman emphasises the importance of social capital in enhancing individual well-being, particularly through stable, supportive community relationships with significant focus on the stability of social structures and networks. Stable communities are crucial for building social capital, stressing the importance of consistency in social relations and networks. However, the poverty of migrant families, characterised by low skills and unstable employment, along with rising rental pressures that forces them to relocate frequently in search of work and affordable housing, disrupts the possibility of forming lasting and meaningful connections within communities. These disruptions hinder their ability to become part of cohesive community networks, which are vital for the development of social capital. As mentioned, most migrant children in Beijing move 2-3 times during their stay. With each move to a new place, new neighbours are strangers to them, and they are not familiar with their surrounding neighbours. The children in this study sometimes have to move again before having the chance to know their neighbours or engage in brief interactions. Thus, as their experiences indicate, each relocation disrupts existing social relations, turning neighbours into strangers and severing connections that can have been established over time. The instability of living conditions and the marginalisation of communities make it difficult for migrant families to establish enduring social and mutual relationships with their neighbours, thereby hindering the formation of close community ties in their places of residence and, consequently, limiting the formation of social capital.

Coleman (1988) argues that the social capital crucial for educational success and personal development is built upon stable, long-term relationships, which are hard to achieve for children of migrant families due to unstable housing conditions. The challenges faced by migrant families, arising from poverty-induced factors such as low skills, unstable employment, and the necessity of frequent relocations to find work and affordable housing, disrupt the possibility of establishing lasting, meaningful connections within communities. This instability prevents migrant families from accessing

collective support, shared norms, and mutual trust, which are essential for the socialisation of children and their integration into the broader society. Frequent moves and the continuous search for housing not only affect this research's families' material well-being but also impede the continuity of children's education and social participation. Such constant mobility breaks the ability of migrant children to build and maintain stable social relationships. Without a stable community as a backbone, migrant children lose opportunities to establish and maintain friendships, participate in community activities, and learn social skills through these interactions. As mentioned in the result chapters, my research reveals that there is no stability for migrant families. It is difficult to make friends because migrant children do not stay in a place for long time, and some of them live so far away from school (almost 3 hours by bus), which means that they cannot hang around after school or see friends that live close to the school. This weakens their potential for social mobility through social capital, and further limits migrant children's access to educational and social resources.

Housing instability also weakens social integration and peer relationships. Social integration in the school environment plays a vital role in children's academic and social development. Stable peer relationships provide emotional support, facilitate the development of social skills, and enhance children's interactions with the school community. Previous studies showed that children who felt connected to their peers and school were more likely to exhibit positive academic behaviours and achieve higher academic outcomes (Cheng, 2020; Sethi & Scales, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Due to the transience of their living conditions, migrant children often face significant barriers in integrating socially and forming stable peer relationships. The cycle of making new friends and then leaving them can lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety (Pribesh & Downey, 1999), potentially reducing children's participation in school activities and exacerbating their sense of alienation from the school community. Migrant children's constant movement prevents their ability to create and sustain long-term peer groups, which provide much needed emotional and social support. Because of the repeated disruption

caused by transitions, migrant children can become socially isolated. Failure to form lifelong friendships and the need to constantly adapt to new social environments can harm their mental health. The stress of adjusting to new schools, and also the pressure to catch up on their work can cause anxiety and depression, which has an even bigger impact on learning and achievement.

For example, Nana explained her unwillingness to make friends because it was the last year in this school and everyone would definitely be separate and would not know each other in the future as their migrant status changed. For her, it was a waste of time to spend time and energy maintaining this soon-to-end friendship. The experience of migrant children, as illustrated through Nana's perspective, highlights a poignant aspect of their educational journey—transient peer relationships due to frequent relocations. For migrant children like Nana, the migrant nature of their school relationships become a source of disillusionment and cause a strategic withdrawal from investing in friendships that are perceived as temporary. This mindset, while protective in some respects, can inadvertently reinforce the cycle of social isolation and disengagement from the educational environment. The rationalisation of minimising emotional investment in school relationships reflects a deeper issue of social integration, where the lack of stable, enduring peer connections significantly impacts the children's educational outcomes and mental well-being. The consequences of such social isolation and the absence of a supportive peer network are multifaceted, lead to not only decreased academic motivation, lower school participation, but also increase dropout rates (Lu & Zhou, 2013). For migrant children who view schooling through a lens of discomfort and detachment, like Nana, the educational process becomes a task to endure rather than an opportunity for growth and development. This detachment from the school environment and peer relationships can lead to a profound disinterest in academic achievements and a reluctance to pursue further educational opportunities.

Overall, the debate about housing poverty among migrant worker families – which is analysed in terms of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) – reflects the challenges these families face. Bourdieu criticises class controls on social capital by drawing attention to the ways in which migrant families' exclusion from networks that are helpful, coupled with their housing conditions, deny access to good networks and perpetuate socio-economic inequalities. Such lack of social capital can not only hamper the adults' ability to improve their own situation, but their children's future as well. Coleman (1988) concentrates on how housing instability undermines the development of stable community ties essential for building social capital. He argues that frequent moves break up migrant families in their social bonds and stop them from joining cohesive local communities. Such unpredictability can be a barrier to both the stability of migrant households and the educational and social mobility of their children. The traditional lens through which poverty is viewed often highlights the lack of resources and parental engagement, though they are valuable, without pointing out the underlying reasons for structural inequality – for instance, the housing and neighbourhood situation – that perpetuate poverty. Together, these perspectives illustrate how structural barriers, such as inadequate housing, reinforce poverty cycles by limiting social capital and access to supportive networks.

Another significant finding is that the issue of maintaining social connections among migrant children, especially those living in the dispersed and physically distant suburbs of Beijing, brings to light the increasing role of digital platforms in facilitating social interactions. The difficulty for migrant children to keep in touch offline after school due to geographical separation highlights a significant barrier to social integration and community belonging. In this context, online social activities emerge as a crucial means of addressing some of their social needs, allowing these children to bridge the gaps created by physical distance and maintain friendships. Digital platforms help the migrant children of this study overcome the isolation imposed by their living conditions, offering a space where they could interact with classmates on weekdays and even make new friends online, with offline socialising mainly

happening on weekends. This leads to the formation of cyber communities, which redefines the scope of traditional community engagement. Through these online communities, children find a new form of belonging, shifting the dynamics of social interactions from physical to virtual spaces. Despite the benefits of digital platforms in bridging social gaps, the reliance on online interactions stresses the limited interaction migrant children have with the external community.

7.6 School, peers and teachers

When considering social capital outside the family, Coleman (1987), in addition to focusing on the community, emphasises that schools and teachers and peers in schools are also important places for children to acquire social capital. Within the school environment, interactions between teachers and students, connections between schools and families, and internal social organisations and activities constitute key components in the formation of social capital. Such capital can enhance students' academic achievements, social skills, and adaptability. My research indicates that migrant children face difficulties integrating into local social circles in Beijing and also disconnect from their original communities in rural remote areas, making it challenging for them to acquire social capital within the community. Findings like Ding and Wu (2023) suggest that social capital within the school and among peers has a more significant impact on the educational aspirations of migrant children than family social capital. Previous studies highlight the crucial influence of peers and friends on students' academic performance and educational desires, with peer support within the school environment having a notable positive effect on students' psychological development and academic success (Cheng, 2020; Eccles et al., 1993; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Lu & Zhou, 2013). When students feel accepted and supported by their peers, they tend to have better engagement and academic outcomes in school. Furthermore, longitudinal studies of students from diverse backgrounds find that social relationships played a decisive role in students' academic paths and emotional development (Crosnoe & Benner,

2015). For migrant children, in particular, positive relationships establish with peers can serve as a critical resource for mitigating the impacts of family instability.

It is noteworthy that for migrant children in this research, the concept of "school" predominantly signifies the environment of interaction with peers rather than the school itself or relationships with teachers. Thus, when expressing their positive attitudes towards schooling, their explanations almost invariably centre on satisfaction with peer relationships, seldom mentioning the school or teachers directly. This distinction is crucial as students' contentment and emphasis on peer relations do not necessarily imply that migrant children possess more peer social capital compare to other groups. Previous studies indicate that the impact of peer social capital does not significantly vary across different social strata (Cheng, 2020), and the condition of being migrant might even diminish students' peer social capital (Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Ream, 2005). Given that my research does not primarily focus on contrasting the migrant children cohort with other groups, I choose to explore this from the perspective of the migrant children themselves. Based on the student interviews and my observations, it appears that their positive feedback on peer relationships might stem from a relative lack of other forms of social capital within the school setting, particularly in the context of relationships between students and teachers or school administrators. This finding highlights the importance of recognising the diverse sources and impacts of social capital within educational settings. For migrant children, peer relationships might serve as a crucial compensatory mechanism for the lack of engagement and support they receive from the institutional facets of the school environment, including teacher-student interactions and administrative support.

Firstly, the shortage of personal care and emotional care from teachers for migrant children is a profound issue that can impact on their learning experience and results. The perception that teachers, as educators, hold lower academic expectations for migrant students is a critical issue that can not

only undermines students' motivation to learn but can also diminish their self-esteem and confidence. In particular, children can take these expectations for granted and act accordingly, never living up to their potential. Low expectations can also discourage students. If children perceive that teachers lack faith in their abilities, their involvement and concentration at school can decrease. It is what could make them doubt the significance and intent of effort in their education and thereby restrict their academic capacity on an unsustainable level. Moreover, continual low expectations also undermine children's self-esteem and sense of who they are as students. They might start to view themselves through the deficit lens imposed by others. They may begin to see themselves through the lack-blind lens of others. Teaching with low expectations, by itself, is harmful to students' self-worth and self-confidence, which can result in them declining to solve problems or push through them. It is noteworthy that, although direct teacher interviews are not included in this study, the migrant children's expectations of their teachers' aspirations provide a valuable perspective that goes beyond the observable interactions to capture the subjective experience of the students. The children's perspectives are crucial for learning how teacher-student relations and are instrumental in understanding the children's educational environment. Thus, while the teachers and the headteacher play a supplementary role in the data collection, the children's perceptions of their teachers are fundamental and worth studying, since they reveal important details about the educational barriers like academic learning for migrant children.

