

Left-behind Children and Educational Attainment in China: A Study of Ma San County School

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Abstract: *The rapid and uneven economic development in China has led to large-scale rural to urban migration, which in turn has resulted in many children being left in their hometowns by their parents as they seek work. This study investigated the effects of this on the 'left-behind children' examining their educational attainment, social situation, and psychological impacts. It found that left-behind children are likely to report negative emotions and that these are linked to lower levels of educational attainment. A percentage of left-behind children also reported positive emotional states and good educational achievement, contradicting the results of previous studies. The paper finally offers three recommendations to help assist the children's development and educational achievement.*

Keywords: *Left-behind Children, China, Educational Attainment*

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, when many policies were adopted in order to eliminate poverty in China and rejuvenate the economy, the pace of economic development has picked up remarkably. However, economic development and success has not been shared equally within all areas of China; urban areas have developed very well while some rural areas still feature an undeveloped economy. The rapid socioeconomic development and the rapid acceleration of industrialization and urbanization have generated a large gap between economic development in Chinese urban and rural areas. This has led to hundreds and millions of people who live in rural areas streaming into well-developed cities in search of higher-paid jobs in order to improve their economic status and livelihoods.

One of the most serious impacts of this mass migration is the emergence of "left-behind children". As implied by the name, these "left-behind children" are children who have been left in their hometowns and separated from one or both of their parents who are seeking work in the developed, urban regions of China (Banister, 1997). "The Left-Behind Children Survey Release Seminar" conducted by All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 2008 (Sohu News, 2009) defined "left-behind children" as juveniles who are living in the rural areas of the place where his residence is registered and both of or one of their parents work in other places rather than living with them (Zhao, J. & Xu Q.Q. 2009). They are the inevitable by-products of rural labourers' economic migration. They have to be left at home by their parent(s) due to administrative difficulties restricting their parent(s)' ability to take them with them. Zhang Weiqing (the director of the National Population and Family Planning Commission of P. R. China) stated in 2007 that there were more than twenty million left-behind children under 14 existing in China, while the population is still booming with reports suggesting there were more than fifty-eight million left-behind children in 2009 (XinHua News. online). This problem has had two important effects. Firstly, as Sigmund Freud suggests, "anxiety in children is originally nothing other than an expression of the fact that they are feeling the loss of the person they love" (1950 cited Bowlby 1973).

Children, regardless of whether they are left behind or not, are still in a period of psychological development (Zhang, J. L. 2009) and when they are separated from their parent(s), their psychological health can easily be damaged, encountering negative effects. (Wu and Yu, 2004; Zhu, 2009). This loss of 'attachment' damages their psychological development (Bowlby, 1969; Goldbery, 2000; Cherry, 2009). Secondly, their educational attainment, which is potentially affected by their lack of attachment, will have a direct impact on the development of rural areas. If an individual's academic life has been negatively influenced by psychological problems, they will perform as well in academic settings. As a result of this, being confronted with large numbers of left-behind children, the government, society and educators should assume responsibility for ensuring that they can maximise their development. However, it seems that such situation remains unclear and more well-rounded understanding should be obtained,

since the present plans and strategies that are being conducted thereby providing assistance for left-behind children are too general without considering the specifics and varieties. In order to provide diverse material and mental health assistance to left-behind children to ensure that they can benefit from education and obtain a healthier nurturing environment, their basic conditions should be well-understood by society. Therefore this research investigated the psychological and educational impacts on left-behind children in Ma San County, Guangxi province, China, in order to explore the impacts in further detail and postulate methods to increase their educational attainment.

2. Literature Review

The December 1978 the Communist Party leadership in China decided to enact reform and opening-up policies in order to provide the conditions necessary for rapid economic growth. Although, as Robert Michael Field (1986) states, the reforms had an immediate and dramatic impact in rural areas, where communes were disbanded, free markets were established, and township and village industry blossomed, at the beginning of the reforms period the economy in China's urban areas also started to develop rapidly (Field, 1986). By 2004, although poverty was still prevalent using international measures, it was fundamentally a rural phenomenon and no urban inhabitants were in poverty as measured by the official Chinese poverty line (Naughton, 2007). As a result of these inequalities and the mechanisation of industry, many people living in rural areas migrated to urban areas in search of higher-paid jobs (Banister, 1997; Cook, 1996; Fan, 2008). The surplus labour force in China's rural areas exceeded 200 million by 2000 (Xie, 2004), and this drove increased migration to the cities. Workers are restricted in their access to services, including education, and amenities by the Hukou registration system, which is a form of population registration formally required and legalized since the National People's Congress promulgated the People's Republic of China Regulations on Household Registration on January 9, 1958 (Fan, 2008: 40), therefore many choose to leave their children behind in the care of elder relatives (Chan and Zhang, 2009, Wang, 1997). Zhao Jing and Xu Qingqing (2009) suggest that is the direct cause of the emergence of left-behind children.

