

**The Importance of *Guanxi* for Parents of Children with Autism:  
A Study of Social Capital in Navigating School Resources**

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### Abstract

Studies relating to the impact of power imbalances between parents and school actors have increased in recent years. Yet, there remains little insight into the nature of such imbalances from a parent perspective in non-Western countries such as China. Drawing from Bourdieu's Social Capital framework from the 1960s, we analyzed audio-recorded interviews with 16 parents of children identified as autistic living in one of four provinces across China using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Specifically, we analyzed the expressed processes and strategies, e.g., personal connections with key school officials ("*guanxi*" in Mandarin) that participating parents used to advocate for inclusive education services. Our findings suggest a parent's use of social capital (in the form of *guanxi*) surpasses explicit national policies as an effective strategy for garnering adequate services for their child. Such unspoken power dynamics between schools and parents reveal significant implications for equitable access to educational resources. In making more visible the parental perspective from a less-understood region of the world, we aim to support a deeper understanding of the often-hidden tensions that emerge when parents seek support for their children with disabilities.

*Keywords:* Inclusive Education, Parental Advocacy, Social Capital, Guanxi, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Previous research on parental advocacy for children with autism highlights the importance of cooperative engagement between parents and schools to provide optimal support for children with disabilities, yet findings from such work suggest that parents are viewed as less-than-equal members in such collaborative efforts (McCabe, 2007; Su et al., 2020). Furthermore, parents of children with autism report greater difficulties gaining access to school and specialized care than parents of children with other disabilities (Burke & Goldman, 2015). Given that the current prevalence of autism among school-aged children in China is around 1% (Sun et al., 2019), a substantial proportion given China's population, it is crucial to build constructive parent–school collaboration to fulfill the rising educational demands. In addition, regional surveys indicate that less than 10% of children with autism attend regular schools, while the remainder attend special schools or do not attend school (Xiong & Sun, 2014; Xu & Zhu, 2016). Parents report that public schools fall short in providing adequate support to families with children on the autism spectrum, noting the extreme stress and challenges in advocating for their children’s rights to an inclusive education that allows their access to regular classrooms (Cui, 2016; Hu, 2020). However, only a handful of these studies have investigated the imbalance from the perspectives of parents, and even less is known about such issues outside the western hemisphere. Zhao and Huang (2017) conducted one of few available studies about parents of children with disabilities in China and the inequitable access to inclusive education (i.e., integration into regular classroom contexts) that is explicitly outlined in the nationally adopted model called *Learning in the Regular Classroom* (hereon referred to as the LRC model). These educational

scholars found that 77% of participating parents living in western China were unfamiliar with and were never informed about the LRC model by administrators and teachers (Zhao & Huang, 2017).

The LRC model is widely recognized as both the beginning as well as the most predominant model of inclusive education in China (McCabe, 2003; Xu et al., 2018). It was first introduced in 1994 by the National Education Commission of the People's Republic of China (renamed the Ministry of Education in 1998, a department under the State Council) through a policy titled "The Measures of Implementing Learning in Regular Classrooms for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities" (the Measures). The Measures proposed that public schools should include students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and suggested that the LRC model be the primary education model to serve students with disabilities (McCabe, 2003).

However, the LRC model's structural flaws and rhetorical muteness about inclusivity have greatly impeded its implementation. First, it was not a law issued by means of the supreme powerhouse (the National People's Congress and its standing committee) supervising the legislation at various levels in China (Law, 2002). This means that on a legislative level, the LRC model does not legally bind public schools to provide proper free education to students with disabilities, as IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990) does in the United States. (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; McCabe, 2003; Deng & Pei, 2009). Rather, it is more of a solution plan to address the international trend of

mainstreaming and inclusion, as well as the domestic necessity of increasing the enrolment of students with disabilities (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; McCabe, 2003; Deng & Pei, 2009). Second, due to political and cultural differences, the core values of inclusive education embedded in IDEA, including equity and diversity, have never been the rhetorical emphasis in implementing the LRC model (Deng & Pei, 2009). Different from the rights-based inclusive education system aiming at providing appropriate and free public education to students with disabilities in the United States, the LRC model aims at providing students with disabilities a possible solution, as Deng and Pei described in their work about the LRC model, “to give most children with special education needs in China an opportunity to go to school” (2009, p. 319).

