

# ***Research on the Educational Plight Faced by Rural Left-behind Children in China***

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**Abstract:** Due to the rapid development of China's cities and the increasing inequality between urban and rural areas, Chinese left-behind children have been neglected by society for a long time, which should make their educational plight a worthwhile issue to be explored. The research utilizes literature review to discuss some reasons for those children's educational plights they are facing. Various researches from other authors is drawn to probe into more dimensions of the factors. Then, the result is presented that there are three aspects among that deeply influence the quality of education the rural left-behind children are receiving, including parents, society and news media. In short, the departure of parents makes children suffer from unhealthy mental conditions and fail to gain adequate cognitive knowledge, leading to their trouble in receiving high-quality education. Moreover, the vicious characteristics of rural society which delivers backward ideologies is also a culprit that prevents them from getting the same education as urban children. Lastly, the one-sided coverage of those children by news media shapes them as pure victims or threatening people, letting others keep away and refuse to help them and also causing children's wrong perceptions of themselves and their living environments. As to the research conclusion, their difficulties in education should be paid more attention and the relevant institutions are supposed to take action to drop them out of such plight.

**Keywords:** left-behind children, parent-child relationship, rural society, frame

## **1. Introduction**

In China, left-behind children are under 18 years old and one or both of their parents leave them at home and migrate to more developed areas for money [1]. Moreover, it is for at least 6 months that those parents fail to reunite with their children [1]. Because there exists an imbalanced socio-economic advance across various places in China, the increasing number of people who originally reside in the countryside prefer to move to the urban areas for more opportunities [2]. Then, owing to the hukou policy, those parents' children are not entitled to receive the same education as what was given to the urban children, which seems to be a kind of discrimination against such a special group [2]. In this way, the phenomena such as the 'urban-rural' divide and the application of the mentioned policy generate obstacles to their chances to gain equal services [3]. Consequently, those rural children are left behind by their parents in their residential places which lack high-quality and advanced educational sources since the family environment functions as a critical component in the

process of children's psychology and interactions [4]. Additionally, the common conflict between fair and legal institutions and rules which are established without judicial authority in the countryside also leads to the educational dilemma faced by these children which overemphasizes the harmony of the society rather than justice and law [5]. When it comes to the solutions to cases involving violations of the law, what is accepted is that villagers negotiate and handle them privately and 'civil litigation' is symbolic of shame [5]. Apart from that, Chinese news media relies on merely human interest and constructed frames to limit the description of left-behind children to a narrow range [6]. The media also mainly look at micro- and meso-level responsibilities when discussing the attribution of left-behind children's dilemmas instead of institutions and policies [7].

The research topic will focus on considering the elements which lead to the educational plights faced by rural left-behind children in China. It includes three aspects: parent, rural society and news media. The research utilizes the literature review to conclude, extend and deeply think about this topic. Then, as to the meaning of the research, it helps readers objectively understand the current situation of left-behind children, encouraging them to give a helping hand to those destitute of rich educational resources and opportunities. Thus, under the circumstances, it is more possible for those left-behind children to improve their lives and receive education of higher quality.

## **2. Problem**

### **2.1. The Departure of Parents**

The first aspect lies in the departure of parents or one of them. It is common for left-behind children to bear prolonged separation from their parents, even for at least six months [1]. Obviously, in their formative years, such an experience may seriously affect their mental health as well as their cognitive development, which can be seen as an educational dilemma for them to face.

#### **2.1.1. Impact on Mental Health**

Firstly, as to mental health, the migration of parents from the village to the more developed city can increase the level of those children's anxiety [8]. What can be worse is that, although any of their parents are back home, there can be no significant distinction in their mental health status, proving that the return of parents will not compensate for the damage they did to their children after leaving them previously [8]. Moreover, the research also presents that left-behind children tend to show more serious anxiety and lower dignity [8]. Anxiety causes a child to be fearful or hostile towards his surroundings, which will prevent him from fitting in. For instance, he is not willing to communicate with teachers and classmates or share information and knowledge for mutual learning at school. Low self-esteem affects a child's view of himself. He tends to believe that he is incapable of achieving goals or solving problems. As a result, when a problem arises, he may choose to deny himself or ignore the fact that the problem needs to be solved. Then, he may run away or blame it for happening instead of attempting to figure out approaches through learning new knowledge or changing his original mindset. Both anxiety and low dignity may lead to low efficiency and willingness to study and impede children's education. Apart from that, a term named 'parent-child attachment' means the relationship between the child and their caregivers which show a level of security and sometimes provides safety and proximity in the face of trouble [1]. According to it, one investigation shows that the loss of such attachment may lead to children's depression, which is defined as feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness and even the symptoms of insomnia [9, 10]. Consequently, a child with depression may have no motivation to learn new things and socialize at school, which undoubtedly affects his chances of getting high-quality education as well.