The phenomenon of educators harbouring low educational expectations regarding the educational needs of migrant children seriously damages the education process and potential of this most vulnerable group. This study sheds light on the pervasive issues of cheating and plagiarism among migrant children, behaviours that are distressingly overlooked by teachers, indicating a broader issue of diminished emphasis on real academic achievement. This lack of vigilance not only undermines the integrity of the educational process but also tells migrant children that academic achievement does

not matter at all, and may cause further disengagement, which could be conducive to a school culture of academic misconduct. It shows that the tacit acceptance of cheating and plagiarism by not addressing these issues head-on reflects and reinforces the low expectations teachers have for migrant students. It deprives students of the opportunity to engage genuinely with learning material and to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, this research reveals a general dissatisfaction among migrant children with the teaching methods employed, characterised by a lack of diversity and interaction. For instance, Doudou's experience highlights the monotony and lack of engaging learning opportunities in the classroom, fostering a sense of disengagement and apathy towards schooling. It is a style of teaching that discourages students from becoming curious and makes it harder to grasp and understand the concepts. Teachers' low academic expectations for migrant children reflect their failure to give engaging lessons. Boredom and non-active learning experience lead to disengagement with education. An instructional approach that fails to captivate migrant children's interests or challenge them intellectually does little to develop a passion for learning or intellectual curiosity.

Many migrant children report their teachers only cared about finishing the lesson rather than making sure students understood, which further shows the low academic expectations held by educators on these migrant children. The focus on merely completing the lesson without ensuring student comprehension exacerbates the issue because it ignores the real purpose of education – helping students to understand and master what is being taught. This practice may make students miss what they need to know and this may slow down a student's learning process. The root of low expectations and the resulting educational practices may stem from several sources. Preconceived notions about migrant children's low abilities and potential can lead teachers to unconsciously (or consciously) lower their expectations, decreasing the quality of instruction for those children. Moreover, the educational system itself is also lacking in training and pre-planning teachers to meet the many different demands

of migrant children, which exposes a structural failure perpetuating inequality and stifling the achievement of this population.

Also, the learning environment of migrant children is heavily shaped by the administration and culture of schools, which – according to many of these students – has little concern for their learning and well-being. This neglect suggests that there are schools that value profit above the quality of learning. The story shared by Junpeng, where access to the school for an initial visit depended upon the payment of fees, exemplifies the perception of schools as entities more concerned with profit than education. Such commodification destroys the foundational sense of belonging and access to learning resources, for migrant children's educational and personal success. The lack of support at home, combined with a school environment that does not cater adequately to their educational needs, creates a multifaceted challenge for migrant children. Despite having high educational aspirations, their actual academic performance remains low. Nana's struggle to keep up with the curriculum, compounded by parental neglect and teacher indifference to her learning difficulties, represents the dual challenge for migrant children to gain educational resources, leading to their continual lag in course progress.

This situation contrasts with the traditional Confucian educational system of Chinese culture, which advocates that diligence in study led to rewards. However, this ethos traditionally caters to an elite demographic, surrounded by high expectations from their families, teachers, and society. On the contrary, migrant children are less of a prize: their parents, teachers, and even the general system of society apparently accept their low academic performances. Migrant children seem implicitly unable to reach, not due to a lack of aspiration or ability, but because a system lowered its demands upon

them. The narrative that surrounds migrant children's education often resigns them to achieving the bare minimum, rather than striving for excellence and maximising their potential.

The poor level of communication between parents of migrant children and their teachers is one of the biggest barriers to learning, impacting the accumulation of social capital that is essential to their academic and social progress. This communication gap, is partly due to the extreme work schedules and logistical challenges that migrant families endure. My research finds that this lack of regular, meaning face-to-face interactions between migrant parents and their teachers because of work pressure and limited time reduces the degree to which parents play an active role in their children's education, which is positively related to student achievement. This disengagement can lead to a lack of awareness about academic progress and needs, diminishing the support migrant children received at home. Furthermore, there is no proper way for parents to engage with their children at school in migrant children's schools. Schools do not organise parent-teacher meetings or provide educational consulting services because of resource limitations among migrant households. The lack of parent-teacher meetings and educational consulting services not only limits parents' access to information about how their child is learning and behaving in school, as well as their ability to give guidance or talk directly with teachers that can build on the home learning and solve problems early. Without this interaction, teachers and school leaders may not know how special the lives of migrant families are and may continue to design policies and practices that do not adequately serve these children.

The evolving dynamics between parents, teachers, and schools in China, particularly concerning migrant children, shows the transition of social capital in education. This transition depends in large part on the changing role and perception of teachers in Chinese society, which has seen a decline and resulted in fundamental transformations of the educational system. In the past, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, teachers held an elite social status equal to those of bureaucrats. This respect

was partly due to the relatively low levels of widespread education across the country, making teacher's position high and honoured. However, the economic opening of China and the subsequent rise of private educational institutions and tutoring centres have dramatically changed this. Since market forces have come to play in the classroom, a great majority of teachers are contract employees, especially in the schools for migrant children, which in turn has affected the perception of their professional status and authority.

This shift towards viewing teachers more as service providers, coupled with the increasing influx of low-qualified teachers into the labour market, has led to the erosion of the teaching profession's once sacred status. For migrant children's parents, many of whom encounter economic challenges in large cities like Beijing, they tend to treat them less like esteemed educators and more like migrant workers, the same migrant identity as themselves, since almost all teachers at migrant children schools are also low-paid migrants. This perception exacerbates communication barriers and hinders the potential for collaborative educational support. The diminished teacher status and the resultant limited parental involvement and cooperation has dramatic effects on educational participation and achievement among migrant children. Teachers, feeling undervalued and disrespected, may experience decreased morale and motivation, which can negatively impact their effectiveness and commitment to the profession. Also, the reality is that many parents of migrant children perceive the responsibility for education to lie solely with the teachers and schools, believing that their duty end with sending their children to school. This mindset severely limits the opportunity for home/school integration.

In general, migrant children's learning and school performance appear to be shaped by a complex network of factors including peer relationships, teacher interactions, classroom experiences, and parental involvement. The peer social capital is particularly positive, providing academic help, emotional support, and boosting self-esteem, which help migrant children plan for and work towards

a successful future. However, the interaction between parents and schools is often superficial and infrequent, adding to the educational challenges these children face. Moreover, the evolving role of teachers—from respected educators to service providers focused on meeting parental expectations—mirrors broader shifts in the education system driven by market forces and privatisation. This transformation can diminish the authoritative role teachers traditionally held, affecting their impact on migrant children's education. Additionally, a gap seems to exist between the high educational aspirations of migrant families and the actual educational outcomes, exacerbated by migrant parents' work pressures and limited engagement with their children's education. This absence of meaningful parental involvement leaves children without adequate help and also stops families from collaborating with schools to create an educational environment that is conducive.

7.7 Gender

In this research, gender is identified as a fundamental element intricately linked to both access to education and aspirations. Within the framework of traditional Chinese gender roles and divisions of labour, the educational opportunities, educational aspirations, and occupational aspirations of migrant children seem to be deeply influenced by social gender norms. Whether it concerned accepting, perpetuating, or challenging these gender disparities, the role of gender appeared to be crucial in shaping and influencing the identities, attitudes, behaviours, and choices of both migrant parents and their children.

In the results section, it is noted that the number of siblings among migrant children indicates that migrant parents exhibit a preference for sons over daughters, especially during the strict enforcement period of the "One-Child Policy". They would violate the policy to have a son, particularly if the first child was a daughter. For migrant families from rural areas with low socio-economic backgrounds,

having an "only daughter" was deemed unacceptable and insecure. Parents were still inclined to prefer an "only son". The preference for sons over daughters, even at the risk of defying national policies shows a traditional view that values male offspring for their potential to carry on the family name and provide for their parents in old age. The "One-Child Policy", while revolutionary in its aim to control population growth, inadvertently reinforces these gender biases by placing immense pressure on families to have a male heir. For urban girls, the policy creates a unique socio-political environment that levels the educational playing field, allowing them access to resources and opportunities previously dominated by males (Fong, 2002; Hu & Shi, 2020). However, this study highlights that such policy-driven equality does not uniformly penetrate all strata of Chinese society. Migrant families from rural areas, already marginalised by their SES, find themselves at a crossroads between traditional gender preferences and the modern state's regulatory framework. The distinction between the experiences of urban girls and girls from migrant families suggests that policies alone were insufficient to dismantle entrenched gender biases. For migrant families, the economic and social security provided by a male offspring often outweighs the benefits of adhering to state policies or embracing gender equality.

Fortunately, when it comes to educational opportunities for migrant children, these migrant parents do not limit the educational opportunities for girls due to gender differences. Besides the legal requirements for compulsory education, their lives have moved away from remote rural areas to align with urban living. Working in cities, compared to impoverished rural areas, provides them with more funds to pay for their children's tuition fees (although the income is still low). This study's migrant parents have high educational aspirations for migrant girls, hoping that they can pursue university education in the future. In contrast, migrant parents often wish for migrant boys to complete high school or attend vocational schools after compulsory education. The higher educational aspirations migrant parents hold for their daughters can be seen as a response to changing gender norms and the

recognition of education as a key to economic independence and social mobility for women. In the past, men are seen as the economic pillars of the family, while women are expected to take on the role of family caregivers (Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Hesketh & Xing, 2006; Huang & Gong, 2022; Liu, 2006; Wang, 2005; Zhang, 2019). However, modern society increasingly values women's education and career development, considering education a crucial pathway for women to secure better job opportunities and career advancement (Deole & Zeydanli, 2021), thereby achieving personal value and financial independence. Migrant parents, in seeking better futures for their children, are increasingly viewing their daughters' education as equally important, if not more so, due to the perceived long-term benefits of higher education in securing stable, well-paying jobs.

