

Left-behind Children's Academic Development

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Keywords: Left-Behind Children; Bias; Quantitative Research; Research Method

Abstract: The left-behind children have been a hot group of society engaging researchers and scholars studying in recent years. Caring for the growth of the left-behind children is a crucial choice to balance the well-being and development of this group. However, to some extent, the existing research has drawbacks on investigating the data of this group and focusing on some deviation factors. In this essay, the author reviews several current studies on this special group and got different even contradictory results from previous research. By comparing and sorting out the existing research, this essay presents the problems that existed in those researched and makes suggestions for prospective methods.

1. The Definition of the Left-Behind Children

Left-behind children, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, are children "raised in their home countries or in their countries of habitual residence, who have been left behind by adult migrants responsible for them." When it comes to official definition on a national level, Chinese government defined left-behind children as "rural children under the age of 18 whose parents migrate to a different location for work for more than six months (Hung)." In 2010, there were an estimated 61.03 million left-behind children in China, approximately 38% of all rural children and 22% of all Chinese children.

2. Factors Leading to the Formation of the Group

A massive wave of rural-to-urban migration in China induced by the "Reform and Opening-up" in 1978 could explain why such a great population of left-behind children existed in China in the first place. Low-skilled job opportunities in industrialized urban regions provided great economic incentives for citizens in rural regions to migrate a long distance towards developed cities (Chen and Wang). In fact, in 2018, approximately 241 million Chinese citizens were categorized as migrants, or members of the floating population. Although Chinese government has encouraged migrant workers to bring their children with them (McKenzie & Dong, 2016), many children were still left behind in their rural hometowns due to the potential living and educational obstacles migrant children might face in metropolis owing to the restrictions posed by China's hukou system.

3. Current Research on the Left-Behind Children

In recent years, many studies have been conducted to identify challenges faced by left-behind

children in relation to interventions, deviant behaviors, mental health, and family bearing (Wang, Wei, Ma, & Wang, 2016).

3.1. Contradictory Results

At first, scholars tended to make simplified assumptions in their essays, claiming that child-parent separation was the only cause that lead to observed negative effects among left-behind children (Ge, Song, Clancy, & Qin, 2019). Gradually, however, researchers turned to recognize the defects of previous research and incorporated more sociologically-oriented methodologies and academic theories to carefully establish causal relations among diverse factors. For instance, a recent research analyzing how increased household income and decreased care resulted from parental migration influenced left-behind children combined quantitative and qualitative research methods to reach the ultimate discovery (Chang et al., 2019). Scholars also intentionally controlled independent variables including gender, neighborhood socioeconomic status, number of caregivers, etc. to reach more precise conclusions.

Among disparate research directions, left-behind children's academic development was at the center of discussion among scholars. Conclusions achieved by each research, nevertheless, were not consistent and even contradictory. One study analyzing school examination scores and questionnaire responses collected from 3,076 students concluded that children-parental separation resulted in lower test scores of left-behind children compared with their non-left-behind counterparts (Fu et al., 2017). On the contrary, another research examining standardized English test score of more than 13,000 rural students in Northwestern China indicated that parental migration had significant, positive impacts on left-behind children's academic performance (Bai et al., 2018). Other researches that controlled specific variables, on the other hand, found mixed results. For instance, a study revealed that fathers' migration had negative effect on sons' academic performance but positive effect on daughters' academic achievements (Leng and Park, 2010).

3.2. Problems in Existing Research

Several problems in existing literature lead to the inconsistency among research findings on the topic of left-behind children's education. First, standards that measured students' academic capability were different from study to study. Some researches relied on self-reported academic evaluations (Wen & Lin, 2012), which might not be reliable enough to reflect the authentic situation. Others developed specific test paper or used their own methods to standardize examination scores of different schools to eliminate potential bias. Some of these methodologies were self-designed and could not be duplicated or applied to future research. Second, many mediating factors were not well-controlled in previous literatures. Indeed, major variables like age and gender were usually under control. One study published on *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, for example, conducted detailed research on how separation age and separation duration influenced left-behind children's behavioral and emotional status (Ling et al., 2015). However, other variables including caregivers' gender, or families' education level and labor capacities were usually neglected and left uncontrolled, which lead to mixed results or incorrect conclusions. Third, even though test scores of left-behind children were widely examined to analyze their academic development, other educational outcomes such as left-behind children's enrollment, drop-out rates, and attendance were rarely studied. The absence of analysis towards these criteria resulted in a research gap on the topic of left-behind children's academic development.

4. Reflects and Suggestions

Considering the previous studies' drawbacks listed above, future research analyzing left-behind children's educational situation could be improved in several ways. First, more official academic standards should be used as fundamental database for further research. Zhongkao (high school entrance exam) score or gaokao (college entrance exam) score, for instance, could be used to compare left-behind children with non-left-behind children. "Senior High School Exam (huikao)" score that existed in provinces like Beijing, Zhejiang, and Tianjin could also be a standardized

criterion. While conducting research cross-referencing left-behind children in multiple provinces, nonetheless, the inconsistency between each province's exam paper should be considered. Second, future studies, especially quantitative ones, should controlled more variables, either observable or non-observable, to eliminate potential mediating factors. Educational background or original income level of each family, for example, could greatly influence left-behind children's academic development. Third, to fill in current research gap, scholars should also analyze other educational outcomes beyond test score in future research. Hopefully, these studies would be effective in analyzing left-behind children's present academic development and used as reliable evidence to initiate beneficial policy-level reforms.

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