

# Parental migration education-The impact of parental migration education on the mental health of Chinese rural students

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**Abstract.** With the rapid development of China, rural areas have made huge contributions to the resources for industrial development in urban areas. This in turn has resulted in students and parents that having to leave their hometowns. A large number of students have become left-behind children. This paper will analyze the causes of the psychological problems of left-behind children and propose solutions from three aspects: child psychology, grassroots policy and implementation, and macro education policy. Therefore, this paper contributes to providing a future reference for people to know more about left-behind children in China.

**Keywords:** Security; Procedural justice; Educational justice; Left-behind children.

## 1. Introduction

Education related to parental migration has grown to be one of China's most crucial challenges in rural education. The most crucial problem to be researched and resolved in parental migration education is the mental health of children who are left behind. The goal of this paper is to examine the factors that contribute to the mental health issues faced by children who are left behind as well as potential remedies in three areas: macro-educational policy, child psychology, and policy implementation.

The urban-rural dichotomy in China was formed in the 1950s. To raise resources for industrial start-ups, the Chinese government chose to use agriculture to provide financial support for the industry. For realizing the national industrialization strategy, the policy of unified purchasing and marketing, which began in 1953, and the household registration system, which began in 1958, kept agriculture and rural areas in a state of exploitation [1]. When the price of industrial goods is higher than the value, while the price of agricultural goods is lower than the value persists. A large number of rural residents have chosen to move into the cities in search of more reasonably paid jobs. The urban center policy led to a concentration of educational resources in urban areas. Thirty years ago, when there were still a large number of rural schools in rural China, the government was motivated by a management mindset of resource concentration. Rural schools were abolished and the saved resources were used to open high-quality Junior or senior high schools in the cities. On the other hand, the job opportunities and income in the cities were much higher than in the rural areas. Those two reasons have made a large number of left-behind children in rural areas.

In a school in Sichuan, research shows that nearly half of the students in the school are left-behind children [2]. And a significant portion of these students faces mental health challenges. Forty-eight percent of the students are left-behind children. And among these left-behind children: twenty-six percent of them had anxiety; forty-three percent had depression; twenty-one percent had feared, and eight percent were irritable [2]. The number of left-behind children with mental health problems is much higher than that of ordinary Students. The survey data of Xinchang Primary School Sichuan is representative of rural schools.

In summary, addressing the mental health of left-behind children requires three dimensions: macro-education policy, child psychology, and grassroots education policy.

## 2. The Psychological State of Left-behind children

The separation of left-behind children from their parents increases the risk of children developing mental health problems. Hongfei Yang mentioned that academic research on adolescent mental health in China has reached a consensus on the following points. Four factors (i.e., family integrity, democratic parenting style, harmonious family relationships, and high parental literacy) play an important role in ensuring children's psychologically healthy growth [3]. For left-behind children, family integrity has been destroyed. Democratic parenting is also not a luxury for left-behind children, as it often requires parents to have sufficient time to communicate with their children to cope with their developmental problems and to help them develop a healthy worldview. The lack of time for family members to spend in the company of each other can also enlarge the distance of the family relationship between left-behind children and their parents.

According to the survey by Sun fang, left-behind children are more likely to have negative emotions such as loneliness, inexplicable irritability, aggression, low self-esteem, and apprehension. Many of them have significantly higher behavioral problems such as aggression, withdrawal, and discipline, and more negative attitudes toward interpersonal interactions and society, as well as lower levels of social adjustment [4]. If left-behind children lack parental companionship and care during the critical stage of their psychological growth and lack guidance for their growth, it can lead to a lack of security for children. The lack of security is the cause of most of the mental health problems left behind. Security will also be the entry point to solve the psychological problems of left-behind children.

However, children's psychological growth is influenced by both the family environment as well as the school environment. The companionship and camaraderie in the school environment can go some way to complementing what children lack in the family environment. Children of the same age, with similar knowledge backgrounds and interests, values, and lifestyles, have low psychological defenses, small communication gaps, a great deal in common, and high levels of interactivity with one another. They are more likely to feel the love, care, help, and support from their peers through intimate communication in a mutually accepting, friendly, and harmonious peer relationship.[4]. Although the companionship of peers can compensate for the lack of security of left-behind children, the low social adjustment of left-behind children can still create obstacles to their acquisition of security.

## 3. Policy Implementation

### 3.1 Developing Grassroots Policies and Working Methods

When faced with the issue of mental health of left-behind children, the task of the grassroots in China's education system is divided into two parts. The first part is to develop various practical and concrete measures to help left-behind children grow up healthily. Then, the second part is to ensure procedural justice in order to prevent the urban-rural gap from being further widened.

The grassroots level of the education system is the closest to the rulers of the children left behind. Therefore, some specific, effective policies and management methods can only be developed and implemented by the grassroots themselves. For example, teachers, parents, and communities are mobilized to collaborate on the task of caring for left-behind children. Such action plans rely heavily on the authority of the rural school principal. Instead, it helps left-behind children overcome the challenges of low social adjustment and build stable friendships with other left-behind children to fill the lack of security. The implementers of such a practical and effective approach should be the schoolteachers.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of the grassroots of the education system (i.e., teachers, principals, and local school boards in rural schools) to influence communities and parents. Then, it is necessary to collaborate to develop specific solutions to the psychological problems of children left behind through student surveys, internal communication, and student mental health analysis.