### **2.1.2. Impact on Children's Cognition**

The aspect of parents' leave is not limited to problematic mental health, but it also has an impact on children's cognition, which is relevant to education. In general, the father and the mother respectively play different roles in one family in China [5]. Take girls' knowledge of sex as an example, their mothers are often responsible for teaching and answering physiological problems and their fathers should step in when girls are being bullied or hurt [5]. Separated from their parents, left-behind children will lose the opportunity to take in knowledge like the condition above, failing to gain complete cognitive structure from both parents.

## **2.2. The Characteristics of Rural Society**

The second component causing left-behind children's educational plight is the characteristics of rural society in China, particularly negatively influencing children's understanding of the law. The rural society in China is symbolic as somewhere people only focus mutual relationships rather than laws [5]. In brief, for example, after a child is sexually abused, members of such society will not choose to disclose the malignant event to the public or seek legal help. Instead, they may handle it through hiding the truth from the public illegally [5]. The relationship there between members in the same community is similar to family members in a house and what they are striving for is the harmony and unity of the whole place, rather than the justice comprehended normally by urban people. If victims or their families struggle for real justice, the offenders are likely to rely on the interpersonal relationships valued in such a society to justify themselves and even to hate the victims and their families as having betrayed rules ingrained. In other words, those who refuse to comply with such rules commonly acknowledged just in the small village can be viewed as people without morality [11]. For instance, Xiaoyu was sexually abused by several elder people and they were sentenced to prison with the assistance of 'judicial intervention and justice', which was a story about justice [5]. However, the bare truth is that other members of the village presented hatred towards Xiaoyu and her family, becoming evidence proof of the irrational values in the acquaintance society in China.

Immersed in such an environment, two groups of rural left-behind children will be negatively influenced. One includes children going through intentional bullying such as sexual abuse and another includes those perpetrators. For the former, after knowing the features of the condition they are living in, they may become silent or pretend that nothing happened after being hurt, or even retaliate impulsively because they will not believe that the justice they thirst for will come to reality, so they should give up struggling or merely depend on themselves. Neither of these is the sensible way for them to protect themselves because they lack the education of the law. For the latter, these children will also fail to receive the correct education that guides them to take responsibility for their illegal deeds since such a society may help them escape from punishment. In short, such characteristics of the rural society in China impede children's education of legal awareness.

## **2.3. The Coverage of News Media**

### **2.3.1. Impact on the Public's Ideas**

Lastly, different from the two dimensions discussed above, the third aspect will focus on the space outside the rural society and the left-behind children's families, which is about the coverage of news media. Reports from journalists are likely to affect ideas hidden inside civilians' minds, influencing the image of such children and whether they deserve to be helped by society or themselves. Such ideas may determine people's actions towards educational difficulties those children are facing, especially teachers who plan to go to the rural areas to bring children knowledge, and volunteers who would like to help children out. The news media helps set up a platform to bring various social news

to be discussed, which possesses the capacity to swift the public's opinions [12]. However, when reporting or describing news happening, journalists tend to present their subjective views from their consciousness or just one-sided perceptions of events in the guise of seemingly unbiased reporting. This will have a very serious impact on the public's perception of the real living conditions, psychological changes and image of the left-behind children. Most news only focuses on children's separation from their parents, 'alternative care-taking arrangements' and the vulnerability of the girls in that group who often suffer from sexual abuse [7]. Left-behind children's living conditions are enormously different from normal children in urban areas. Thus, after gaining knowledge of children different from those in cities, people tend to construct the image of left-behind children inside their mind who exactly differ from the standard of a child's situation and surroundings. Such kinds of differentiated thoughts will not make people want to assist and understand the left-behind children. The original goal is to bring the quality of education for those children closer to that of urban children, but the impact of the report above will probably merely make those helpers feel sympathy or other irrational emotions towards them in the beginning. Therefore, their approaches to treating them mean that those children cannot be given normal education because many providers treat them as victims or patients with mental problems. Then, there has formed a new stereotype of rural left-behind children in China which differentiates the rural environment from the urban one, negatively and one-sidedly dismissing the whole conditions in rural areas [7].