Although previous works shedding light on parental advocacy under the LRC model in China have been published (e.g., McCabe, 2007; Cui, 2016), empirical studies zeroing in on this topic are scarce compared to those focusing on summaries (e.g., McCabe, 2003; Xu et al., 2018), teachers' general attitudes towards inclusive practices (e.g., Qu, 2019; Su et al., 2020), and the availability of classroom support for students with disabilities (e.g., Ge & Zhang, 2019; Xiong & Sun, 2014).

As such, parents' concerns and experiences relating to their advocacy efforts remain largely unknown. In this study, we adopted Holcomb-McCoy and Bryan's definition of advocacy: any actions that “influence public attitudes and enact and implement laws and public policies” (2010, p. 263). In the context of parent advocacy, it consists of acquiring educational resources and opportunities within the LRC model for their children with autism.

We conducted an interview study to learn about the experiences of parents who have advocated for inclusive education services for their children identified as autistic. Bringing such underexplored voices to the forefront, in our opinion, is necessary for fostering more equitable and inclusive practices in school communities. This is especially true when focusing in on parent advocacy in the less explored context of China. Previous studies reveal that parents are no less immune to inequitable challenges than parents in other countries, and that cultural particularities, such as *guanxi*, have shaped the strategies used for gaining access to educational resources (Xie & Postiglione, 2016).

*Guanxi* (pronounced *gwon-shee*) is an idiom in China that refers to the personal connections or relationships embedded in every aspect of Chinese culture and societal life (Gold et al., 2002). This term is defined as a multifaceted concept that refers to the art of networking to achieve a particular goal (Liu, 2020; Xie & Postiglione, 2016). *Guanxi* is predominantly explored in the context of business administration and marketing, with some connection to political and social sciences (Gold et al., 2002). As Ruan (2016) suggested in their study on school choice, the inequities of compulsory schooling, including the marketization of public education, have led to the presence of tuition fees that have increased since the late 1990s (Ngok, 2007). Such inequities have created a tumultuous, unstable ground that Chinese parents must navigate with great caution, necessitating the strategic use of *guanxi* to garner educational access for their children (Ruan, 2016).

*Guanxi* is not a cultural phenomenon unique to China. Previous researchers have reported similar parental strategies in other countries. For example, upper- and middle-class

parents in the United States demonstrate stronger ties with school officials, hence gaining greater benefits for their children compared with those from working-class families (Coleman, 1988). Sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1986) characterized such societal privilege as *social capital*; individuals activate their social network to gain social advantages or benefits for a variety of reasons, including support for their children. Bourdieu explained that access to such networking tends to be limited to those sharing the same social circle or class, hence privileging institutional familiarity or membership while excluding those who might benefit even more from such enrichment or resources. Bourdieu's observations of such social action echo the theories by Chinese scholars who have connected social status with relational practices across various sociocultural contexts (e.g., Chen, 1999). For research focusing on guanxi-based social relationships in China, the social capital lens has been used to explain how individuals can draw resources, such as the information, trust, and control benefits of interpersonal dynamics (e.g., Gold et al., 2002; Gu et al., 2008). Scholars believe that to study social capital in Chinese societies, researchers are suggested first to understand and look through the concept of guanxi (social relations) (Bian, 2017; Gold et al., 2002).

Bourdieu (1986) viewed social capital as a form of power that one used to gain respect and access to tangible resources shared within a particular social group. Trainor (2010a) applied this framework in their analysis of parents' utilization of social capital in advocating for their children. By interviewing participants from various cultural and social backgrounds, Trainor found that advocacy efforts were not always effective and that parents

gained more knowledge about the importance of using social capital (e.g., personal relationships with experts or teachers). Trainor also implied that the success of such advocacy efforts depends largely on the coherence between home and school; hence, teachers are less likely to dismiss parents and their children when they share cultural affiliations. Parents' reliance on expert opinions and advice from their social circles also played a significant role in the successful procurement of school services at school.