Therefore, migrant parents might prefer girls to receive higher education to secure a good job and improve their economic capability. Conversely, the focus on vocational education for boys reflects a pragmatic approach to economic survival and family support. For migrant boys, partly due to traditional views that see men as more suited for technical work or blue-collar professions, vocational education is seen as a quicker pathway to employment opportunities, aligned with traditional expectations for boys to become economic providers. Hence, their educational goals for boys in this research are more practical and employment-oriented. This practical orientation towards boys' education does not necessarily imply lower aspirations but rather a different set of expectations based on traditional roles and the immediate economic realities faced by migrant families.

However, when examining the reasons behind the different levels of educational aspirations for girls and boys, it is noted that for girls, the rationale is that higher education makes job searching easier and more straightforward. Yet, no parent of a girl from the interviews with children specifies what major in university can lead to an easy job; while parents' aspirations for boys' secondary education are also for future employment, they have more specific directions or suggestions for boys. This

indicates that migrant parents' educational aspirations for boys are more practical and detailed. Thus, although migrant parents' educational aspirations for girls seems higher, in reality, they express a more idealistic "go to university" vision for girls, while their considerations for boys are more practical and specific.

Furthermore, although the results above indicate that there is no difference in subject preferences among migrant children based on gender, specifically, both migrant boys and girls, due to long-term exposure to poor teaching quality and limited engagement into the classroom, show poor academic performance. They only favour subjects they can comprehend like Chinese, and find subjects with strong logical components like Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry challenging. This difficulty in understanding leads to a loss of interest over time. There are no gender differences in subject preference due to poor academic performance. However, gender differences are reflected in migrant children's choices of vocational learning for future education and aspirations for future careers.

The emergence of gender differences in vocational training choices and career aspirations among migrant children points to the influence of social norms and expectations on shaping these preferences. The differences in how migrant parents guiding their children towards future careers reveal underlying social norms and expectations about gender roles. For instance, migrant parents are more inclined to encourage migrant boys to choose careers that can support themselves, a consideration based on economic factors. This emphasis on economic self-sufficiency for boys reflects the traditional view of men as breadwinners, a role deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese culture. Although parents express respect for the career aspirations chosen based on the interests of both boys and girls, the career visions for migrant girls are more often based on the girls' interests. On the other hand, migrant parents do not strongly encourage girls to take on roles as family providers, rarely discussing financial and economic considerations with them. This behaviour, while seemingly

respectful of girls' career wishes, actually reflects a lack of serious discussion about future career development for girls and does not assign them the traditional role of providers. This indicates the continuation of traditional gender roles, where women's economic contributions to the family are undervalued, mirroring longstanding gender-specific career expectations prevalent in Chinese society.

This phenomenon becomes even more evident in the way migrant children express their career aspirations, reinforcing the gender perceptions of their parental class, and reflecting a solidification of gender roles against a backdrop of low SES. The career choices of these female students almost exclusively mirror the typical low-wage, low-status employment types associated with women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as preschool teaching and makeup artistry. Such aspirations not only show the rigidity of gender roles imposed by their parents but also highlights the lack of ambitious career planning and guidance for migrant girls, stifled by economic limitations and a constrained social environment. Particularly under the influence of peers and the vast amount of information on social media, the career aspirations of these migrant girls are further limited, as their similarly low-capital migrant peers also have very limited sources of information on career aspirations, focusing on traditionally feminine occupations like preschool teaching and makeup. Through peer modelling and social learning, this type of employment aspiration, characterised by low wages and status, is further amplified. Although there is a single case of a migrant parent who, from the perspective of economic factors, encourages a girl to pursue a career related to computing, breaking away from the male-dominated choice of the computing industry and seeking a career in a male-dominated field, this is seen as a leap forward and progress in gender perception. However, the girl herself does not agree with her parents' idea, instead wants to pursue the traditionally feminine makeup industry. Compared to the parents' progressive expectations of breaking gender constraints for their child's career, migrant children themselves are more deeply entangled in gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, the educational content in schools for migrant children is disconnected from the demands of the labour market, particularly leaving students' lack of awareness and understanding of the job market. These girls have little knowledge of existing professions, let alone the ability to make informed choices. Their career aspirations become solidified through interactions with other migrant children from similar low socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, the disconnect between classroom learning in the educational system and the real-world demands of the labour force not only hinder students' ability to grasp the breadth of career opportunities available to them but also reinforce traditional gender roles through limited exposure to diverse career paths. Moreover, the fact that career aspirations can take on more external than internal drive raises doubts about the authenticity of these aspirations. While purportedly following interests, these 'interests' are examined in this research because they do not stem from the girls' true aspirations but instead those induced by peer influence and social media, creating a deceptive 'self-career interest'.

Migrant parents try to divert their children from the path taken by their own careers, characterised by job instability, low wages, and physically demanding conditions, by preventing the career of migrant children from being similar to their parents' careers. Yet one big challenge is that the parents' limited knowledge of the labour market prevents them from providing practical career advice. This provides migrant children, especially girls, with a fuzzy idea of what might be their future career opportunities, in particular those that offer economic independence. Occupational demands for migrant boys clearly emphasize self-sufficiency: parents would name job positions that could provide stability and some basic income. Not only does this reflect the old-style social norm that men should be primary breadwinners, but it also reflects a general desire among migrant households for upward mobility and financial security. Migrant girls, on the other hand, are especially left behind in determining their future careers. The superficial respect for "choice" is the deeper distrust of professional orientation, a tendency to be relegated to a job that is unencumbered by parental influence and kept at low wage

and low social status by migrant girls. This not only continues the cycle of gender stereotypes but also significantly limits their opportunities for economic empowerment and upward social mobility.

Integrating Bourdieu's (2001) gender theory, particularly the concept of symbolic violence, into discussions about the educational opportunities, subject choices, and career aspirations of migrant children offers a comprehensive understanding of how gender inequalities persist and are normalised within these domains. Bourdieu's notion of "gender habitus" (Bourdieu, 2001) adeptly explains how the gender identities of migrant children are shaped and reinforced through social structures and familial interactions. This is directly reflected in the influence of parental gender perceptions, the gender norms of peers from similar socio-economic backgrounds, and the impact of social media, leading to a reinforcement of stereotypical choices in educational and career aspirations among migrant children. The use of "symbolic violence" to describe how dominant social orders are maintained through subtle and often unrecognised forms of force help to explain how social norms and expectations reinforce traditional gender roles and sustain gender inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

For example, with subject choice, symbolic violence takes form in the socialisation process that directs migrant boys and girls towards gendered goals such as future academic and professional aspirations. This is specifically evident as migrant boys are encouraged to pursue careers that facilitate economic independence, while migrant girls, although also encouraged to achieve educational success and economic independence, are often steered towards occupations considered stable and suitable for women, such as low-paid, less prestigious jobs in early childhood education or nursing. Gender inequalities are perpetuated through the consolidation of roles and restriction on career options for men and women. Additionally, the influence of peer groups and social media on migrant girls' career goals cannot be ignored. The influence of peer groups and social media can further reinforce these

gendered career aspirations, creating a feedback loop that sustains traditional gender roles and employment types. When peer groups and social media content highlights certain career paths and lifestyles for women, they exert a form of symbolic violence, and narrow the range of possibilities that girls perceived as available or desirable to them.

While Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence reveals how social norms perpetuate gender inequalities, it might not fully capture the specific ways in which gender roles are reinforced or challenged within the Chinese context. This is due to unique economic, cultural, and historical factors in China that influences gender norms. The rapid economic growth in China has led to significant social mobility and, under the legal framework of the Compulsory Education Law and efforts towards gender equality, has virtually eliminated the difference in educational opportunities between migrant boys and girls, ensuring their equal rights to education. Unlike the frequent dropout incidents among left-behind children in rural areas, especially girls (Bradley, 2020; Pan & Ye, 2017), migrant parents in urban areas recognise the equal importance of education for girls, and view it as a crucial factor for seeking social mobility and stable employment. This challenges Bourdieu's dichotomous narrative of symbolic violence, as social norms and expectations do not compel migrant families to prioritise the education of one gender over the other, thereby weakening traditional gender norms within family structures. Moreover, the labour market changes brought about by rapid economic development opened up new job opportunities for migrant labour. While Bourdieu's theory might suggest that symbolic violence upheld social hierarchies, in China, economic transformations also offer pathways to challenge traditional gendered work roles. Migrant parents, for example, could introduce their daughters to masculine industries such as the computer industry, and potentially change traditional gendered career paths for women. However, despite the potential for migrant status and economic factors to drive a shift towards more gender-equitable and diverse career aspirations, gender norms and socio-

economic barriers often replace these considerations, keeping migrant children, especially girls trapped within conventional, stereotyped occupations.

7.8 Chapter summary

This chapter examines the complex educational experiences of migrant children, from school selection to their learning processes, and the support systems around them including parents, communities, teachers, and peers. Taking Bourdieu's (1986) theories of cultural capital, the chapter describes how factors are so influential on the educational paths of migrant children, often placing them at a disadvantage even with high educational aspirations but paired with limited economic resources and parental involvement. The chapter also explores educational aspirations and outcomes among impoverished groups in China and the UK, emphasising the universal impact of poverty on education across different social contexts. Despite the variations, the enduring influence of poverty significantly disadvantages children from poorer backgrounds. Bourdieu's framework helps analyse social inequalities, but Coleman's (1988) theory of family capital and Reay's emotional capital introduce additional comprehension by focusing on family dynamics and the nurturing aspects of capital crucial for development.

Given the limitations of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory in explaining the persistent educational achievement gaps between social classes, Goldthorpe's (2010) RAT offers an insightful framework for understanding micro-phenomena within groups from a methodological individualist perspective. My research supports this theoretical view, demonstrating that most migrant children are aware of the educational pathways available to them. They recognise the significance of a university degree in supporting their educational and employment prospects. Nonetheless, in the context of Chinese migrant families, the focus shifts from traditional economic considerations to the discrepancy

between current academic performance and higher educational aspirations. This dynamic assessment often leads to strategic decisions aimed at improving educational outcomes, suggesting that migrant status itself is a critical factor affecting children's academic performance and educational decisions.

