

Reverse Adaptation of Hong Kong Children Returning to Mainland China

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Abstract. Under the background of integration in the Guangdong Hong Kong Macao Greater Bay Area, the issue of children's educational adaptation caused by Hong Kong families migrating to the mainland has received widespread attention. However, the academic community still lacks in-depth exploration of the adaptation difficulties of children who have received early education in Hong Kong or overseas and transferred to mainland kindergartens. Using qualitative text analysis, this paper systematically analyzes the discussion of parents on social media platforms such as Tiktok and Xiaohongshu, and analyzes the main challenges and needs of such children in the process of kindergarten adaptation. The study found that: firstly, parents generally face the dilemma of choosing schools, and their choices of different curriculum models and educational concepts reflect differentiated expectations for their children's identity and cultural identity; Secondly, children experience adaptation difficulties in curriculum patterns, teacher-student interactions, and language environment transitions, resulting in a mixed sense of belonging. Based on this, this article proposes specific suggestions from three levels: family, kindergarten, and home school collaboration, including language and psychological preparation in advance, establishment of a two-way communication mechanism during the transition period, and implementation of a gradual rule adaptation plan.

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous integration of the Guangdong Hong Kong Macao Greater Bay Area, the integration of education between Hong Kong and the mainland has rapidly deepened [1]. In this context, a special group of children is gradually emerging. They may have received early education in Hong Kong or moved overseas with their families and

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attended kindergartens there. Now, due to family decisions, they have returned to the mainland and entered the mainland's kindergarten system. These returning children are facing the challenge of transitioning from their original language and educational environment to the mainland kindergarten system dominated by Mandarin.

Existing research suggests that children who grow up in multicultural environments often develop a mixed identity between their mother culture and host culture [2]. For children returning to Hong Kong, they not only need to adapt to language switching, but also experience reverse cultural shock [3]. In addition, the language socialization process of these children in cross-cultural transfer has a profound impact on their identity recognition and school adaptation [4]. In recent years, scholars have continuously deepened their research on cross regional migrant children. Xu et al. conducted a systematic review of the global group of children facing adaptation difficulties due to their return, revealing the triple challenges of academic, psychological, and social integration faced by returning children, and emphasizing the need for current research to focus more on the micro adaptation experiences of individual children. At the same time, Wu and Qiu conducted an empirical analysis of the psychological and social adaptation of cross-border students in Shenzhen and Hong Kong based on the resilience and social capital framework, and found that the social capital network of cross-border migrant children plays a key moderating role in identity construction when facing "double marginalization" [6]. In domestic research, scholars have noticed that the identity recognition of cross-border students between Shenzhen and Hong Kong exhibits a dual characteristic [7]. As for the mental health problems caused by migration, existing studies have shown that migration experience itself may increase adaptive challenges. Migrant children in the Chinese Mainland suffer multiple social adversities, including discrimination pressure due to factors such as the registered residence system, which significantly predicts their loneliness, depression, anxiety, and other psychological distress [8]. Another study found that there is heterogeneity in the impact of return migration on children's mental health and cognition, with different types of migrant children exhibiting differentiated adaptation trajectories after return [9]. However, most of the above studies focus on children returning from mainland China or cross-border students, and there is still a lack of attention to the early adaptation experience of the specific group of "Hong Kong children returning to mainland China", especially the challenges in the preschool stage. This study explores the following questions by analyzing parents' discussions on social media: How do parents describe their children's difficulties and advantages in the adaptation process? What are the adaptation prospects of these children in the Mandarin-dominated educational environment and diverse types of kindergartens in mainland China?

2 Problem expression

2.1 Differences in curriculum models and educational concepts

The differences in curriculum modes refer to the systematic differences in teaching objectives, content organization, teaching methods, and evaluation methods among different educational systems. Research shows that there are fundamental differences in curriculum concepts

between kindergartens in Hong Kong and mainland China. Liu and Wang conducted a systematic comparative analysis of the early education curriculum guides in the Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and found that the curriculum guides in the Chinese Mainland are more focused on collectivism and academic preparation orientation, while the curriculum guides in Hong Kong are more focused on the guidance of children's individual development and exploration ability [10]. Hong Kong education has long been influenced by Western early education concepts, emphasizing process and individual differences, while mainland education is rooted in Confucian cultural traditions, emphasizing diligence, competition, and collective achievement. This value system permeates into the kindergarten stage, forming a collective consensus that "preschool education needs to prepare for future education". Yang and Li, through case studies of four kindergartens in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, revealed the similarities and differences in curriculum innovation between the two places from three levels: intended curriculum, implementation curriculum, and curriculum ideology. The school-based curriculum in Shenzhen and Hong Kong tends to seek integration between child-centered and teacher-led Western concepts, and Chinese traditions. The commonality of the curriculum in the two places stems from shared Chinese cultural values, while their uniqueness is shaped by different social contexts [11].