The uses of social capital in Chinese society reflect a different picture; researchers are generally interested in the use of *guanxi* within a context heavily influenced by traditional, Confucian values and beliefs that emphasize the concept of “reciprocal obligations and indebtedness” (Liu, 2020, p. 454). *Guanxi* has a cultural connotation like social capital in that it is a form of power used to gain access to certain resources; however, it is distinct from social capital in that, despite the facts that *guanxi* and social capital both reflect the real and potential resources that may be derived through network interactions and that they both emerge from the investment of individuals seeking to develop advantageous social relationships, *guanxi* refers to a two-way obligation formed through the exchange of favors to each other, which serves as an incentive for people in China to practice social relations (Bourdieu, 1986; Huang & Wang, 2011; Ruan & Chen, 2020). In the literature, *guanxi* is frequently mentioned as a form or variant of social capital in China that refers to resources derived through interpersonal interactions and having values that the participants can access (e.g., Yang, 2002; Qi, 2013).

While there is some understanding of the cultural influences of *guanxi* and how it is

used to gain access to valuable educational resources, there is less clarity about parents' perspectives on such societal dynamics when striving to advocate for their children, particularly those identified as autistic. There is more information about teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education; Qu (2019), for example, found that teachers in China viewed inclusion as *correcting* or *fixing* errors for children rather than making accommodations or adjustments according to learning needs and styles. Hence, inclusive education, according to Qu, seemed little more than being physically present in the regular education classroom. By digging deeper for the possible roots for this mindset in Chinese teachers, the author concluded that the teachers' non-inclusive values were embedded within a collectivistic mentality that values assimilation and homogeneity over individual development (e.g., *just look like you belong; they can't really learn anyway*). According to Qu, such a mindset reflects a socialist agenda in modern China that harkens back to the Confucian value of being average, not standing out among the collective. Most studies on parental advocacy of children with autism, particularly in China, do not provide this kind of analysis of parents' experiences and views when advocating for the right to education for their children with autism. Zhang and colleagues (2021) conducted a review of studies on parents' use of social capital in China and discovered that most articles published between 1996 and 2018 (176 articles, 73%) involved only quantitative analysis, with only 37 articles (15%) qualitative studies including interviews. Further, the 37 qualitative pieces excluded accounts relating to *guanxi* and its practices in educational contexts (Zhang et al., 2021). As such, our qualitative study on parental experiences and views about their lobbying efforts on behalf of their children

identified with autism will provide missing information about the impacts of inequitable school practices in China.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand Chinese parents' efforts and associative perspectives when advocating for their children with autism. Using the lenses of social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) in the form of *guanxi*, we analyzed 16 parent interviews to address the following research question: What are the experiences and perspectives of Chinese parents advocating for their children to gain access to inclusive education? Specific lines of inquiry stemming from this general research question include: In what ways is the notion of social capital, or its localized form in the context of China, *guanxi*, represented in parent experiences and perspectives? How does the employment of *guanxi* relate to social capital theory, as proposed by Bourdieu and other researchers?

Given the pandemic conditions during this study, all recruitment and interviewing took place in online spaces.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and Recruitment***

Parent participants were selected according to purposeful sampling criteria (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research to identify and choose information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2015). The sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are exceptionally knowledgeable of or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. In addition to knowledge and experience, Spradley (2016) noted the importance of availability, willingness

to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Thus, two criteria were used when recruiting parent participants: (1) those with intimate knowledge of and active participation in their children's education; and (2) parents of school-age children (six to 15 years old) who have been diagnosed with autism.

Table 1. Participants' Background Information.

<b>Total number of participating parents</b>	16	<b>Number of children described in parent interviews</b>	17
Women	15	Girls	3
Men	1	Boys	14
<b>Educational background of parents</b>		Ages 5–7	5
Attended college (no degree)	5	Ages 8–12	9
Bachelor’s degree	4	Ages 13–14	3
Master’s degree	5	<b>Annual Household Income (USD)</b>	
Doctoral degree	2	\$8,000–\$15,000	1
Parents’ age		\$15,000–\$31,000	6
30–39	12	\$31,000–\$46,000	1
40–49	4	\$46,000–\$62,000	3

<b>Employment background</b>		\$62,000–\$77,000	3
Unemployed	4	\$77,000–\$155,000	2
Employed part time	3		
Employed full time	9		

### *Interview Protocol and Procedures*

Previous research has shown that demographic information, including age, gender, etc., is essential in gathering qualitative information (Alase, 2017). As such, before interviews, demographic questionnaires were sent to participants, enabling the researcher to pre-determine the demographics of respondents to the survey. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study in November 2019 (protocol number: 91-19-0826), and data collection happened after the approval date. Since IRB mandated that all interviews and consent forms be in the first language of participants, all interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin) and by the first author. Each interview lasted from 30 to 60 minutes in the form of an audio call via Weixin, which was recorded on the consent of participants. Consent forms in Chinese were obtained from all participants before the interviews. Excerpted transcribed responses by participants (identified by first and last name initials) were translated into English for accessibility.