My research also emphasises housing as a critical factor influencing migrant children's education and severely limiting the social capital available to migrant families in Beijing. The intersection of Bourdieu's and Coleman's social capital theories paints a comprehensive picture of the challenges faced by immigrant families due to housing poverty. Bourdieu emphasises the class-based limitations of their social capital, confined to lower-class communities, while Coleman points out the adverse effects of housing instability on community connections, which exacerbates the socio-economic challenges migrant families face.

When exploring the learning experiences of migrant children in relation to their peers, teachers, and schools, Coleman's concept of peer social capital is highlighted as a positive force in migrant children's education, offering emotional support and shaping their future planning. However, limited parental engagement and the shifting role of teachers, influenced by market dynamics and privatisation, pose challenges to effectively supporting migrant children's educational development. Gender considerations are also explored, with Bourdieu's symbolic violence theory used to discuss how social norms perpetuate gender inequalities, though it does not fully capture the unique aspects of gender roles within the Chinese context. Rapid economic changes and new employment opportunities challenge traditional gender roles, but socio-economic barriers and entrenched cultural norms often maintain traditional and stereotypical career paths for migrant children, especially girls.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This research aims to thoroughly analyse the educational access, parental involvement, learning experiences, and educational achievements of migrant children in Outer Beijing, and explores the educational challenges faced by this unique group within China's rapid urbanisation. As urbanisation accelerates, an increasing number of rural families migrate to cities seeking better job opportunities and higher income to improve their economic circumstances and quality of life. Their children moving to cities face multiple barriers in terms of educational access and quality, including issues with household registration, inequal distribution of educational resources, and difficulties in social integration. This research focuses on the educational experiences of migrant children in their final year of compulsory education (ninth grade in lower secondary education), analysing the roles and impacts of migrant parents in children's educational processes. Qualitative research methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, are employed to explore how being a rural migrant student influenced access to education, experiences of learning and educational attainment in Outer Beijing. Furthermore, this study provides policymakers with case support to promote educational equality and improve the educational conditions for migrant children, so as to offer them better learning opportunities and prospects for future development. It also explores how family social-economic background, cultural capital, and social capital collectively shape the educational paths of migrant children, and contribute new theoretical and empirical insights to the field of educational sociology. The limitations of this research and avenues for future research are also discussed in the following sections.

8.2 Recapping for research questions

Reflecting on the research questions, this research primarily explored the impact of being a rural migrant student on educational access, learning experiences, and educational attainment in Outer Beijing. This research focused on migrant children in their final year of compulsory education, a period marked by significant transitions from lower secondary school to higher secondary school. The transient nature of their families resulted in limited parental involvement in their education. Moreover, the educational experiences of these children in migrant schools differed substantially from those in state schools. This study explored the roles parents played in the educational journeys of their children and the children's classroom experiences with the broader dynamics of home, community and school influences on the substantial population of migrant children. This dual focus aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the educational experiences within this unique demographic.

For the first sub question – what is the role of parents in children's educational experiences from their perspectives:

When exploring the role of parents in children's educational experiences, this research mainly used semi-structured interviews with migrant students, because the migrant parents, burdened by heavy workloads and long work hours, find it difficult to participate in the research. This means that the role of parents here refers to the role of parents from the eyes of migrant students – how they were perceived by the migrant children. This involved three main aspects: school choices in accessing education, children's study routines at home, and parental support in education. Regarding school choices, migrant families faced significant barriers due to strict local enrolment criteria and the lack of a Beijing Hukou, which limited their access to high-quality state schools. This led parents to enrol their children in less expensive and lower-quality migrant children schools without a Beijing hukou. School

location often became the major consideration for choosing a school. Migrant parents in their homes failed to offer an ideal learning space. Most students had to do all the laundry and cooking themselves without much parental interaction or presence at all, and seldom discussed their educational aspirations or plans for a future career in depth. This limited interaction weakened family bonds and reduced effective communication about education. Economically, migrant parents did most of the basics such as paying school fees and living costs, but almost never put into improving the home learning space or extracurricular tutoring. Beyond financial contributions, parental involvement tends to be verbal and seldom translates into practical actions. Simple inquiries about their children's schooling reflected parental concern but were limited by the parents' own low educational levels – typically no higher than lower secondary school, similar to or below the current level of their children – which meant they could little help with homework or grasp curriculum concepts. Migrant parents' low educational level and their demanding physical jobs with long hours left little time or capability to engage more deeply in their children's education, such as attending school meetings. Their own mobility and low SES also limited their social connections, and exacerbated the gap between aspirations and practical involvement. Living in unfamiliar environments in Outer Beijing and constantly facing instability and frequent relocations, they lacked opportunities to forge close connections with locals who could provide access to more substantial educational resources. This research also found that the career aspirations of migrant children did not significantly deviate from those of their parents, indicating a tendency to follow similar vocational paths as their migrant parents.

For the second sub-question: What are migrant children experience in the classroom – learning, attainment and social activities:

This research examined three key dimensions: educational achievement, classroom experiences, and peer interactions. The findings revealed that the academic performance of migrant children was

generally low. Among the 21 students surveyed, all chose vocational education, reflecting their limited academic proficiency. Notably, although this research gathered their final exam scores, observed incidents of widespread cheating suggested that these scores might not fully represent the students' actual academic abilities. Student feedback highlighted several challenges: difficulty keeping up with class pace, boredom with the curriculum, and a general resistance to learning. The misalignment between the curriculum at migrant schools in Beijing and the standards required for the SHSEE back in their rural hometowns further caused the students' confusion and anxiety about their educational futures. As a result, many migrant children held negative attitudes towards their learning experiences at migrant schools, which were compounded by a lack of effective support, leading to self-doubt and diminished self-confidence. Furthermore, the accountability for academic outcomes in migrant schools was often minimal, with educators acting more as administrators focused on ensuring graduation rather than as facilitators of learning. This lack of emphasis on academic achievements diminished the teachers' investment in the educational aspirations of migrant children. However, the social aspect of school life, particularly peer relationships, stood out as a significant positive influence. The migrant children valued the academic assistance, emotional support, encouragement, and career advice they received from their peers, which significantly contributed to their overall positive view of attending school, despite the academic struggles.

This research is descriptive and explanatory in nature and does not primarily only focus on migrant children's academic performance or educational aspirations or the factors influencing them. However, both are undeniably crucial for understanding the educational situation of migrant children. Therefore, I consciously attempt to explore the potential factors affecting these areas in this study. Adopting Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital shows that the support migrant children can receive from their parents is extremely limited due to the migrant family context. Migrant parents are unable to provide a conducive learning environment or support due to their heavy work commitments. Yet,

when discussing educational aspirations, the aspirations of the children are not low, and parents generally have higher aspirations than their children. Despite integrating Goldthorpe's (2010) interpretation that cultural assets can be acquired outside the family and exploring rational choice theory to examine how students make the most beneficial choices based on their circumstances, a significant issue remains. Despite high aspirations, these children struggle to achieve academically, a challenge deeply rooted in family poverty, which restricts their access to parental support, better schools, and broader choices.

Additionally, the concepts of family and emotional capital are discussed to explain the limited support available to migrant children and their complex emotional experiences. Beyond the family, Coleman's (1988) social capital theory is also employed to discuss migrant children's academic performance and educational aspirations due to poverty and unstable housing. The internal social capital within families is not strong, and for those migrating within Beijing, their migrant status almost entirely disconnects them from local community ties, which prevents them from accessing high-quality educational resources in Beijing. This impedes their ability to break through their lower social strata and connect with individuals who could provide more educational opportunities. Their educational performance and choices are primarily influenced by their schools and classmates. The misalignment between the curriculum offered by migrant schools and the future examination directions limits the educational and advancement support these schools can provide. While migrant children highly value the advice and information from their peers, the information shared within this migrant peer group is also limited by their collective restricted knowledge and access. These factors influence the academic achievements and educational aspirations of migrant children, as well as the gap between them. Gender also plays a significant role in their educational experiences. Although migrant parents do not restrict educational opportunities for girls due to gender differences, there is a tendency among

migrant parents to hope for boys to choose more practical vocational education to prepare them for future family caregiving roles. This difference is also reflected in migrant children's career choices.

8.3 Contribution to knowledge

This research makes a notable contribution to educational research by exploring multiple dimensions of migrant children's experiences in Beijing in the following areas:

1. In-depth exploration of migrant children's educational experiences:

This research conducted a detailed analysis of the educational access, learning experiences, and educational achievements of migrant children living in Outer Beijing, which enhanced the updated understanding of the educational challenges faced by these children. Compared to existing research, this study deeply explored the specific experiences of migrant children in three crucial environments – home, community and school – and revealed how these experiences interact to impact educational outcomes.

2. Reassessment of migrant parents' role:

In addressing the educational issues of migrant children, this study specifically focused on the role of parents and explored their role and limitations in the educational process from the perspective of migrant children. It investigated the impact of migrant parents' cultural and social capital on their children's education, and provided new insights into how family backgrounds shaped children's educational experiences. It challenged traditional views that primarily focused on financial contributions and revealed how subtle factors like parental educational attitudes and expectations shaped children's educational pathways.

3. Detailed description of migrant children's classroom experiences:

The study thoroughly explored the in-class and out-of-class learning experiences of migrant children, including their academic achievements, attitudes toward learning, and peer relationships. These were information that added richness to understanding how migrant children learnt, specifically the mismatch between curriculum and students' needs and interests in the future, and the unique place of peers in migrant child learning. A strong, positive peer network could be a strategic focus to enhance migrant children's academic engagement and performance. This provided important clues for improving the educational environment for migrant children and enhancing their academic achievements.