### 3.2 Guarantees of Procedural Justice

The process of policy implementation at the grassroots level in China is often characterized by a lack of procedural justice. The lack of procedural justice can lead to a final policy implementation result that does not meet the original intention of the policy designer. This in turn leads to social problems. In the case of the mental health of left-behind children, the grassroots tend to over-implement urban-centered policies, with social resources tilted in excess to the cities. Therefore, it leads to more parents and students having to travel to different cities. Leaving more students as left-behind children.

Under the influence of the urban-rural dichotomy, local governments want to concentrate quality education resources from the whole region to schools in the cities. Dan mentioned that "most districts have adopted a strategy of "temporarily retaining or restoring small schools in rural areas, but not increasing their investment," and some districts have even withheld funding for small schools and pulled out their excellent teachers, which makes the development of small schools difficult. Some districts have even retained funds for small schools and pulled out their best teachers, which has made the development of small schools difficult [5]. Such withdrawals are often not governed by China's current legal framework, and rural schools with less influence are defenseless against such encroachments. They are forced to close down. Students are forced to transfer to other schools, thereby becoming left-behind children.

The above case occurred in 2019, however, the lack of procedural justice in the urban-rural dichotomy is not a new issue. Around 1990, there was a massive rural school abolition campaign in China. The original purpose of the campaign was to abolish rural schools with very low-quality teaching and insufficient resource retention in order to facilitate the opening of more schools that could provide effective education to students. However, the lack of procedural justice made this campaign a plundering of the rural education system by the urban education system. In an article by the Institute of Education at Tsinghua University, it was noted that Researchers have discovered that over half of the schools that have been eliminated have not been well studied, and that the villagers, who have the greatest stake in the drive to abolish schools, have mostly been neglected and given no chance to voice their opinions. The interests and position of the villages are not given much consideration by local administrations, who are solely answerable to their superiors. Instead, they are primarily interested in pursuing "speed," "quantity," and "efficiency" as a stand-in for performance. This unavoidably causes rural education to be squeezed and deprived as a vulnerable category [6].

In short, if procedural justice is not guaranteed, the disadvantaged groups in the current urban-rural dichotomy, that is, the rural areas will always be over-exploited for resources. More children will be left behind.

## 4. Macro-education Policy

In terms of macro education policies, issues such as equity, justice, the purpose of rural education development, and the relationship between urban and rural areas should be considered. The dualistic development between urban and rural areas, with the city as the center, is the crux of the problem. The best solution to the problem of mental health of left-behind children is to prevent students from becoming left-behind children. The current urban-rural pattern in China is urban-centered, using rural resources to supply blood for urban development. And the procedural justice mentioned above will always only be a relative concept. Procedural justice has to be enforced at the grassroots level, but according to the two cases above, the results of the last thirty years of urban and rural education development show that the absence of procedural justice is the norm. Only when the urban-rural synergy is established and some of the educational resources and job opportunities are redirected back to the rural areas, will a large number of left-behind children have the opportunity to reunite with their parents.

The deep-seated factor that determines policy-making is the government's philosophy of development. Cai and Kong argue that the Chinese government should not replace educational justice

with economically oriented theories in the process of educational development [6]. The economic justice orientation of the educational system and educational policy is partly responsible for the alienation of the school abolition movement and even the quandary of contemporary rural education itself. The only way to solve this conundrum and end the conflict between urban and rural education is to reinstate educational equity as the fundamental starting point. [6].

As mentioned earlier, the urban-rural dichotomy is the political cause of the psychological problems of children left behind in rural areas. The urban-rural dichotomy itself and the problems it brings have had a history of about sixty years. The long history of the urban-rural pattern has led to a discussion of the urban-rural dichotomy in China that has been difficult to escape from cultural centrism. Yongkun and Zhihui argue that the cultural choices for the development of education in rural China also have a more obvious tendency toward vernacular or urban cultural centrism [7]. That is, one single cultural model is used as the optimal standard to measure other cultures. Policies based on such a dualistic philosophy are in fact fragmenting the urban-rural relationship in China and will inevitably lead to the emergence of left-behind children.

Unfortunately, urban centrism is one of the inevitable results of what has become a dichotomous development model between urban and rural areas. Even children left behind as victims of the system themselves will want to enter the city to escape their peasant status [8]. Also, according to a survey conducted in Sichuan agricultural and forestry colleges, only 47.49% of the 339 graduates were willing to return to rural areas for employment [9].

In other words, 52.51% of the students may complete the transformation from farmers to citizens. And according to public data, the admission rate of the first batch of universities in Sichuan province in 2013 was 5.28% [10]. The majority of rural students will still need to return to rural areas in the future. In turn, due to life pressure, they will need to return to temporary jobs in the cities, and their children will still be left-behind children similar to them.

## 5. Conclusion

The mental health problems of left-behind children were analyzed in three dimensions. Similarly, the solution to the problem should also be considered from three dimensions. From the perspective of psychology, the lack of security is the key to the psychological problems of left-behind children. Therefore, education grassroots should provide more opportunities for left-behind children to communicate with their peers and help them overcome social difficulties. Also, it is necessary to encourage and motivate the students' parents, and the community, to care for the left-behind children. From the macro policy perspective, Economic development-oriented thinking should be replaced with educational justice. Long-term economic interests are not incompatible with educational justice, so it is easier to strike a balance between efficiency and justice by formulating policies with the ideology of educational justice. Coordinated urban-rural development, so that both rural students and parents have the opportunity to stay in the rural areas.

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