A widely used social media app in China, Weixin was used when the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with parents online. In the semi-structured interviews, parents were mainly asked about: 1) experiences before school age, such as diagnosis, early symptoms, and early intervention; 2) experiences with school, including enrollment, accommodations at school, and incidents that happened in the process; and 3) parents' expectations from school and for the future of their children. Most of the questions were open-ended, and follow-up questions were asked based on each participant's responses.

Our study began prior to the onset of the pandemic, and, as such, questions directly

related to the current global pandemic were not included. That stated, none of the parents raised any particular concerns or issues associated with the pandemic in efforts to gain inclusive educational access for their children.

### *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

As suggested by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, a person's perception must always be interpreted in the context of the ground where it happens (Sohn et al., 2017). To understand the parents' perspectives toward inclusive education, we used the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method by giving careful attention to what emerged in participants' narratives regarding their cultural beliefs about concepts such as the right to education equity.

Instead of developing a new theory explaining how parents interpret their experiences of school participation of their children with autism, this study aims at unfolding meanings hidden underneath the narratives of participants' experiences (Sohn et al., 2017). It is proposed that IPA researchers utilize open-ended interview methods to elicit descriptions of participants' life experiences without relying on preset values.

Social capital theory served as our theoretical lens when interpreting parents' experiences. Bourdieu (1986) defined capital as a collection of symbolic components such as abilities, preferences, temperament, dress, demeanor, material possessions, and credentials, all of which index one's status in society. Bourdieu identified three dimensions of capital—economic, cultural, and social—all of which seem to play a vital role in home–school relations (Trainor, 2010b). Among the three forms of capital, social capital (i.e., the ability to

access resources via social networks to accomplish specific goals) seems the most relevant to the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, which is a unique Chinese idiom for social networks that serve as a tool for establishing access to social resources (Chen, 1999; Xie & Postiglione, 2016).

When using IPA as an analytical method for a qualitative study, researchers are advised to develop approaches in accordance with their research objectives (Alase, 2017). As a result, the authors utilized a three-step analytic strategy to evaluate the data from parents about their experiences with the LRC model via the theoretical lens of social capital and its indigenous construct, *guanxi*. The authors began by reviewing the original transcripts of parents' interviews and drafting memos on excerpts pertaining to parents' *guanxi*-related experiences under the LRC model. Second, the authors emphasized the similarities and differences in how parents approached and utilized *guanxi* in their advocacy experiences. In this phase, comparable extracts were grouped to establish focused codes. The last step consisted of combining focused codes based on their relevance to the issue of social capital and its existence in the form of *guanxi* in the context of China, as well as developing themes based on the second step. Table 2 illustrates examples of themes and codes.

**Table 2**

*Examples of Codes and Themes*

Themes	Focused Codes	Texts (Examples)
Theme 1: Parents are aware of the importance of <i>guanxi</i>	<i>Guanxi</i> is important in parents' navigation under the	"If you don't live in this school district, you need to

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and widely practice it.

LRC model.

find a guanxi, you know, as we Chinese say, a guanxi matters most.” (CXD, mother of eight-year-old girl diagnosed with autism)

“I would say [the school accepted my child] mainly because I work there, and I know them all...I think that is the major reason.” (GDK, mother of eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)

Parents are not passively accepting guanxi; rather, they actively seek it.

“It all depended on my husband to find guanxi via his networks.... If you don't do that, you will be like a blind person in the darkness, and it is still common in China that everyone looks for guanxi to get things done.” (MY, mother of five-year-old girl and 13-year-old boy, both diagnosed with autism)

“So, I started to work on [looking for guanxi] a year before school age, and it worked well, and I found the principal who graduated from the same university as I did.” (TC, mother of eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)

