

Mechanisms of Child-Friendly Communities Empowering the Urban Social Integration of Migrant Children: A Process-Tracing Study Based on the 'Torch Community'

Ruiban Song

College of Humanities and Social Development, Northwest A&F University, Shaanxi, China

songruiban@nwafu.edu.cn

Abstract. In the context of the new-type urbanization strategy, facilitating the urban social integration of migrant populations has emerged as a pivotal issue requiring urgent attention. The construction of child-friendly communities, as a crucial component of urban spatial integration strategies, demonstrates significant and unique effects in empowering migrant children to achieve social integration. To delve deeply into the mechanism of this empowerment, this study selects the "Torch Community" as a typical case and employs the process-tracing method for analysis, followed by theoretical summarization and refinement based on the findings. The study found that the child-friendly community has developed a systematic theoretical framework for social integration by establishing four core mechanisms: resource integration, social network construction, psychological support, and educational equity. These mechanisms effectively facilitate the social integration process of migrant children within the community. This study provides theoretical insights and practical implications for promoting more comprehensive and effective child-friendly community development and facilitating the social integration of migrant children.

Keywords: Child-friendly communities, Urban Social Integration, resource integration, social network construction, psychological support, educational equity.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the deepening advancement of the new-type urbanization strategy, China has progressively increased its focus on the governance of migrant populations, particularly implementing a series of policies and practices aimed at promoting the "citizenization" of migrant populations. "Citizenization" is not merely a transformation in identity and household registration status; rather, it encompasses a dynamic process across multiple dimensions including economic, social, cultural, and psychological aspects, with its core lying in achieving comprehensive social integration of members (Yang J, 2009). In this context, migrant children, as a special vulnerable group within the migrant population, have gradually become the focus of academic and policy practice attention regarding their urban social integration. According to the data from the Seventh National Population Census, as of 2020, the total number of migrant children in China has reached 71.09 million. This vast group faces multiple difficulties in urban life, including a lack of educational resources, a lack of social identity, and mental health issues. These issues not only impact the individual development of migrant children but also pose significant challenges to urban social stability and economic sustainable development. Therefore, how to promote the social integration of migrant children through scientific and effective social governance strategies has become a critical issue that urgently needs to be addressed. The introduction of the concept of "Child-Friendly Cities and Communities" provides an innovative pathway to address the social integration issues of migrant children. This concept was jointly initiated by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) in 1996, aiming to ensure the comprehensive development of children by optimizing community environments and policy support. In recent years, China has gradually established a child-friendly cities and communities system with Chinese characteristics, based on its own actual conditions. This system encompasses multiple dimensions, including policy-friendliness, service-friendliness, rights-friendliness, space-friendliness, and environment-friendliness. However, to date, no city in China has been certified as a "Child-

Friendly City" by the United Nations, which to some extent reflects the gap between theoretical design and actual effectiveness, as well as the mismatch between community development and the needs of migrant children.

To explore the mechanism of child-friendly communities in facilitating the social integration of migrant children, this paper takes the "Torch Community" in Panyu District, Guangzhou, as a case study and employs a process-tracing method to analyze the governance practices within this community. Process-tracing is a qualitative research method that reveals the formation mechanism and evolutionary pathway of causal relationships through a longitudinal analysis of specific cases (Wang W, 2022). The Torch Community, as a non-profit organization dedicated to serving migrant children, has established a comprehensive service system integrating "children-family-community-society." By means of resource integration, social network construction, and psychological support, it has created favorable conditions for the social integration of migrant children.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Firstly, a literature review is conducted to analyze the role of communities in facilitating the social integration of migrant children, providing a theoretical foundation for the case study. Secondly, the process-tracing method and multi-source data analysis are employed to reconstruct the governance process of the Torch Community, revealing the challenges and institutional difficulties faced by migrant children in their integration. Thirdly, the key success factors and effective pathways in community practices are extracted. Finally, the research findings are summarized, and policy recommendations are proposed to provide references for policy formulation and community governance related to the social integration of migrant children.

2. Literature Review

In the context of new-type urbanization, the issue of social integration among migrant children has increasingly garnered extensive attention from the academic community. As a vulnerable group within the migrant population, the social integration of migrant children pertains not only to the fairness of individual development but also directly impacts the stability and sustainable development of urban societies. Existing research primarily focuses on areas such as education, mental health, family support, and community integration, shedding light on the multiple barriers and challenges faced by migrant children.