This emerging phenomenon has received considerable investigation from Chinese scholars (Chen and Gong, 2006; Jiang and Chen, 2009; Wang, 2007; Wang and Huang, 2009; Yao, 2009; Yuan, 2009; Zhao et al, 2009; Zhao, 2009) and some similar characteristics have been identified. Spending an extended period of time away from their parents has previously been demonstrated to have several negative psychological effects on left behind children (Wu and Yu, 2004; Zhu, 2009) and also on their educational achievement (Chen, 2009; Shi and Wang, 2008; Song, 2008; Wang, 2009; Xu, 2006; Yan, 2006; Ye et al, 2006; Zhang, 2009; Zhou et al, 2005). Qiao Lihua and Duan Hongwei (2009) examined the psychological health of left-behind children in Taiyuan. The researchers established questions in accordance with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and found that psychological problems manifest when the second and third level of human needs (safety needs and psychological needs) cannot be satisfied. Negative feelings such as sadness, depression and unhappiness are easily experienced, as well as fear. Feeling fear and psychological disappointment can easily cause mental problems. Also, the results showed that 64.4% of parents rarely or never had intimate talks with their children when they were at home.

Similar research was conducted by Cui Li Juan (2009). The self-esteem-scale (SES) developed by Morris Rosenberg, and the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale were used as auxiliary methods to investigate their mental states. According to Cui (2009), most of the left-behind children received low scores on anger management, psychological support and social adaptation. Moreover, the data shows that the more frequently left-behind children contact their parents, the stronger their self-esteem are, but also that lacking confidence is a common problem for most of them. This supports the concept of attachment and its importance in childhood (Bowlby, 1969; Goldberry, 2000; Howe, 1996).

Gao Yabing (2008) compared left-behind children with children living with their parents in rural areas of Zhejiang Province. According to the results of their SCL-90 (symptom check-list), the index of positive symptom items (anxiety, hostility, phobia, and paranoia) in left-behind children, especially those aged 12-15, is higher than in children living with both parents. The analytical results also showed that left-behind children suffer generalized anxiety disorders, phobias, and feel angry and depressed very easily, while children who live with their parents can communicate with people more easily and enjoy better psychological health.

Chen Anjie and Qi Shuang (2009) also compared left-behind children and children living with their parents in Shandong Province. Their study found that the students' psychological setbacks in interpersonal relationships and study habits made the left-behind children more likely to suffer from

inferiority complexes, with 55% of the left-behind children in the study feeling academically inferior. In addition, left-behind children who were unwilling to communicate with others made up 20% of the total number of researched left-behind children, 5% higher than children who lived with both of their parents.

Duan Chengrong and Wu Lili (2008) conducted quantitative research on a large scale of left-behind children in Henan, Anhui, Sichuan, and Jiangxi. They suggest that most serious problems, such as playing truant from school, fighting and even committing criminal activities, were present in left-behind children going to middle schools. Their data indicates that left-behind children over age 12 become more aware of deprivation of parental love than younger left-behind children. This leads to a lack of security and happiness, making them irritable and anxious, and demonstrating anti-social behaviour.

Nevertheless, Li Qinghua (2008) argues that more severe psychological problems also exist within the younger group of left-behind children, aged between seven and eleven. Qinghua asserts that these younger left-behind children have started to be aware of their surroundings. On the other hand, their self-management ability and independence are not developed completely and they still need love, care and help from parents, which they realise and which impacts their development again as Bowlby's attachment theory suggests (1969). They bear a grudge against their parents and surroundings, and become irritable, introverted, eccentric and unsociable. They perform badly at school and achieve very poor academic results.

Some additional examples from other countries can also support the findings of Chinese studies. For instance, a study in America, Anne Roberson's investigation (cited in Morgan, 1996) showed that children who were cared for by their parents performed well in school and in their emotional and psychological development, while the group of children cared for by staff "turned out to be more troublesome in school (Morgan, 1996, p. 25)."

Robertson's findings are amplified in Deborah Lowe Vandell's and Mary Ann Corasaniti's (1990) work on 236 eight-year-old school children in Texas, which shows that children under maternal care were able to get better academic, interpersonal, and work-habit grades (Morgan, 1996). C. Violato's and C. Russell's (1994) large-scale synthesis of information from 88 studies (involving 22,000 children) concluded that parental care is very essential and important for the development of children (Morgan, 1996). A large-scale study on the global impact of human migration was organized by United University in seven Asian countries in 1983 (Gunatilleke, 1992). The findings of the study show that some Indian children who were left in their own countries by their parents had psychological problems (Conaco, et al., 1998). From the literature it is clear that the impacts of lack of attachment are felt across the world, not just in China.

3. Methodology

3.1 Site Selection

The site selection was guided by the desire to make the study feasible and outcomes meaningful. Ma San county, in Guangxi Province of the People's Republic of China, is a representative rural area, where many rural workers who are seeking higher-paid jobs in cities come from. This means there are many left-behind children living there. The National Middle School is the biggest middle school in Ma San County and there are 1,389 left-behind children aged 12 to 18 studying in this school. The number of left-behind children represents about 89% of the total number of students.