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<p>Theme 2: Parents are hesitantly requesting accommodation and services under the schooling arrangement through guanxi.</p>	<p>The academic performance to be covered under the LRC model is of high importance.</p>	<p>“I think if a child cannot catch up with the progress with his class, then he should go to a special school because it would be beneficial to everyone.... My son could keep up with the class academically, so I wish he could stay in the regular school.” (QW, mother of 11-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)</p>
	<p>A cooperative and submissive strategy is needed when facing disagreement with schools.</p>	<p>“I wish my son could stay in the regular classroom, but he is too bad in academics, and if he stays, he will interfere with others...and that is not the kind of pressure he or I could take in the end.” (GSC, father of 11-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)</p>
		<p>“As parents, we need to do whatever we can beforehand so that our kids can stay safe and not be a burden to teachers or school.” (CXD, mother of eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)</p>
		<p>“I would say never file a complaint to their supervising sections...It would wind up against parents in the end and</p>

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		increase the negative impression to both parents and children.” (GDK, mother of eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)
Theme 3: Social status matters in the practice of guanxi	The implicit premise behind an effective advocacy experience is a similar social circle.	<p>“That principal graduated from the same university as I did, and we have common friends ... and he has been accommodating for me to get my son into his school.” (TC, mother of eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)</p> <p>“I wasn't happy with his former school, so I found out about a private school for children from Christian families, and we contacted one of our sisters in that church, and he was admitted right away.” (FA, mother of 10-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)</p>
	The implicit reason behind unsuccessful advocacy experience is a different social circle.	<p>“And he gave me an excuse, saying the decision has nothing to do with his disability, but I know the true reason; he does not want this burden at his school, and we have no guanxi with him.” (LHX, mother of 13-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)</p>

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“I know it was because of my guanxi with this principal because I know another mom came to the principal and asked for enrollment for her son, but the principal didn't agree.” (TC, mother of eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism)

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### Findings

The social capital theory framework developed by Bourdieu (1986) helps interpret parents' approaches to special education participation. According to Trainor (2010b), although this framework does not necessarily illuminate specific methods in which parents interact with schools in terms of service or accommodation, it could explain the transformation of capital into an opportunity (Trainor, 2010b).

In the following sections, three themes emerge from parents' experiences when they tried to create educational opportunities for their children with autism: 1) Parents are aware of the importance of guanxi and widely practice it; 2) parents are hesitantly requesting accommodation and services under the schooling arrangement through guanxi; and 3) social status matters in the practice of guanxi.

#### *Awareness and Uses of Guanxi*

Most (14 out of 16) participants talked about either seeking guanxi or maintaining

good *guanxi* with schoolteachers or principals to achieve schooling arrangements or better accommodation for their children with autism. Responses indicated that parents are fully aware that the personal connections between parents and principals and other applications of *guanxi* can be powerful tools for accessing public education under the LRC model. Although parents had complaints about doing so, they still practiced *guanxi* actively during interactions with school actors. Parents whose social network consists of school principals were more likely to place their children in public schools. In other words, the successful procurement of inclusive education was perceived to be largely dependent on *guanxi* rather than the formal written requirements of the LRC model.

As prior studies on Chinese cultures have suggested, *guanxi* serves as a substitute for public policy in Chinese society and plays a crucial role in social lives (Xin & Pearce, 1996). Furthermore, by establishing a personal bond, the *guanxi* between the parties provides the basis for trust. It thus forms a source of stability in reaching any bilateral or multilateral agreements.

“If you don't live in this school district, you need to find a *guanxi*, you know, as we Chinese say, a *guanxi* matters most,” said CXD, mother of an eight-year-old girl diagnosed with autism and full-time caregiver at home.

“I would say [that the school accepted my child] mainly because I work there, and I know them all...I think that is the major reason,” said GDK, mother of an eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism and teacher at a local elementary school.

The two statements suggest parents were aware of the importance of *guanxi* in

arranging school for their children. Talking about the arrangement via personal connection instead of official channels, they expressed dissatisfaction and concerns about the wide use of guanxi in schooling.

“It all depended on my husband to find guanxi via his networks.... If you don't do that, you will be like a blind person in the darkness, and it is still common in China that everyone looks for guanxi to get things done.... I wish there will be no room for guanxi in the future, and I wish there will be a transparent system that will guarantee the enrollment to school,” said MY, a local government official and mother of a five-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy both diagnosed with autism.

While some parents expressed their concerns about using guanxi, more parents accepted it as a valuable mechanism to get things done.

“If you want your kid to get into public school, you just need to find a guanxi to get it done, or your kid [needs to] just behave so well that they won't find [the autism],” said XH, mother of a seven-year-old boy diagnosed with autism and founder of an organization providing private training and therapy for children with disabilities.