4. A focus on the impact of housing:

The importance of housing in the educational experience of migrant children was an often overlooked yet critical factor. Previous research has not sufficiently focused on the depth of the impact that housing had on the learning experiences of migrant children. Poor living conditions, such as overcrowding, lack of quiet spaces for study, and inadequate lighting, can directly hinder a child's ability to focus on homework and other educational activities. Frequent moves can disrupt a child's schooling and affect their ability to form lasting friendships and connections within the school and neighbouring community. Insecure housing can also lead to anxiety and stress, which were detrimental to cognitive functions and learning. Most importantly, migrant families often resided in areas with less access to high-quality schools due to economic constraints, which directly affected the educational opportunities available to their children. Stable housing in supportive communities can increase families' access to social networks that provided academic support and resources, such as tutoring or educational programs, which were often absent in migrant or marginalised communities.

5. Impact of gender on educational opportunities:

When these data were combined with the analysis of the gender disparities in education access and expectation for migrant children, it was apparent that migration, economic status and gender were interconnected. The study highlighted how migrant boys and girls within the same excluded community pursued differing education paths depending on culture and economic requirements. For example, social expectations might lead families to prioritise vocational education for boys to quickly enter the workforce, while girls might be encouraged to pursue lower-income jobs. This promoted the research on gender roles and learning/teaching among socio-economically disadvantaged individuals.

6. Application and expansion of theoretical frameworks:

By applying Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and Coleman's (1988) social capital theory to the educational study of migrant children, the research provides an in-depth theoretical explanation of the educational dilemma of migrant children. Although originating in the West, these theories and concepts are applicable to exploring similar dynamics in non-Western contexts, including China. They not only validate the wide applicability of Western educational theories across various cultural and social backgrounds but also enrich them by incorporating unique elements of Chinese society, such as the impact of the household registration system or the role of community among the migrant population. They offer a structured approach to study how different forms of capital and social structures affect individuals' opportunities and outcomes to enhance the understanding of the complex social mechanisms that support educational inequality in rapidly urbanising China. This is also beneficial for comparative educational discussions, as understanding how social and cultural capital operates in a Chinese context allows scholars to compare these dynamics with those in other parts of the world, thus promoting global educational theories and practices. Moreover, by exploring external

means of acquiring cultural assets and the role of rational choice theory in educational decisions, as well as introducing emotional capital, it further enriches the theoretical framework of educational sociology applied to the group of migrant children.

8.4 Implications for policy and practice

To effectively address the educational challenges faced by migrant children, policymakers and educational practitioners need to implement comprehensive measures aimed at fostering educational equality, inclusiveness, and enhancing educational quality.

Implications for Policy:

1. Removing barriers to education access: there is a critical need for policy reforms to eliminate barriers that prevent migrant children from accessing educational resources, particularly those related to residency status (Hukou). Existing identification policies almost exclude migrant children from attending local state schools. The government should consider moderately relaxing the admission standards for local state schools to include migrant populations to promote educational equality.

2. Increasing enrolment quotas in state schools: in the face of limited educational resources, policymakers should look to expand the enrolment capacities of state schools and specifically increase the quotas for migrant children with low social-economical background. This would ensure that migrant children have greater access to quality education and are integrated more fully into the educational system.

3. Improving the quality of education in migrant schools: the quality of education offered to migrant children varies significantly. It would be on the government to enhance the infrastructure in these schools, and support high-level teacher education with financial support and resources.

335

Additionally, relevant standards should be established to ensure the quality of education in schools for migrant children.

4. Increasing financial investment and resource allocation for migrant children's education: state and private migrant-child schools differ widely in terms of teaching quality. The government should establish policies that are fair to the educational resources for all sorts of schools and provide financial assistance to families of migrant children to reduce educational inequalities between the various groups of economic status.

5. Connecting housing and education reforms: policymakers need to acknowledge the mutually beneficial relationship between housing and education, particularly for migrant populations. Encouraging partnerships between housing authorities and educational systems could encourage more inclusive supports for migrant children, which ensures that interventions address both educational and residential stability. This approach should aim to provide stable, supportive living environments that complement educational efforts, and then enhance the overall well-being and academic success of migrant children.

Implications for practice:

1. Aligning curriculum with labour market needs: educational departments and schools need to continuously adapt curriculum to meet the labour market needs of the future. This includes more than just updating textbooks, but incorporating real world skills and learning goals for the future. It is essential to provide migrant children with clear guidance on potential educational paths and career opportunities, thereby enhancing their ability to make informed decisions about their futures.

2. Enhancing vocational training and internships: migrant children schools need to provide specialised vocational training programmes and internships based on the particular needs and

pathways for migrant children. This approach would make education more relevant and actionable, linking classroom learning with real-world practice and employment prospects.

3. Advocating gender equality in schooling: it is crucial for educational institutions to challenge traditional gender roles by actively promoting gender equality and diversity in career options. For instance, equal opportunities in gendered fields, like STEM education and career advice devoted to migrant girls. Such initiatives can help dismantle existing biases and empower all children to pursue a broader range of careers.

4. Collaboration between family and school: there should be a concerted on involving migrant parents in education, through targeted outreach efforts and community learning programs. The greater parental engagement, the more harmonious and positive schooling atmosphere (home-school relationship) can be created for migrant children's learning.

5. Training of specialist teachers: educational departments need to consider to prioritising ongoing professional development for teachers who work with migrant children. Training programs should focus on inclusive teaching practices, mental health support, and cultural competency. These skills are vital for creating an educational environment that is accommodating and responsive to the diverse needs of migrant students.

6. Affordable housing: policymakers should ensure that housing subsidies or long-term rental assistance programs for migrant families are in place to reduce the economic pressures of housing. This stability is crucial for children's consistent educational progress. Additionally, improving the infrastructure of migrant housing areas with amenities such as parks, playgrounds, and safe walkways not only enhances the quality of life but also provides safe environments for learning and socialising outside of school hours.

7. Building community support networks: establish community centres in or near migrant residences to offer a range of supportive services, including educational programs, parenting workshops, and

social integration activities. These centres should act as hubs for building community cohesion and social capital. Forming partnerships with local nonprofits, educational bodies, and social services can extend the resources available to migrant families, enabling access to extracurricular activities, mental health support, and academic guidance.

By implementing these policy implications and enhanced practices, governments can establish an environment that is more equal and supportive for migrant children to improve their chances for educational success and integration into the receiving areas. Such targeted strategies ensure that educational systems and communities not only foster the academic and social integration of migrant children but also guarantee that they have equal opportunities to excel. This holistic approach to policy and practice reinforces the foundation for these migrant children to thrive in disadvantaged settings, and contributes positively to both equal development and social cohesion.

In addition, to maximise the impact of this research on the educational experiences of migrant children in Beijing, a strategic dissemination plan will be implemented. This plan includes attending conferences in China that cater to both academic and professional audiences, such as educators, policymakers, and community leaders. Understanding the challenge of securing opportunities to speak directly to key stakeholders, efforts will be redoubled to engage through various platforms. First, it will prepare and distribute policy briefs that succinctly translate the research key findings into actionable recommendations. These briefs will be pivotal in discussions during seminars and workshops specifically organised for stakeholders involved in education and policy-making. In addition to academic dissemination, a concerted effort will be made to reach professional audiences through practitioner conferences aimed at teachers, headteachers, and educational administrators. These conferences will serve as a vital forum for presenting research outcomes, discussing practical implementations, and engaging directly with those who influence the educational environment of

migrant children daily. Moreover, a strong traditional and social media strategy will be implemented, involving the writing of articles for widely-read newspapers, educational blogs and popular social media such as Wechat platforms and Little Red Book. This approach not only broadens the reach of the research findings but also builds public support and awareness with both informative and persuasive efforts.

8.5 Limitations and personal reflections

This study offers an insightful exploration into the educational experiences of migrant children, with a focus on a small group of children from a migrant school in Outer Beijing. However, the narrow scope of this descriptive qualitative research makes it hard to apply the findings to the wider group of migrant children in China. The detailed observations provided are deeply contextual and specific to the unique environment of the study setting, which might not accurately reflect the conditions and challenges experienced by migrant children in different locations or cities across the nation. Moreover, because the research methodology relies on observation and interviews of migrant children, teachers and the headteacher, this work ignores important stakeholders such as migrant parents. Nor does it offer any kind of comparison with non-migrant or left-behind children that could give a more robust, comprehensive understanding of the educational gaps and particular difficulties experienced by migrant children. Another significant limitation is the lack of a stratified analysis based on the varying levels of academic performance and educational aspirations among the migrant children studied. This homogeneous approach potentially obscures critical distinctions between different groups within the migrant children population, which could inform targeted educational interventions. Addressing these limitations in future research would not only strengthen the findings but also contribute more effectively to policy-making and educational strategies designed to support this vulnerable population.

8.6 Areas for future research

The challenges and needs of migrant children in educational systems offer a rich field for further exploration and development in academic research. Here are some specific areas where future research could provide deeper insights and more comprehensive solutions.

The first is that future studies need to be more geographically large, beyond one site studies – to include many regions and cities in other countries or within a larger country like China. This expansion would provide a richer, more representative dataset that reflects the diverse experiences of migrant children in various socio-economic contexts. By comparing regions with different policies, economic conditions, and cultural backgrounds, scholars will be able to analyse them in a more granular way to explore how they might affect the educational experience of migrant children. Such studies could also explore rural-urban and interurban differences, and shed light on unique challenges and opportunities in different types of migrant experiences. A deeper exploration of the socio-economic factors affecting migrant children's education is needed. Research could adopt mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative insights from detailed case studies with quantitative data to build a fuller picture of how socio-economic factors intertwine to affect educational access and quality.

The second point is that a greater variety of stakeholders need to be accounted for in research designs. Future research needs to actively include migrant parents and policymakers. Additionally, engaging with community leaders and educational experts can provide a more holistic view of the migrant experience. This multi-stakeholder approach can uncover diverse views on the needs and challenges faced by migrant children, and gives a comprehensive basis for developing effective interventions.

Thirdly, employing quantitative methods such as multilevel regression analysis could clarify the impacts of migration status on academic performance and educational aspirations. Such approaches can identify potential mediators or moderators between migration status and educational outcomes. Researchers could segment migrant children based on academic performance or educational goals, which allows for a detailed exploration of how different factors affect various subgroups. This stratified analysis could inform more precise and effective educational interventions tailored to meet the specific needs of different groups of migrant children. Moreover, it is valuable to conduct longitudinal studies would provide data on the long-term effects of migration on educational outcomes. Tracking migrant children over several years can help researchers understand the lasting impacts of initial educational interventions and the long-term academic and social integration of migrant children. This could also help in assessing the effectiveness of policies and programs designed to support migrant children over time.