Some scholars have pointed out that migrant children generally experience low levels of social integration, making it difficult for them to establish a stable social identity and sense of belonging in urban areas. For instance, Zhou Hao and Zhang Ning found that the urban-rural dual structure and migrant status restrict migrant children's opportunities to integrate into the mainstream urban society (Zhou, H., & Zhang, N, 2003). Lei Youguang emphasized that such identity issues stem not only from policy barriers but also from multiple influences at the cultural and psychological levels (Lei, Y., 2004). Wang Kaiqing and Wang Yijie further noted that migrant children face significant institutional barriers in accessing education, healthcare, and public service resources, a situation that exacerbates their social marginalization (Wang, K. Q., & Wang, Y. J, 2011).

In response to these issues, researchers have proposed coping strategies from multiple perspectives. At the family level, Guo Liangchun et al. argue that family education plays a crucial role in the social integration of migrant children (Guo, L. C., Yao, Y., & Yang, B. Y., 2005). Parents' educational beliefs and practices directly influence children's mental health and social adaptability, and enhancing parents' educational competencies can help improve migrant children's academic performance and social skills. At the school level, Bai Wenfei and Xu Ling point out that schools, as vital settings for children's socialization, can significantly enhance the integration level of migrant children by optimizing management and teaching services (Bai, W. F., & Xu, L., 2009). Research indicates that strengthening teacher-student interaction and improving the campus cultural atmosphere contribute to strengthening the emotional bonds between migrant children and the school, as well as the community. Yang Juhua proposes that schools should provide more courses and psychological

counseling services tailored to the needs of migrant children to help them integrate into urban life (Yang, J., 2013).

With the advocacy of the concept of "Child-Friendly Cities and Communities" by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), communities, as crucial settings for promoting the social integration of migrant children, have gradually gained attention. Communities serve not only as venues for providing basic services and resources but also facilitate children's social identity and mental health through the construction of social networks. In his research, Sandi Kawecka Nenga points out that inclusive community design can significantly enhance children's sense of social identity and level of socialization (Nenga, S., 2012). Through participation in community activities, children not only develop a stronger sense of belonging but also boost their self-confidence through interactions with peers and adults. Zhou Wang et al. propose that the introduction of the "child-friendly" concept can effectively improve community environments, such as by increasing activity spaces and enhancing service quality, to promote children's social integration and mental health (Zhou, W., Yang, S. S, 2021),..

Furthermore, some studies emphasize the importance of community psychological support. Cui Lijuan et al. argue that creating an inclusive and safe community environment for migrant children can alleviate their psychological pressure and enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence (Cui, L. J., Ding, Q. N., & Cheng, L., 2009). These studies indicate that communities play an irreplaceable role in resource integration, psychological support, and the construction of social networks.

Although related research has provided certain theoretical support for the construction of child-friendly communities, there are still deficiencies. On the one hand, existing studies mostly explore the significance of communities for the social integration of migrant children from a macro perspective, lacking in-depth analysis based on specific cases, which results in a certain disconnect between theory and practice. On the other hand, research on the mechanisms through which communities promote the integration of migrant children via resource integration, social network construction, and psychological support is relatively fragmented and has not yet formed a systematic theoretical framework. Furthermore, research has focused more on the school and family levels, with relatively limited exploration of communities as comprehensive governance settings.

To address the aforementioned deficiencies, future research should focus on incorporating practical cases from specific communities and employing qualitative methods such as process tracing to deeply analyze the specific mechanisms through which communities promote the social integration of migrant children. Firstly, attention should be paid to the rational allocation and integration of resources within communities, exploring the role of community services and educational resources in the process of socialization. Secondly, from the perspective of social network construction, analyze how communities facilitate children's social identity and mental health through interactions with peers, families, and community members. Thirdly, strengthen research on community psychological support systems, exploring how communities provide migrant children with a sense of security and belonging through emotional care and psychological intervention.

3. From Dilemma to Exploration: Innovative Practices and Path Evolution of the Torch Community

Guangdong, as the forefront of China's reform and opening-up, has attracted the largest population of migrant workers nationwide, among whom the number of migrant children has been expanding annually. According to statistics, as of 2010, the non-permanent resident population in Guangzhou had exceeded 4 million, with the number of migrant children accompanying their parents reaching over 300,000, thereby constituting a socially significant group that has garnered considerable attention. However, at that time, organizations within the public welfare sector predominantly focused on safeguarding the labor rights of migrant workers, with insufficient attention paid to the needs of migrant children. Against this backdrop, the Xiaojinyan Community Public Welfare Service Center (hereinafter referred to as "Torch Community") was established in Xinqiao Village, Panyu District,

in 2010. Xinqiao Village is a typical migrant worker community with a registered population of over 4,000 and a floating population exceeding 20,000, including approximately 3,000 migrant children. At its inception, Torch Community, relying on local social workers and volunteer teams, conducted in-depth research on the migrant children and their families in Xinqiao Village, uncovering four major issues.