“So, I started to work on [looking for guanxi] a year before school age, and it worked well, and I found the principal who graduated from the same university as I did,” said TC, mother of an eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism.

TC, as a university professor, revealed that she undertook a great deal of planning to cultivate and establish guanxi with possible elementary school administrators before her son started school, as he had been expelled twice from kindergarten owing to a lack of

connections, or so she believed.

However, getting an unofficial arrangement with a school only seemed to relieve immediate pressures without resolving issues. Due to the unpredictability and randomness of utilizing guanxi in the process, parents must still face the challenges and uncertainty of their children's long-term educational future.

“My major worry at this point is what to do after elementary school. Where could he go? I could not go with him anymore, right?” said GDK, mother of an 8-year-old boy diagnosed with autism.

This quote is from a mother who works at the same elementary school her son is attending. Although she admitted the benefits of using guanxi, she worried this benefit could not last after her son graduated.

Findings reveal that while parents were aware of the importance of guanxi and actively practiced it in making informal arrangements in schools, they were also aware that the outcomes of using such social capital were neither reliable nor transparent. As such, parents maximized their efforts to fit into the environment while avoiding confrontations.

### ***Hesitancy in Requesting Accommodations via Guanxi***

Different from what Trainor (2010a) found in parental knowledge and expertise in advocating for children, parents in this study indicated a tendency to be reluctant to request accommodation or services. Such reluctance seems to stem from the fear of being kicked out of school altogether.

“His dad will send him to school late because we don't want him to interfere with the

other students in the classroom.... The morning classes are major ones so, in doing that, it will make the teachers' burden of class management much less and won't irritate other parents," said GDK, mother of an 8-year-old boy diagnosed with autism and a teacher at a local elementary school.

Only two parents in this study expressed that schools should offer services and accommodations to their children. They expressed a positive attitude in communication with schools about the LRC model for their children. However, they believed the model is more of a favor the school offers for the rest of the parents. Most parents (14 out of 16) indicated that if a student with disabilities could not perform well academically, they agree that a particular school would be a better choice.

"I think if a child cannot catch up with the progress with his class, then he should go to a special school because it would be beneficial to everyone.... My son could keep up with the class academically, so I wish he could stay in the regular school," said QW, mother of an 11-year-old boy diagnosed with autism and full-time caregiver at home.

"I wish my son could stay in the regular classroom, but he is too bad in academics, and if he stays, he will interfere with others ... and that is not the kind of pressure he or I could take in the end," said GSC, father of an 11-year-old boy diagnosed with autism and advocate for children with autism.

The statements from these two parents suggest that, even though parents are trying hard to get a place in the regular classroom for their children, they prioritize not bothering others over their children's benefit from learning in the school, and they think academic

performance is the key to get accepted by the regular classroom settings.

When asked about the strategy parents were using to communicate with schools to solve disagreements, disputes, or concerns regarding their children's education, most of them indicated the importance of being cooperative with the school. According to them, the least appropriate strategy to redress the grievances to the school was to act confrontational and ask for extra services.

“As parents, we need to do whatever we can beforehand so that our kids can stay safe and not be a burden to teachers or school... There was a kid in our school, and his parents did no intervention before school, and that kid ended up being suspended,” said CXD, full-time caregiver at home and mother of an eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism.

“I would say never file a complaint to their supervising sections.... It would wind up against parents in the end and increase the negative impression to both parents and children ... and I suggest parents do not bear too many hopes for a school to educate every child as equal,” said GDK, mother of an eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism and teacher at a local elementary school.

Responses from parents suggested a preference for taking a cooperative strategy instead of requesting the right to address their concerns with schooling.

### ***Social Status Matters in the Practice of Guanxi***

Even though most participants reported guanxi as a significant source of social capital when they advocated for the service right of education for their children, their efforts were not always successful.

“Initially, the principal agreed, and then he changed his mind, and no matter how hard I tried to convince him my son won't be a troublemaker in the class, he just refused me ... and he gave me an excuse, saying the decision has nothing to do with his disability, but I know the true reason: he does not want this burden at his school, and we have no guanxi with him,” said LHX, mother of a 13-year-old boy diagnosed with autism and local government official.

“Why do I know [that my son was admitted to a local public school] because of guanxi? Because I know there was another mom who came to the principal and asked for enrollment for her son, but the principal didn't agree,” said TC, university professor and mother of an eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism.