In summary, the educational experiences of migrant children constitute a complex and multidimensional research area that intersects with disciplines such as education, sociology, and psychology. This research is pivotal for developing more effective educational policies and practices that support the integration and success of migrant children. Through more in-depth and extensive research, future studies can not only provide educational support that better meets the needs of migrant children but also provide critical academic and policy foundations for achieving educational equality and inclusiveness.

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University of Reading

Institute of Education

Ethical Approval Form A (version May 2019)

Tick one:

Staff project: _____   PhD <u>√</u>   EdD ____

Name of applicant (s): Linyao Wang

Title of project: Educational Inequalities of Migrant Children in Beijing

Name of supervisor (for student projects): Prof. Carol Fuller

Please complete the form below including relevant sections overleaf.

	YES	NO
Have you prepared an Information Sheet for participants and/or their parents/carers that:		
a) explains the purpose(s) of the project	√	
b) explains how they have been selected as potential participants	√	
c) gives a full, fair and clear account of what will be asked of them and how the information that they provide will be used	√	
d) makes clear that participation in the project is voluntary	√	
e) explains the arrangements to allow participants to withdraw at any stage if they wish	√	
f) explains the arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of any material collected during the project, including secure arrangements for its storage, retention and disposal	√	
g) explains the arrangements for publishing the research results and, if confidentiality might be affected, for obtaining written consent for this	√	
h) explains the arrangements for providing participants with the research results if they wish to have them	√	
i) gives the name and designation of the member of staff with responsibility for the project together with contact details, including email. If any of the project investigators are students at the IoE, then this information must be included and their name provided	√	

k) explains, where applicable, the arrangements for expenses and other payments to be made to the participants	√		
j) includes a standard statement indicating the process of ethical review at the University undergone by the project, as follows: 'This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct'.	√		
k) includes a standard statement regarding insurance: "The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request".	√		
Please answer the following questions			
1) Will you provide participants involved in your research with all the information necessary to ensure that they are fully informed and not in any way deceived or misled as to the purpose(s) and nature of the research? (Please use the subheadings used in the example information sheets on blackboard to ensure this).	√		
2) Will you seek written or other formal consent from all participants, if they are able to provide it, in addition to (1)?	√		
3) Is there any risk that participants may experience physical or psychological distress in taking part in your research?		√	
4) Staff Only - have you taken the online training modules in data protection and information security (which can be found here: http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/humanresources/PeopleDevelopment/newstaff/humres-MandatoryOnlineCourses.aspx Please note: students complete a Data Protection Declaration form and submit it with this application to the ethics committee.			
5) Have you read the Health and Safety booklet (available on Blackboard) and completed a Risk Assessment Form to be included with this ethics application?	√		
6) Does your research comply with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research?	√		
	YES	NO	N.A.
7) If your research is taking place in a school, have you prepared an information sheet and consent form to gain the permission in writing of the head teacher or other relevant supervisory professional?	√		
8) Has the data collector obtained satisfactory DBS clearance?	√		

9) If your research involves working with children under the age of 16 (or those whose special educational needs mean they are unable to give informed consent), have you prepared an information sheet and consent form for parents/carers to seek permission in writing, or to give parents/carers the opportunity to decline consent?	√		
10) If your research involves processing sensitive personal data[4], or if it involves audio/video recordings, have you obtained the explicit consent of participants/parents?	√		
11) If you are using a data processor to subcontract any part of your research, have you got a written contract with that contractor which (a) specifies that the contractor is required to act only on your instructions, and (b) provides for appropriate technical and organisational security measures to protect the data?		√	
12a) Does your research involve data collection outside the UK?	√		
12b) If the answer to question 12a is "yes", does your research comply with the legal and ethical requirements for doing research in that country?	√		
13a) Does your research involve collecting data in a language other than English?	√		
13b) If the answer to question 13a is "yes", please confirm that information sheets, consent forms, and research instruments, where appropriate, have been directly translated from the English versions submitted with this application.	√		
14a. Does the proposed research involve children under the age of 5?		√	
14b. If the answer to question 14a is "yes": My Head of School (or authorised Head of Department) has given details of the proposed research to the University's insurance officer, and the research will not proceed until I have confirmation that insurance cover is in place.			
If you have answered YES to Question 3, please complete Section B below			

- Complete **either** Section A **or** Section B below with details of your research project.
- Complete a risk assessment.
- Sign the form in Section C.

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[4] Sensitive personal data consists of information relating to the racial or ethnic origin of a data subject, their political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life, physical or mental health or condition, or criminal offences or record.

- Append at the end of this form all relevant documents: information sheets, consent forms, tests, questionnaires, interview schedules, evidence that you have completed information security training (e.g. screen shot/copy of certificate).
- Email the completed form to the Institute's Ethics Committee for consideration.

Any missing information will result in the form being returned to you.

A: My research goes beyond the 'accepted custom and practice of teaching' but I consider that this project has **no** significant ethical implications. (Please tick the box.)	√

Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.

There will be a total number of approximately 25 participants in this project, which including 1 headteacher, 3 class teachers, 21 migrant children in a primary migrant children school.

Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words noting:

My research project title is educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing. The study aims to investigate the access to education and the educational experiences of migrant children who have migrated with their parents to Beijing. It will use qualitative methods of interviews for the participants of a headteacher, 3 class teachers, 21 migrant children aged from 11 to 16 in Year 9 respectively and a focus group only for migrant children, as well as a qualitative 10-minute questionnaire survey for migrant students with purposive sampling and snowball sampling technique. All participants will be given information sheet and consent form to complete before conducting the research if they agree to take part. During the research process, participants can change their mind at any time without any repercussions. All the collected data including photographs and video records will be strictly confidential and will be kept in private. In some circumstances where there are concerns about the students' welfare, it is necessary to contact safeguarding staff in school, or call the police and children protection charity. The research will start on 1st September, 2020 and it will last for 8 months to collect data.

B: I consider that this project **may** have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee.	
Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.	
Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words. 1. title of project 2. purpose of project and its academic rationale 3. brief description of methods and measurements 4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria 5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary) 6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with then. 7. estimated start date and duration of project	

RISK ASSESSMENT: Please complete the form below

Brief outline of Work/activity:	1. The projects aims to investigate the access to education and the educational experiences of migrant children, and then wish to understand educational challenges facing migrant children and give suggestions on how schools, teachers and parents can provide resources to support migrant children in education. 2. Around 21 migrant children aged from 11 -16 in Year 9 will be involved in the research. They will be invited to complete a 10-minute questionnaire about their personal and family information, as well as their experiences at school and at home. Also, this research will deeper explore migrant children's feelings and educational experiences through class observation, a 30-minute interview. In order to know other factors affecting migrant children's learning experiences, this research will also

	have a 30-minute interview with teachers and the headteacher respectively. 3. Before conducting this research, it is ensured that all participants agree to take part by reading and signing information sheet and consent form.

Where will data be collected?	In a migrant children school (primary) in Changping District in Beijing, China

Significant hazards:	1. Students' health and welfare might not be well-protected at school and at home. For example, during an interview with migrant children, it will be found that they are discriminated by other students at school; or the classroom environment and damaged teaching equipment is not suitable for education; or their parents cannot take good care of them, or even abuse them at home. 2. The collected data has the possibility to be accidently destroyed because of force majeure such as fires, floods and earthquake.

Who might be exposed to hazards?	Migrant children, teachers, parents

Existing control measures:	1. If a child is discriminated by other children, it should be reported to his or her teacher, as well as the parent. If the discrimination has negative effects on the child's psychology, it is necessary to contact a youth psychology charity to help him or her. 2. If there is damaged teaching equipment in the classroom, the damaged items should be immediately reported to school facilities team. 3. If a migrant child is abused at home, it is necessary to call the police and contact children protection charity. 4. All the collected data and documents will be backed up and be kept private in case of force majeure.

Are risks adequately controlled:	Yes

If NO, list additional controls and actions required:	Additional controls	Action by:

C: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:

Note: a signature is required. Typed names are not acceptable.

I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm that ethical good practice will be followed within the project.

Signed: …   ..   Print Name…Linyao Wang……………   Date…6th May, 2020….

STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE ETHICS COMMITTEE

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.

Signed: Print Name: Karen Jones
(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative)*
                                             SignedDate 7 May 2020

(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative)*

* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

Appendix 1: Questionnaire Schedule for Student Information

Instructions:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. These are questions for my doctoral research about educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing. This survey has 27 questions and should take you approximately 10 minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in how you feel. Be assured that all answers you provide will be kept in the strictest confidentially. I really appreciate your help!