Parents have reported significant differences in the curriculum patterns of kindergartens in mainland China and Hong Kong, and children need time to adapt. A parent said, "I used to think that going to school in Hong Kong was happy and easy, but when I came, I realized that wherever Chinese people gather, there is nothing that is not 'rolled up'. It's just that the way of rolling is different." In addition, some parents have pointed out that there are diverse education methods in mainland China, but there is a lack of a unified early childhood education system and a tendency towards exam-oriented education. A parent commented on mainland kindergartens as follows: "The education methods are diverse but lack a unified early childhood teaching system, and tend to focus on exams." These evaluations reflect parents' cognitive conflicts about what is good education.

The difference in curriculum philosophy leads to cognitive dissonance among returning children during the adaptation process. They may feel at a loss and unable to quickly adapt to the transition between relaxed and strict teaching styles. In the long run, this difference may weaken children's intrinsic motivation for learning, and even see 'going to school' as a source of stress rather than pleasure.

2.2 Changes in teacher-student interaction and behavioral norms

The differences in teacher-student interaction patterns are reflected in the power distance, communication methods, and disciplinary management strategies of the teacher-student relationship. Cross-cultural education research points out that in high power distance cultures, teachers are seen as authorities and students need to show respect and obedience; The culture of low power distance encourages equal dialogue and personal expression [12]. The teacher-student interaction in mainland kindergartens emphasizes discipline, order, and collective action; The teacher-student relationship in Hong Kong kindergartens places more emphasis on personal space and a sense of boundaries.

Mainland kindergartens generally adopt the "class collective management" model, where teachers face around 30 children and must rely on clear rules and obedience to maintain order. The class size of Hong Kong kindergartens is relatively small, usually 15-20 people, and they focus more on individual autonomy and internalization of rules rather than external coercion [13]. In addition, the identity negotiation theory suggests that children's understanding of "appropriate behavior" in cross-cultural interactions is strongly influenced by their previous socialization experiences, and when the behavioral norms of the new environment are inconsistent with their existing experiences, they are prone to adaptation difficulties [14].

There are also differences in teacher-student interaction patterns and behavioral norms between kindergartens in the two places. Some parents believe that mainland kindergartens emphasize discipline more, while Hong Kong kindergartens focus more on the standardization of home-school communication and personal space. A parent shared: "Hong Kong kindergartens have a letter-like communication model: they need to check the file bag in their child's backpack every day to see if there are any new notifications or assignments, and they need to understand, operate, and execute them themselves."

A teacher compared the characteristics of students from two places in detail: "Mainland students tend to be introverted, communicate politely with teachers, and ask questions after class if they don't understand. They have a strong sense of collectivism, actively cooperate with class activities, have clear goals, compete with each other in learning, and play and frolic together after class. They also focus on cultivating learning abilities. Hong Kong students grew up in a bilingual and trilingual environment, and were influenced by some foreign education. They understand boundaries, have strong social skills, speak confidently on stage without fear, often expand extracurricular activities, and tend to cultivate all-around abilities." This comparison confirms the differences in socialization goals between the two regions.

2.3 Mixed identity recognition

Identity confusion refers to an individual's inability to clearly identify themselves with a single cultural group during cross-cultural migration, resulting in a psychological state of "neither belonging here nor there". The theory of identity negotiation suggests that when individuals cross cultural boundaries, they need to re-answer the fundamental question of 'who am I?' If this process is hindered, it can lead to identity confusion and a lack of sense of belonging [14]. For children returning to Hong Kong, they are exposed to both Hong Kong culture and mainland culture, but neither can fully accept their identity, thus forming a "third cultural identity" that lies between the two [2].

Some parents expressed confusion about their children's identity and uncertainty about where they came from after returning to mainland China. This mixed sense of belonging is a deep psychological challenge during their adaptation process. A user shared, "Am I from Hong Kong? I don't think so. Am I from Shenzhen?" It's also strange to say that.

The mixed identity has a profound impact on the psychological adaptation of returning children. In the short term, children may exhibit emotional instability, social avoidance, or a

dual rejection of two cultures. In the long term, if not properly guided, this mixture may lead to self-concept ambiguity, low self-esteem, and even depressive tendencies [7]. However, a positive perspective also suggests that if families and schools can support children in constructing positive mixed identities, this multicultural experience can actually be transformed into stronger cross-cultural adaptation abilities [2].