Some parents indicated what helped their efforts to find guanxi: examples included similar social status and circles, their occupations, educational background, or membership in religious organizations.

“That principal graduated from the same university as I did, and we have common friends...and he has been accommodating for me to get my son into his school,” said TC, university professor and mother of an eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism.

“I wasn't happy with his former school, so I found out about a private school for children from Christian families, and we contacted one of our sisters in that church, and he was admitted right away, said FA, full-time caregiver at home and mother of a 10-year-old boy diagnosed with autism. When asked if this school is just for children from Christian homes, she replied, “Yes, you must have at least one parent who is a Christian at that church,

and you need to have a referral.”

GDK, a local elementary school teacher, responded negatively when asked if other children in similar circumstances to her son were ever admitted to the school where she works. “No. In my school, I had never seen someone admitted under the LRC model. I believe my son was the first. My colleague and principal knew my son early and wanted to assist me.” As indicated previously, GDK was concerned about her son's future when he graduated from the school where she works because this advantage may not persist through high school.

The expressed experiences and values of participating parents reveal acknowledgment and hesitancy about the uses of guanxi for gaining school resources for their children. Responses also indicate some anxiety about advocating for their children over and above the common good of all students at their children's schools. Hence, the most prevalent form of guanxi used with school actors seemed to be one that capitalized on or fostered social relationships to garner services for their children.

### **Discussion**

We aimed to gain a deeper understanding of inclusive education efforts for children with autism from a parental perspective within China. Limitations in recruiting participants for our study included the fact that the only available mode of contact (online networking) excluded parents who lack access to online resources or were uninterested in online networking. In addition, as all participants in this study were Han Chinese residents living in cities with a per capita GDP ranking among the top ten in China. Parents' perspectives from

other ethnic groups were omitted from this study. Studies on Chinese ethnic differences suggest that the dominant Han Chinese culture cannot adequately represent the entire Chinese population in terms of contextualized cultural practices (Deng et al., 2016). Consequently, our findings may not be generalizable to parents from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in China. Another limitation was the relatively small sample size with an unbalanced gender ratio (15 females vs. one male) recruited for our study, which precluded our ability to make any generalizations or group-level claims (e.g., parents with younger vs. older children, or male parents vs. female parents). Given these limitations, we view this study as an initial phase of a larger exploration to make visible what parents of children with autism in China may experience and try to do to gain access to inclusive education services under the LRC model.

Findings from our analysis offer some insight into the challenges that parents in China—even those within the top socioeconomic sphere—face when advocating for inclusive education opportunities. Analytic uses of the Bourdieuan capital lens have been instructive in previous studies on probing home–school collaborations (Bacon & Causton-Theoharisa, 2013; Trainor, 2010a). As such, we took up this framework as a guide for our analysis. Three major findings emerged from our exploration of recorded interviews with 16 parents of children with autism in China, each of which is addressed in turn.

### ***The Perfunctory and Powerless Nature of Inclusive Education Policies in China***

According to prior research, although the LRC model marked the beginning of inclusive education in China and has been recognized as the most popular form of providing

education for children with disabilities in China, the inadequacies of this model at the legislative level have rendered it ineffective in achieving its goal of compelling public schools to provide free education to children with disabilities, as illustrated by the accounts of parents in this study. Our participants expressed their reticence in referencing laws or other litigation-related information with school actors during their advocacy efforts. Instead, all parents stated their reliance on *guanxi*, which seemed to align with the socially framed transactional practices typically observed in Chinese business contexts (Chen, 1999). Fostering positive social connections with school leaders and teachers seemed to serve as the most important strategy for gaining acceptance and support for their children. The national LRC model that explicitly outlines a family's rights to inclusive education seems to have been deemed by participants to have little purchase in negotiations between parents and schools, regardless of the severity of their child's disability. Participants also seemed to recognize the inequitable power dynamics that placed them in a subordinate position within the educational system, unable to make or influence any decision relating to their children's placement at school or their accommodations. Such parental recognition contrasts with Trainor's (2010b) finding that inequitable access to services relies more on the type and severity of disabilities than parental involvement with school actors.