Name:

Student number:

Part A. Student personal information

1. What is your gender?

    1) Male   2) Female

2. What is your age?

    1) 9-10   2) 11-12   3) 13-14

3. Do you have siblings?

    1) Yes (if yes, how many? _____)   2) No

4. What is your father's job? (please specify his occupation _____)

5. What is your mother's job? (please specify her occupation _____)

6. What is your father's education degree?

    1) Primary school   2) Junior high school   3) Senior high school

    4) Technical secondary school   5) College   6) University or above

7. What is your mother's education degree?

    1) Primary school   2) Junior high school   3) Senior high school

    4) Technical secondary school   5) College   6) University or above

8. Where do you live during weekdays?

    1) Living in school dormitory (if living in school dormitory, please skip the next two questions)

    2) Living with parents in the city (if living with a parent, please specify father or mother)

    3) Living with relatives or parents' friends in the city

    4) Other (please specify _____)

9. Where does your family live in the city?

    1) Rent a flat   2) Bought a commercial house

    3) Stay in a relative / friend's house   4) Other (please specify _____)

10. How many neighbours do you think are rural registered in your community now?

    1) Only a few   2) Some   3) Majority   4) Most

11. How often do you contact with your rural neighbours?

    1) Always   2) Sometimes   3) Rarely   4) Never

12. How often do you contact with the rural relatives in your hometown?

    1) Always   2) Sometimes   3) Rarely   4) Never

Part B. Future expectation

1. What education degree do your parents want you to achieve?

    1) Finish junior high school   2) Finish senior high school   3) Technical school

    4) College   5) University or above   6) Not decide

2. What education degree do you want to achieve?

    1) Finish junior high school   2) Finish senior high school   3) Technical school

    4) College   5) University or above   6) Not decide

3. Where do you mostly want to stay after graduation? (please explain why _____)

    1) Stay in the city   2) Go back to hometown

4. What do you mostly want to do after graduation?

1) Get a job directly   2) Be apprentice to learn a skill

3) Study in vocational school   4) Go to high school

5. What is your opinion on education?

1) Education is significant   2) Education is boring

3) Education does not help me   4) Education is the same in every place

6. Please tick to indicate to what extent you agree with following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
City is better than country in all aspects.				
Dream can come true by self-effort.				
Knowledge can change destiny.				
Going to school is only for getting a diploma to find a job.				
How well I do at school makes no difference to how I get on with life.				
I can succeed without going to school.				
Hard to succeed as long as my parents are not in high social class.				

Part C. Migration experience

1. Where is your hometown?

Village/ town: _____, City: _____, Province: _____.

2. Are you born in Beijing?

1) Yes   2) No

3. Is Beijing the first city you have been living for more than a year?

1) Yes (if yes, please skip Question 4)   2) No

4. What is other city you have been living for more than a year except your hometown? _____.

5. How long have your parents / one parent been living in Beijing? Please specify _____ years.

6. How long have you been living in Beijing? Please specify _____ years.

7. How long have you been studying in this school? Please specify _____ years.

8. How do you and your parents decide to choose this school? (it is multiple choice)

     1) Friends' recommendation   2) The only school that can receive

     3) The tuition fee is the cheapest   4) Other (please specify_____)

9. Have you ever changed your school in Beijing?

     1) Yes, (if yes, please specify when and why _____)

     2) No

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule for School Information

Interview with headteacher

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. These are questions for my doctoral research about educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing. This survey has only 15 questions and should take you approximately 60 minutes to complete. Be assured that all answers you provide will be kept in the strictest confidentially. I really appreciate your help!

Part A: basic information about school, children and teachers

1. How long is the school's history?

2. How many classes and students in your school?

3. How many teachers have the length of teaching experience in your school – less than 2 years, 2 to 5 years, 5 to 10 years, or more than 10 years?

4. How many teachers have the educational background in your school – high school and below, associate degree, or bachelor's degree and above?

Part B: financial information

1. What are the sources of funding?

2. What is the fees for each student per semester or per academic year?

3. Does the local government give financial support?

Part C: student recruitment information

1. Since your school does not have an official website, how to recruit migrant children?

2. What are the difficulties of recruiting migrant children?

3. What are the enrolment requirements for students without Beijing Hukou in your school?

4. What is the result that when migrant children cannot meet the school's enrolment requirements?

Part D: policy implementation

1. What kinds of roles has your school played in implementing local government' educational policies towards migrant children and are there any changes in your school?

2. Any difficulties when conducting local government's educational policies towards migrant children?

3. Any benefits can your school achieve by implementing these polices?

4. What kinds of support you wish to receive from local government or other social organisations?

Appendix 3: Interview Schedule for Teacher Information

Interview with teachers

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. These are questions for my doctoral research about educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing. This survey has only 11 questions and should take you approximately 60 minutes to complete. Be assured that all answers you provide will be kept in the strictest confidentially. I really appreciate your help!

Part A: personal information

1. What is your hometown of original place?

2. How long have been in Beijing and in this school?

3. What is your educational background?

Part B: experiences with migrant children and parents

1. What do you think of migrant students?

2. What is your relationship with your students' families?

3. Are there any pressing issues for you concerning migrant children's education?

4. What is your plan in recent five years? Do you wish to stay in this school or change to another school?

Part C: support and educational policy

1. What's the government's attitude to your school?

2. What support do you wish to receive from the school or from the government for children's education?

3. Are these any special polices toward migrant children in your school?

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule for Student Information

Interview with students

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. These are questions for my doctoral research about educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing. This survey has only 15 questions and should take you approximately 30 minutes to complete. Be assured that all answers you provide will be kept in the strictest confidentially. I really appreciate your help!

Part A: school

1. What is your feeling of going to school?

2. How do you define yourself? (social identity)

3. What do you like doing best at school?

4. What do you like to do after school?

Part B: peer relationships

1. What do you think of your migrant classmates?

2. Are there any difficulties when communicating with other students?

3. If you have the difficulties, do you have any solutions to solve the problems?

4. Who are your friends? What do you like about them?

5. Have you made friends with local children?

6. Any difficulties when communicating with local students?

Part C: teachers

1. Which teachers do you like and why?

2. Which courses do you like and why?

3. Have you gotten extra help from teachers after school?

Part D: parents

1. How many hours you spend on study after school?

2. Whether your parents help you with study after school? If yes, how many hours they spend on your study every day?

Appendix 5: Headteacher Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Project: Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

Dear Headteacher,

I would like to invite your school to take part in a research study about educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing, which especially explores how does being a rural migrant student influence access to education, experiences of learning and educational attainment in your school.

What is the study?

The study is part of the fieldwork to collect data for my doctoral research. It aims to investigate the educational experiences of migrant children who have migrated with their parents to Beijing. Their experiences will be affected and analysed from their access to education, their process of learning and their educational attainment in your school. It hopes to understand the specific educational challenges facing migrant children and explore what support migrant families need to ensure the best educational outcomes for their children. Then, it could give suggestions on how schools, teachers and parents can provide resources to support migrant children in education.

Why has this school been chosen to take part?

Although Chinese central government has promogulated educational policies to provide more educational access for migrant children to receive education in Beijing state schools, there are a large proportion of migrant children with lower social backgrounds cannot meet the criteria for accessing state schools. These migrant children have to go back to their rural hometowns or attend migrant children schools with less educational resources compared with state schools in Beijing. The phenomenon has posted a threat on educational equalities and raised researchers' awareness of supporting these migrant children.

Your school has been invited to take part in the study because your school is located in the district, which has the highest proportion of schools for children of migrant workers in Beijing. Additionally, your school is one of the earliest and longest schools for migrant children, which has a history of around 20 years with stable school operation and management, attracting a large number of migrant

participants. The participation of your school in this study can represent the largest overview of migrant children's education in Beijing, and it will provide a lot of support and significance for the government's endeavour to reduce educational inequalities.

Does the school have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether you give permission for the school to take participate in this study or not. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the study, without any repercussions to you or your school, by contacting the researcher Linyao Wang, Tel: ; Email: linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What will happen if the school takes part?

With your agreement, at first, I would like to have a 60-minute school survey to collect basic information about your school, such as history, number of classes and students, basic characteristics of all teachers, sources of funding, enrolment requirements for students without Beijing Hukou, fees, and so on. Secondly, students in Year 6 are invited to complete a questionnaire and interview asking them about their learning experiences at school and at home (should be obtained through a short questionnaire or an interview with parents). Thirdly, in order for me to set the children's learning in context, it would be helpful to have their academic records and observe their behaviours and interactions in class. I would also have a 60-minute interview with class tutors about the Chinese, Mathematics and English curriculum in school, their personal educational backgrounds and their experience in teaching through class observations.

All the sessions will not be conducted in students' and teachers' preferred time and place and will not disturb the school's normal teaching procedures. The research process will be photographed, and audio and video recorded for later analysis with prior permission.

If you agree to the school's participation, I will seek further consent from parents or carers and the children themselves, as well as from their class teacher before conducting this research.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information collected by all participants in this study will remain strictly confidential and will only be seen by the researcher (Linyao Wang) and her supervisors (Professor Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. Neither you, the students, the parents nor the school will be

identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the school.

Participants in similar studies have found it interesting to take participate. We anticipate that the findings of the study will be useful for teachers and educators in endeavouring to better support migrant children's education in Beijing. An electronic summary of the findings of the study can be made available to you by contacting the researcher if you wish.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you, the migrant children, the teachers or the school to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be given pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters and will be referred to by those pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national and international conferences, and in written reports and articles. In some circumstances where there are concerns about the students' welfare, for example, when migrant children are founded to have been abused by other students at school or parents at home, it is necessary to contact appropriate safeguarding staff in the school, or call the police and contact children protection charity.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard your data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Professor Carol Fuller at University of Reading by phone on +44(0)1183782662, or by email on c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Linyao Wang by phone on   (UK), (China), or by email on linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What do I do next?

I do hope that you will agree to you and your school's participation in the study. Participation is voluntary and non-payment. If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached consent form and return it to Linyao Wang.

Thank you for your time.

Research Project: <u>Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing</u>

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

<u>Headteacher Consent Form</u>

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of Headteacher: _____

Name of the school: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

	Yes	No
I consent to the involvement of my school in the research as outlined in the information sheet.	☐	☐
I consent to completing a school survey as explained in the information sheet.	☐	☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 6: Parent / carer Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Project: <u>Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing</u>

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

I would like to invite you and your child to take part in a research study about how does being a rural migrant student influence access to education, experiences of learning and educational attainment, and then explore what kinds of resources to support migrant children's education in your area. As you are the legal guardian of the child in the family, on behalf of his / her parents, I am asking for your permission to invite your child in the study.

What is the study?

The study is part of the fieldwork to collect data for my doctoral research. It aims to investigate the educational experiences of migrant children who have migrated with their parents to Beijing. Their experiences will be affected and analysed from their access to education, their process of learning and their educational attainment in a primary school in your area. It hopes to understand the specific educational challenges facing migrant children and explore what support migrant families need to ensure the best educational outcomes for children.

Why has my child been chosen to take part?