Firstly, there was a lack of activity venues. Xinqiao Village suffered from a shortage of safe and suitable activity spaces, resulting in migrant children lacking healthy entertainment and interaction places during their after-school hours, which in turn restricted their physical and mental development as well as social skills. Secondly, there was unequal access to educational resources. Migrant children were disadvantaged in accessing educational resources. Schools within the village faced issues such as inadequate teacher staffing and outdated teaching facilities, further widening the quality gap in education between migrant and local children. Thirdly, barriers to community integration persisted. Due to language barriers, cultural differences, and social exclusion, migrant children found it difficult to integrate into the local community, which undermined their sense of belonging and social adaptability. Lastly, there was a lack of publicness. There were limited close connections among community residents, with public spaces and activities virtually absent, limiting interactions among residents and hindering the social development of children.

To address these issues, Torch Community established the first migrant children's community activity center in Guangzhou, providing after-school care, companionship services for children, and community education programs aimed at enhancing social participation skills. These initial explorations significantly improved the lack of activity spaces and educational resources for migrant children and provided support for their integration into community life. However, in practice, Torch Community gradually realized that merely focusing on the individual needs of migrant children was insufficient to address the fundamental issues. In 2013, a fire incident in Xinqiao Village marked a crucial turning point in the adjustment of working strategies. A migrant child tragically died after being locked inside a rental house and was unable to be rescued in time, which profoundly exposed the lack of social support and public safety mechanisms in migrant communities. The Torch Community team thereby recognized that the community environment and social support system are crucial to the development of migrant children. In response, Torch Community adjusted its strategy, shifting from a sole focus on child services to an integrated service system encompassing "children-family-community-society," emphasizing the community as the mainstay and addressing issues through multi-party collaboration.

Torch Community's integrated service system encompasses four core aspects: enhancing family education capabilities by conducting parent training and educational consultations to assist migrant families in transforming traditional educational concepts and strengthening psychological support and behavioral guidance for children; optimizing community spaces by collaborating with village committees and corporate resources to establish children's activity centers and open libraries, providing migrant children with safe learning and recreational spaces; promoting participation from diverse stakeholders by integrating resources from parents, schools, village committees, and volunteers to establish support networks and mutual aid mechanisms; and conducting cultural adaptation and psychological support activities to help migrant children overcome language and cultural barriers, enhancing their self-confidence and social adaptability. Particularly through the synergistic effect of families, schools, and communities, Torch Community has gradually expanded children's services from individual care to the improvement of the community ecosystem.

After more than a decade of development, Torch Community has emerged as one of the largest and highest-quality community non-profit organizations serving migrant children in Guangzhou, with remarkable achievements. In terms of migrant children's social integration, community activities and educational programs have enabled over 85% of migrant children to express a sense of belonging to the community and establish positive social relationships. In terms of optimizing educational resources, the tutoring services provided by the community have significantly improved children's academic performance and mental health, with a nearly 30% reduction in dropout rates. In terms of

enhancing community publicness, interactions and participation among community residents have increased significantly, gradually forming cohesive public spaces within the community. Furthermore, through diversified cooperation mechanisms, Torch Community has attracted long-term support from governments, businesses, and socially conscious individuals, successfully achieving effective integration of public welfare resources.

Despite Torch Community's significant achievements in building child-friendly communities, its work still faces challenges. The high mobility of migrant families poses a threat to the long-term effectiveness of services, and funding remains primarily dependent on social donations, lacking stable financial support. Additionally, although community publicness has improved, deep interactions among residents still need to be strengthened. Torch Community plans to secure more government resource support, integrate its service model into public policy frameworks, and further expand service coverage, especially in communities with high concentrations of migrant populations. Meanwhile, by establishing a long-term evaluation mechanism and dynamically adjusting service strategies, Torch Community aims to provide more precise and efficient support for migrant children. The practice of Torch Community not only offers valuable experience for the social integration of migrant children but also explores a universal and sustainable path for the construction of child-friendly communities in China.