### **2.3.2. Impact on Children's Perceptions**

The second aspect of new media coverage from the external world lies in children's perceptions of themselves and their surroundings. From information reported by the media, the loneliness those rural left-behind children are suffering is spotlighted, for example, the unwillingness to interact with others or share their inner feelings with parents and teachers [7]. Moreover, the media shares a story about four children's suicide and emphasises their inclination towards self-isolation and self-abasement and also portrays left-behind children as a group addicted to the internet and removing themselves from real life [7]. It should be admitted that such actions are taken by several children in that condition, but not everyone acts like that. Apart from that, the media construction gradually ingrains some positive images of those children into others' minds, such as their hard study and work [7]. It is the family structure that the media pays attention to and is described to be the reason for their efforts [7]. To be more specific, the media means that owing to the special and incomplete family structure, children's endeavor after outstanding academic performance may satisfy their parents, compensating for the missing element of happiness in their families to some extent. In addition, From the media's perspective, school is also a significant one in shaping children's lives [13]. Nevertheless, the media attribute children's problematic behavior to schools. If children in such circumstances find the news and views from the media that are delivered to others outside the rural areas, they are more likely to suspect, hate themselves, or produce negative feelings about the environment around them, especially their family structure, leading to an educational plight created by themselves.

To be specific, originally, a child has the comprehension of his own choices and actions without being affected by others. However, after knowing that the media, as the crucial role in letting others understand themselves better only mentions their negative situations, their 'abnormal' family structure and also somewhat one-sided generalizations about the reasons for their struggles, many of them are more like to give up what they are striving for, refusing to study studiously to reach the real goals inside their hearts. Moreover, there exist rural left-behind children who will form hatred of society and the outside world, becoming more alienated and negative. Such mindset and emotion can be a stumbling block to their self-improvement and the willingness to receive education from others. Plus, as to the media's emphasis on the incomplete family structure and 'inadequate school supervision' which are blamed for causing children's wrong behavior, may provide an excuse for

errant children who will explain that their parents' leaving for work or the disappointing conditions of their schools makes what they are and what they have done and they should not be blamed [7]. In this way, they tend to refuse to be responsible for their mistakes, hindering their education in socializing and self-control.

It is worth to be emphasized that journalist seems to avoid the root cause of such a phenomenon, choosing to establish human-interest frame rather than focusing on economic and financial frames [6]. As mentioned above, some of the coverage merely attributes left-behind children's low-quality education to the lack of parental company and attention, school supervision and children's weaknesses which swift the public's attention away from systemic problems, failing to implicate and consider the essential drawbacks and the relevant solutions [14]. Educational plights faced by left-behind children are more related to economics, for instance, hukou policy rather than human-interest which is digressive when discussing such issues [6].

### **3. Suggestion**

#### **3.1. The Aspect of Parents**

Firstly, the government should adjust the hukou policy. In the light of urban-rural divide in China, measures should be taken to be more inclusive of rural people's identities, to give rural parents the chance to work in urban areas and to give children equal access to education. Secondly, instead of only concentrating on children's academic performance and salaries, parents of those left-behind children are supposed to understand the importance of parental care and their accountabilities to guide them to grow up healthily. Thirdly, some parenting skills should be given to parents to let them focus children's emotional needs by relevant institutions and volunteer organizations.

#### **3.2. The Aspect of Rural Society**

The degree to the spread of law education should be enhanced, especially in rural areas. Arrangements should be made for some teachers to go there to disseminate knowledge of the law, and they are responsible for encouraging children there to use the law as a weapon to protect themselves.

#### **3.3. The Aspect of News Media**

News media should correct the one-sided views and reports on those rural left-behind children, presenting the true image of them in public and letting those children know that there are people paying attention to them. Journalists are supposed to convey the true information about those children, rather than illustrating their feelings or opinions.

### **4. Conclusion**

The research applies to literature interview to analyze three dimensions that hinder left-behind children from receiving a high-quality education. Firstly, the departure of parents leaves children at risk of emotional problems and a lack of cognition. Then, the characteristics of rural society lead to their failure to gain law education and to protect themselves when facing crimes. Lastly, the narrow descriptions and coverage of the conditions of left-behind children by Chinese news media affect the public's view of such groups and children's perceptions of themselves. More importantly, the two frames it relies on also fail to present the rational attributions of responsibilities on this matter. Then, suggestions in terms of these three dimensions are presented. In the end, after considering the reasons for those children's educational plights, people should have expectations about the future education available to left-behind children in rural China. In the future, various difficulties faced by left-behind children, not limited to educational plight are expected to be paid more attention. Furthermore,

children in need of assistance will be given the rights they deserve to voice themselves, sharing their lives and views on their education and other aspects in front of the whole society.

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