### *Apologetic Positions for Receiving Favors from Schools*

In contrast to what Bourdieu and other related theorists suggest about the purposes and functions of social capital, participants expressed reluctance in making any explicit requests for accommodations or resources for their children. The common theme among all

participants reflected the importance of not bothering others because of their child. This principle seemed to stem from a realistic concern that explicit requests for service and accommodations would be deemed as signs of social dissatisfaction, hence burdening school actors. Responses also indicated that parents use a self-deprecating tone when speaking with school leaders and teachers about their children. Such phatic displays from parents shaped their requests to resemble what one would do when asking for a favor out of moral kindness with no references to the rights that schools are dutybound to support. All but two participants expressed a belief that the right to educational access is conditional on the capabilities of their children rather than being a mandatory right. Parents seemed more concerned about not interfering with other children's progress in the classroom than whether their children could gain access to the classroom.

This finding of parental concern for the whole over their own children's rights to educational resources is consistent with findings from prior studies that revealed a Confucian mindset when interpreting or referring to disability rights (Poon-McBrayer & McBrayer, 2014; Qu, 2019; Yu, 2008). For example, Poon-McBrayer and McBrayer (2014) found in their study of parental advocacy practices in Hong Kong that there was a strong aversion to making confrontations during interpersonal interactions with school authorities; parents usually adopted a cooperative and gentle manner during such meetings to pave the way for the future negotiation with school actors.

### *Exclusivity of Guanxi in Social Circles*

While all participating parents had a household income in the top 10% in China, there

was a range of educational backgrounds and professional standing among respondents in our study. Findings from our analysis moderately suggest that parents with similar social circles with principals, especially those with a higher professional status—those with highly regarded professions occupations such as being doctors, university teachers, or government officials—may be more successful in obtaining educational opportunities for their children. While our sample does not support any conclusive findings, such a pattern aligns with prior research on the vital role that parents' socioeconomic status plays in gaining educational access for their children (de Boer et al., 2010; Trainor, 2010b). In this light, *guanxi* is similar to the notion of social capital of Bourdieu (1986) in that it results from investment by individuals striving to form beneficial social relations, yet with more emphasis on professional roles and identities than on wealth itself. For example, one of our participants who worked for a school had been successful in getting her son enrolled. Another participant, who was a government official, made use of her position to support the school that subsequently ended up accepting her son.

Responses from participants indicated that *guanxi* in the context of parental advocacy is not a simple connection between individuals; successful connections have much to do with the social status that is built from one's ability to build positive relationships with school actors and the ways in which professional identities are leveraged. This finding echoes the previous research on *guanxi* in Chinese society, which largely focuses on business practices. Such studies highlight the importance of *guanxi* for establishing social order during business dealings, which is exclusive to outsiders of a particular class (Chen, 1999). Our participants

also suggested that educational access is not equally accessible to all and that the higher one's social status, the more likely a schooling arrangement can be reached for children with autism. Such sentiments align with Bourdieu's (1986) description of memberships within social networks based on one's social status as well as Ruan & Chen's (2020) notion of *guanxi* as reflecting "horizontal exclusiveness" (p. 709).

Implications from our study highlight shared values of social capital (in the form of *guanxi*) in gaining and maintaining access to educational services for children with disabilities, regardless of a family's legal rights. On the one hand, the networks that control our everyday lives operate in a similar manner no matter where we reside (Westlund et al., 2010). Yet, on the other hand, because of the way we organize ourselves as well as operate in networks, our whole perception of the world is formed by the social networks embedded in culture; such networking has an important impact on the manner in which individuals and communities interact with one another (Kwok et al., 2019; Paton et al., 2013). For example, even though researchers in several countries have observed the use of social capital by parents of children with autism as a means of advocating for educational rights, unlike parents in Western countries, the use of policies and laws seems far less acceptable in garnering services for children with autism in China.

One of the most significant findings from our study is our participants' seemingly unwavering concern for the whole school community and the possible impact their child may have on the school's capacity to serve all children. These concerns appear to reflect a deeply entrenched cultural norm of social harmony, which may inadvertently absolve schools of

their mandated responsibility to provide inclusive education for children with disabilities. Such a finding is a stark contrast with western countries like the United States, in which litigious discourse surrounding individual rights is unavoidable (Lalvani & Hale, 2015). Future explorations of recently immigrated parents to the United States may reveal to what extent such cultural differences may influence advocacy efforts.

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The Importance of *Guanxi* for Parents of Children with Autism: A Study of Social Capital in Navigating School Resources by Hui Zhang and Diana Arya

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