4. Multidimensional Focus: An Evaluation and Analysis of Torch Community's Child-Friendly Practices

The construction of Child-Friendly Communities (CFC) has gradually become a critical issue in global social development. The "Child-Friendly Community Self-Assessment Tool," jointly developed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Childwatch International Research Network, has become an essential instrument for evaluating the implementation of this concept. This assessment tool encompasses six core dimensions and has been widely applied worldwide. Considering China's national conditions and practical context, this study adapts and refines the assessment tool by identifying four dimensions—space, services, society, and governance—as the evaluative framework for Torch Community's child-friendly community development.

4.1. Spatial Dimension: Child-Centered Community Environment Construction

In terms of the spatial dimension, Torch Community adopts an integrated approach that frames "children-family-community-society" as an interconnected system, placing children at the core of community development to facilitate the effective integration of resources and problem-solving within the community. This concept is embodied in the design and development of the community's education and service systems, particularly in the creation of children's activity spaces. Torch Community has established a dedicated community activity center, providing standardized indoor spaces for migrant children, with adequate size and sufficient opening hours to meet their daily needs. Additionally, Torch Community prioritizes the planning of outdoor spaces, ensuring children's safety during their commutes to and from school by implementing features such as separate pedestrian pathways and connecting primary activity areas with the community's public service facilities. This spatial layout enhances children's freedom of movement and provides strong support for their healthy development.

4.2. Service Dimension: Implementation of a Multi-Tiered Service System

In the service dimension, Torch Community has designed and implemented a comprehensive service system encompassing basic, universal, and customized services tailored to the needs of minors and their families, covering different age groups from 0 to 18 years old. This system addresses key areas such as education, health, and recreation, ensuring that the diverse needs of children's physical and mental development are met. Torch Community has also made significant innovations in service

delivery. For instance, it launched the "4:30 PM Community School" project, which provides a safe and structured learning and tutoring environment for children after school. This initiative not only alleviates parents' concerns about after-school pick-ups and supervision but also ensures children's safety during after-school hours. Additionally, the community is equipped with libraries and multipurpose activity rooms that feature extensive book collections and modern facilities and host regular cultural and educational activities. These amenities enrich children's extracurricular activities, foster their interest in learning, and promote the comprehensive development of their abilities.

4.3. Social Dimension: Social Integration of Migrant Children into the Community

In the social dimension, Torch Community has actively developed platforms through a series of community programs to facilitate the social integration of migrant children and their families. These programs focus not only on children's academic growth but also on their social participation and cultural identity. By integrating social resources, the community organizes various activities, such as parent-child events and community festivals, creating more opportunities for social interaction and helping migrant children build connections with other community residents, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and identity. Moreover, Torch Community emphasizes cultivating children's sense of social responsibility and public awareness, encouraging their participation in volunteer work and environmental protection projects to promote their growth and learning through active engagement.

4.4. Governance Dimension: Governance System Enhancement and Capacity Building

In the governance dimension, Torch Community emphasizes institution-building and strengthening community governance capacity to ensure the sustainable development of child-friendly communities. Through a multi-stakeholder collaboration mechanism, the community engages in joint efforts with the government, social organizations, and residents to contribute to community construction. Community governance not only focuses on safeguarding children's welfare but also emphasizes the importance of family and societal support. By conducting regular evaluations and gathering feedback, Torch Community continuously optimizes resource allocation and service content to ensure close alignment between policy design and practical implementation. Additionally, the community has established and enhanced a comprehensive child protection system, reinforcing the safeguarding of children's rights and ensuring that every child can grow up in a safe, healthy, and joyful environment.

Overall, Torch Community has achieved significant progress in its exploration of building child-friendly communities. By optimizing spatial design, implementing diverse services, fostering social integration, and enhancing governance capacity, Torch Community has embodied the core principles of child-friendly communities across various dimensions. Moving forward, Torch Community can further refine its existing systems while introducing additional innovations and best practices, thereby promoting the continuous development of child-friendly community construction and providing valuable experiences and insights for other regions to learn from.

5. Theoretical Framework for Enabling the Urban Social Integration of Migrant Children in Friendly Communities

This process highlights the pivotal role of communities in facilitating the integration of socially vulnerable groups and contributes valuable academic insights to theories of social governance. By optimizing resource allocation, reconstructing social networks, providing psychological support, and promoting educational equity, child-friendly communities have established a multidimensional mechanism that empowers the social integration of migrant children.