3 Suggestions

3.1 Family aspect

Parents should prepare their children in advance for language and psychology, consciously helping them understand the cultural differences between the two regions. Families should use Mandarin more for communication, while retaining the frequency of using Cantonese and English, to support children in forming positive and diverse identity recognition.

In addition, parents need to explain the reasons for family return to their children in an age-appropriate manner, helping them understand "why we moved to the mainland" and avoiding children attributing the migration to themselves or feeling abandoned. In terms of identity building, families can guide children to accept the dual identity of being both Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese by sharing the common cultural origins between Hong Kong and Mainland China, rather than being forced to choose between the two. At the same time, parents should pay attention to adjusting their expectations for the adaptation period and avoid transmitting anxiety to their children. It can actively join online or offline mutual aid groups for returning families, alleviate feelings of isolation through experience sharing, and create stable peer social opportunities for children.

3.2 Kindergarten aspect

Kindergartens that receive these returning children can consider setting up transitional help groups to provide language assistance and peer support programs. Teachers should receive cross-cultural education training, understand and respect the unique backgrounds of these children, provide more emotional support in classroom interactions, and avoid treating their differences as a problem.

In terms of teaching methods, kindergartens that receive returning children may consider adopting differentiated teaching strategies, such as allowing returning children to respond in Cantonese or English during group activities, and then gradually guiding them to use Mandarin to reduce language anxiety. Curriculum design can incorporate multicultural elements, such as inviting children to share their living habits in their original place of residence and transforming differences into educational resources. In addition, kindergartens can set up a flexible adaptation period for returning children in the early stages of enrollment to reduce psychological pressure caused by rule changes.

In terms of teacher training, kindergartens should provide cross-cultural education thematic training for teachers to help them understand the language conversion pressure and

cultural adaptation difficulties of returning children. The training content should include: how to identify children's adaptation difficulty signals, how to avoid negative labeling of "differences", and the use of supportive language in parent communication. Teachers need to provide emotional support in classroom interactions and create an inclusive classroom atmosphere. It is suggested that the kindergarten establish an "adaptation period observation record" system, in which teachers briefly record the language use, emotional state, and peer interaction of returning children, in order to track progress together with parents and adjust support strategies in a timely manner.

3.3 Collaboration between home and community

The smooth adaptation of returning children cannot be achieved without the joint efforts of their families and kindergartens. Based on the problems and reasons analyzed in the previous text, the following strategies are proposed here:

3.3.1 Establish a two-way communication mechanism during the transition period

In the early stages of a child's enrollment, kindergarten teachers should actively maintain targeted communication with parents, which can include the child's performance in the kindergarten, as well as their language use, emotional state, and details of peer interaction. Parents need to reflect on their children's language preferences, emotional fluctuations, and specific language used when mentioning kindergarten to teachers. Both parties can share an adaptation log to record the highlights and difficulties of children's adaptation, thus forming a common understanding of their adaptation progress.

3.3.2 Develop a progressive rule adaptation plan

In response to the differences in behavioral norms between the two places, both families should avoid putting pressure on children to face double standards. Parents can introduce typical rules of mainland kindergartens to their children two weeks in advance, before entering the kindergarten, such as being required to sit and listen attentively in class, and raising their hands to speak. However, they should communicate with their children in a way that follows the new school's rules rather than mandatory commands. After entering the kindergarten, teachers should provide children with a certain rule adaptation buffer period in the first week, such as allowing children to observe before participating without interfering with the classroom, and then gradually guiding children to integrate into the collective routine from the second week onwards. At the same time, parents should reinforce positive behaviors at home, using specific praise such as "You raised your hand to answer today, great!" instead of criticism and comparison.

4 Conclusion

This study explores the main difficulties faced by returning Hong Kong children in adapting to mainland kindergartens by analyzing parental discussions on social media. Research has

found that parents generally face school choice anxiety, and their choices reflect different educational expectations and cultural identity goals. Children themselves experience adaptation difficulties in various aspects such as curriculum patterns, teacher-student interaction norms, and identity belonging, and their sense of belonging presents mixed characteristics. This study incorporates the group of "returning Hong Kong children" into the academic perspective and provides a Chinese perspective for the study of "third culture children". Future research can adopt a longitudinal tracking design to compare the adaptation trajectories of children in different types of kindergartens with different return paths, and incorporate multiple perspectives from teachers and children themselves.

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