Although Chinese central government has promogulated educational policies to provide more educational access for migrant children to receive education in Beijing state schools, there are a large proportion of migrant children with lower social backgrounds cannot meet the criteria for accessing state schools. These migrant children have to go back to their rural hometowns or attend migrant children schools with less educational resources compared with state schools in Beijing. The phenomenon has posted a threat on educational equalities and raised researchers' awareness of supporting these migrant children. Your child has been invited to take part in the study because your child's school has expressed an interest in being involved in the study and believed this study will be beneficial for the students.

Does my child have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether you want your child to take participate in this study or not. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the study, without any

repercussions to you or your child, by contacting the researcher Linyao Wang, Tel: ;
Email: linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What will happen if my child takes part?

Your child's normal learning procedures will not be disturbed by this study. Your child will be invited to complete a 10-mintue questionnaire survey about basic personal and family information. I will observe and write down notes about your child's performances in a class, or the ways that he or she answers the questions from the teacher, and so on. The observation will be photographed and video-recorded for data analysis. In addition, your child will be invited to take part in my interview and focus group according to his or her preferred time and place. In the individual's interview and focus group, I will ask some questions about your child's learning experience at school and at home. The interview and focus group will be audio-recorded and may last for 30 minutes. Only if you agree your child to participate in the research by ticking the consent form can I have an interview with your child. For having more close understanding of your child's educational performances in the school, I also need to check your child's grades and behaviour records by the teacher with your consent. If you wish to share more information about your opinions and your child's performance, it is necessary to have a 60-minute interview with you by telephone or face-to-face conversation according to your preferred time and place by ticking the box on the last page of this sheet if you are happy to agree.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information given by you and your child in this study will remain strictly confidential and will only be seen by the researcher (Linyao Wang) and her supervisors (Professor Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. Neither you, your child, the teacher nor the school will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Taking part will in no way influence the grades your child receives at school. Information about your child will not be shared with the school. I anticipate that the findings of the study will be useful for teachers and educators in endeavouring to better support migrant children's education in Beijing. An electronic summary of the findings of the study can be made available to you by contacting the researcher if you wish.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you, your child or the school to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. I will transcribe the recordings from interviews and anonymise them before analysing the results.

Children will be given pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters and will be referred to by those pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national and international conferences, and in written reports and articles.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if I / my child change our mind?

You / your child can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, you and your child can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard your child's data.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Professor Carol Fuller at University of Reading by phone on +44(0)1183782662, or by email on c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Linyao Wang by phone on   (UK), or by email on linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What do I do next?

I do hope that you will agree to your child's participation in the study. Participation is voluntary and non-payment. If you are happy for your child to take part, please complete the attached consent form and return it to Linyao Wang.

Thank you for your time.

Research Project: Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

Parent / Carer Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of my child and me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of child: _____

Name of parent / carer: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

	Yes	No
I consent to the school giving Linyao Wang details of my child's grades in examinations.	☐	☐
I consent to my child completing the questionnaire as explained in the information sheet.	☐	☐
I consent to my child being interviewed by Linyao Wang and the audio-recording of the process.	☐	☐
I consent to the observation of my child in class and other school activities and the photographing or video-recording of my child taking part in them if needed.	☐	☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 7: Student Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Project: Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

You are being invited to take part in my doctoral research study. Before you decide to do so, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with your parents. Ask the researcher, your teachers or your parents if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you and your parents wish to take part.

What is the study?

The study aims to investigate how does being a rural migrant student influence access to education, experiences of learning and educational attainment in your school. The experiences will be affected and analysed from the access to education, the process of learning and the educational attainment. It hopes to understand the specific educational challenges facing migrant children and explore what support migrant families need to ensure the best educational outcomes for children. Then, it could give suggestions on how schools, teachers and parents can provide resources to support migrant children in education.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the study because you now in the last year of primary school, and it is the time to decide the place where you will pursue your future education. I would like to know you and your parents' plans of choosing a secondary school in Beijing or in your hometown. Your choice will explain the current situation of migrant children's accessing to education in Beijing, which will be of great help and value on educational enrolment policies towards migrant children.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw your consent to participation at any time and without giving a reason during the study by contacting the researcher Linyao Wang, Tel: 008615298520989; Email: linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk. The decision not to participate will not affect your grades in any way.

And withdrawing from the research will not jeopardise your relationship with other students, teachers or the researcher,

What will happen if I take part?

If you take part in the research, at first, I will invite you to complete a 10-minute questionnaire survey about your basic information with the consent of you and your parents. Then I will observe your performances, behaviours and interactions with your classmates and teachers in a normal class in your school. Additionally, I will do an interview with you, which will take you around 30 minutes to talk about your personal feelings about going to schools and learning experiences at home. It is up to you to decide the time and the place you prefer to do the interview. The interview and class observation will be photographed and video-recorded for later analysis.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information collected by all participants in this study will remain strictly confidential and will only be seen by the researcher (Linyao Wang) and her supervisors (Professor Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. Neither you, your teachers, your parents nor the school will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the school. Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you participating in the project, it is hoped that the findings of the study will be beneficial for teachers and educators in endeavouring to better support migrant children's education in Beijing. An electronic summary of the findings of the study can be made available to you by contacting the researcher if you wish.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected about you will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you, your classmates, your teachers, your parents or the school to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. I will transcribe the recordings from interviews and anonymise them before analysing the results. You will be given pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters and will be referred to by those pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters in all records. The raw research data and records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access

to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national and international conferences, and in written reports and articles.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, you can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard your data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Professor Carol Fuller at University of Reading by phone on +44(0)1183782662, or by email on c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you have further question or wish to receive further information about the study, please contact the researcher Linyao Wang by phone on +44(0)7536961121 (UK), 008615298520989 (China), or by email on linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What do I do next?

Take time to decide whether or not you agree to take part. Participation is voluntary and non-payment. If you are happy to take part, please complete the following consent form and return it to Linyao Wang.

Thank you for your time.

Research Project: <u>Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing</u>

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

Student Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

I understand that my participation in this research is for the purposes of research, and is in no way an evaluation of me as an individual.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

	Yes	No
I consent to completing the questionnaire as explained in the information sheet.	☐	☐
I consent to take part in an observation being photographed and video recorded.	☐	☐
I consent to take part in an interview with Miss Linyao Wang and I consent to the audio-recording in the process.	☐	☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 8: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Project: Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing, which especially explores how does being a rural migrant student influence access to education, experiences of learning and educational attainment in your school.

What is the study?

The study is part of the fieldwork to collect data for my doctoral research. It aims to investigate the educational experiences of migrant children who have migrated with their parents to Beijing. Their experiences will be affected and analysed from their access to education, their process of learning and their educational attainment in your school. It hopes to understand the specific educational challenges facing migrant children and explore what support migrant families need to ensure the best educational outcomes for their children. Then, it could give suggestions on how schools, teachers and parents can provide resources to support migrant children in education.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the study because your school is located in the district, which has the highest proportion of schools for children of migrant workers in Beijing. Additionally, your school is one of the earliest and longest schools for migrant children, which has a history of around 20 years with stable school operation and management, attracting a large number of migrant participants. You are purposively chosen because you are a class tutor, or you are responsible for one core subject of Chinese, Mathematics or English. As such a teacher, you have more closely communication with students, and you can directly have a deep understanding of their learning status and process. Your sufficiently straightforward experiences and perceptions of migrant children will provide a lot of support and significance for this study.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether you would like yourself and your class to take participate in this study or not. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the study,

without any repercussions to you or your class, by contacting the researcher Linyao Wang, Tel: 008615298520989; Email: linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What will happen if I take part?

If you take part in the research, the research would only take you 30 minutes after class for interview about curriculum, your educational backgrounds, your teaching experiences and feedback on students' academic performances. In addition, with your consent and cooperation, I can observe some lessons taught by you and then can learn students' daily class environment and their learning behaviour in class. The observation will mainly focus on migrant students and will be photographed or video-recorded for deeper analysis.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information collected by all participants in this study will remain strictly confidential and will only be seen by the researcher (Linyao Wang) and her supervisors (Professor Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. Neither you, the students, the parents nor the school will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the school.

Teachers in similar studies have found it interesting to take participate. We anticipate that the findings of the study will be useful for teachers and educators in endeavouring to better support migrant children's education in Beijing. An electronic summary of the findings of the study can be made available to you by contacting the researcher if you wish.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you, the migrant children or the school to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. I will transcribe the recordings from interviews and anonymise them before analysing the results. You and your students will be given pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters and will be referred to by those pseudonyms, abbreviations or numbers and letters in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national and international conferences, and in written reports and articles.

What happens if I change my mind?

During the research, you can stop completing the activities at any time without any repercussions. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard your data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Professor Carol Fuller at University of Reading by phone on +44(0)1183782662, or by email on c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Linyao Wang by phone on +44(0)7536961121 (UK), 008615298520989 (China), or by email on linyao.wang@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What do I do next?

I do hope that you will agree to your participation in the study and to your involvement in it. Participation is voluntary and non-payment and if you are happy to take part, please complete the attached consent form and return it to Linyao Wang.

Thank you for your time.

Research Project: <u>Educational inequalities of migrant children in Beijing</u>

Student Researcher: Linyao Wang, PhD student in Institute of Education, University of Reading

Teacher Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of teacher: _____

Teaching subject: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

	Yes	No
I consent to the observation in my class.	☐	☐
I consent to the class observation being photographed and video recorded.	☐	☐
I consent to the interview with Miss Linyao Wang and I consent to the audio-recording in the process.	☐	☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 9: The layout of the school

This school was small and most of the buildings were one-story bungalows except the teaching building near the school entrance gate, which was a two-story building for the first, second and third graders. There were five main buildings in the school: teaching buildings, teachers' office, the library, the canteen and the dormitory buildings. The canteen was close to the school gate. The teaching buildings and the teachers' offices were separate buildings, but they were all close to each other around the small playground. The library was between the two teaching buildings for the higher graders in the primary school sector and the lower secondary school sector. Boy's and girl's dormitory, which was far away from the teaching area, was located in the northeast corner of the school, next to the big playground. The five most important buildings – classroom, teachers' office, dormitory, library, toilet, were described below.