5.1. Resource Integration Mechanism

Child-friendly communities utilize resource integration mechanisms to optimize service delivery and provide comprehensive support to migrant children and their families. By effectively allocating educational, health, and recreational resources, these communities enhance service efficiency and precision. Resource integration not only meets children's basic needs but also maximizes service effectiveness through functional overlap. For example, by collaborating with social workers, university volunteers, and professional institutions, communities can offer interest-based courses, after-school tutoring, and mental health services, significantly improving service quality. Theoretically, this mechanism illustrates the unique value of communities as resource hubs. Rational resource allocation transforms resources into capabilities, fostering the multidimensional development of migrant children in education, health, and social participation. This mechanism also reinforces the link between resource allocation and capacity-building for vulnerable groups, offering a new theoretical basis for the optimal design of social services.

5.2. Social Network Construction Mechanism

Child-friendly communities facilitate migrant children's integration into urban society by constructing social networks that include peer networks, family support networks, and community relational networks. These networks provide children with emotional support and social capital, helping them overcome social exclusion and isolation. Community activities and group-based interactions foster collaboration and strengthen children's social ties, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging. Theoretically, this mechanism demonstrates that the quality of social relationships directly influences the formation of social identity. By building inclusive relational networks, child-friendly communities support the socialization of vulnerable groups. This mechanism also underscores the critical role of social capital theory in promoting social integration, particularly within the context of urban-rural dualism.

5.3. Educational Equity Mechanism

Educational equity forms a core pillar of child-friendly communities. By optimizing the distribution of educational resources, these communities provide diverse learning opportunities and cultivate a positive educational environment for migrant children. Initiatives such as family education workshops, parent-child activities, and community-based courses enhance the educational standards of both families and communities, laying a solid foundation for children's academic engagement and skill development. The educational equity mechanism deepens the theoretical link between educational resource allocation and social mobility, compensating for the educational disadvantages faced by vulnerable groups and offering an equitable starting point for social integration. This mechanism highlights the fundamental role of educational equity in shaping the socialization process of marginalized groups.

5.4. Psychological Support Mechanism

Child-friendly communities provide emotional support and psychological counseling to migrant children through comprehensive psychological support systems. By fostering collaboration among families, schools, and community stakeholders, these communities establish extensive mental health support networks for children. This mechanism not only addresses the adaptive challenges faced by children during their integration process but also strengthens their resilience in coping with complex social environments. Theoretically, the psychological support mechanism reveals the bidirectional relationship between emotional care and social adaptation. By forming a closed-loop system of "support-adaptation-integration" through psychological services, child-friendly communities enhance individual development while offering a theoretical foundation for the importance of mental health services in social governance.

In summary, child-friendly communities have developed a multidimensional and collaborative framework for social integration through four key mechanisms: resource integration, social network

construction, educational equity, and psychological support. This framework underscores the comprehensive role of communities in social governance, offering practical pathways for the integration of migrant children and enriching the theoretical connections between social integration and resource allocation, social capital, psychological well-being, and educational fairness. This framework has broad applicability and can be extended to research on the integration of other vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers and low-income families. Furthermore, it provides new perspectives for the design of community governance and public policy, contributing to the development of a more inclusive and equitable urban social structure and offering Chinese insights and theoretical contributions to global social integration issues.

6. Conclusion

The practical journey of the Torch Community illustrates the enabling mechanisms of child-friendly communities in promoting the social integration of migrant children. This community fosters a supportive environment through four core dimensions: optimizing spatial layout, improving service provision, reconstructing social networks, and enhancing governance structures. These measures work synergistically in the following ways: optimizing resource allocation to ensure migrant children have equal access to community resources; reshaping social networks to strengthen interactions and foster integration between migrant children and local children and families; providing psychological support to alleviate the adaptive pressures faced by migrant children; and promoting educational equity to create learning opportunities comparable to those available to local children. This study offers practical insights for local communities in building child-friendly environments and provides new perspectives on pathways for migrant children's social integration. The findings underscore that multidimensional community-building strategies can significantly enhance the social integration of migrant children, providing a scientific foundation for both policy development and practical implementation.

However, despite the valuable contributions of the Torch Community's practices, its approaches to resource allocation, social network reconstruction, psychological support, and educational equity may be limited by region-specific socio-economic structures, cultural customs, and policy environments, making them difficult to fully replicate in all regions. Future research should further investigate the practices of child-friendly communities in diverse regional contexts, examining the unique challenges associated with migrant children's social integration and corresponding strategies. Comparative studies across different regions can deepen the understanding of both commonalities and variations in child-friendly community development, providing a robust scientific basis for the formulation of more adaptive and context-specific policies and initiatives. Such efforts will not only advance research on migrant children's social integration but also contribute to broader improvements in child well-being.

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