3.2 Samples

The samples for this study comprised left-behind children studying at Ma San National Middle School, whose basic information was collected and permission from their custodians and teachers was obtained preparatory to conducting the study. Participants were asked to complete closed-question questionnaires, with a series of questions designed to delineate their emotions, educational achievement, and psychological development. The participants invited to take part in the questionnaire were 100 randomly selected left-behind children aged 12-16, from Grades One and Two via assigning numbers for random numbers table thereby ensuring that every individual had an equal chance to be selected as "a random numbers table is the method of ensuring that every individual in the population has an equal chance of being selected for the study"(Hourser. 2009:131). This was done to minimize the sampling bias. Children who lived with their parents were not assigned numbers since the target population for this study is left-behind children. All ethical issues were considered, with anonymity stressed, consent

forms obtained, and clear explanations given to all participants.

4. Results

4.1 Basic Information of Researched Left-behind Children

The number of participants whose ages were 10 to 14 year-old accounted for the largest proportion (73%), the number of participants who were older than 14 years old made up 27%. It is fortuitous that the percentage of female participants is 52% while male participants represent 48% of the total participants.

The number of siblings was also required to provide as, apart from the social factors, family factors, such as raising more than one children, make the family bear heavier financial burden as well. As figure 2 shows, it is evident that most of the left-behind children who took part in the research have more than one sibling. Only 12 participants had no siblings. Participants with one sibling constituted 13% of all participants. By contrast, the proportion of participants with more than two siblings made up 60%, which is the largest percentage. 15% of participants had more than three siblings.

4.2 Basic Information about Parents of Researched Left-behind Children

From Table 1 we can see that the percentage of participants with both parents working in urban areas accounted for the largest proportion (71%); 42 percentage points higher than the proportion of children whose mother or father lived at home with them (29%).

Table 2 shows where the parents of the left-behind children were employed. 58% of the re-searched children's parents were working in other provinces. This result matches the information provided by local government officials: more than 50% of the parents of the left-behind children in Ma San County come home every three to five years because of the high cost of travel. In addition, 20% of participants did not know where their parents worked; this accounts for 1/5 of the total number of participants.

Table 1: Both of your parents working in cities

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	71	71.0	71.0	71.0
	No	29	29.0	29.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Q: Do you know the place where your parent(s) work(s)?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Cities in Guangxi	22	22.0	22.0	22.0
	Cities in other provinces	58	58.0	58.0	80.0
	I don't know	20	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

4.3 How Being Left At Home Affects Researched Children

From figure 1 we can see that a similar proportion of participants felt traumatized and lonely: 23% and 21%, respectively. The number of children who felt helpless and abandoned occupied 24% (15% and 9%, respectively). Obviously, children who had bad moods and emotions accounted for 68%, which is the largest proportion of all participants. In contrast, 25 children felt happy when being left in their hometown.

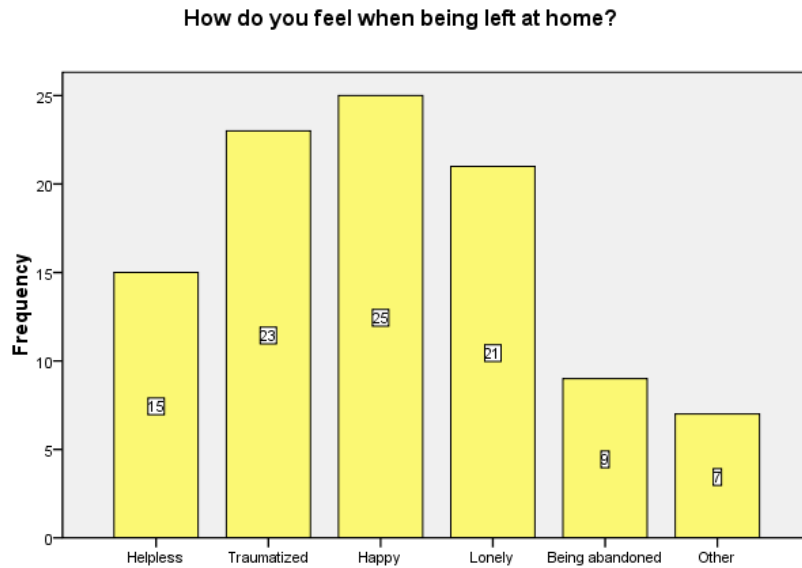


Figure 1: Q: How do you feel when being left at home?

Some previous studies suggest that negative emotions are relevant to ones' social interactions. Therefore, a "crosstabulate" was run to analyze the relationship between the number of friends and the children's emotions. It can be seen from figure 2 above that the number of friends the children had was closely related to their emotions. Specifically, participants who defined their usual emotion as irascible, depressed, or sad had no more than three friends. Most of them had none or only one friend: 14% of participants who felt irascible had one friend, and 10% of participants felt depressed most of the time. Only two participants who felt sad stated that they had three friends. In contrast, 29 participants defined their usual emotion as happy; 17 of those children had three or more friends.

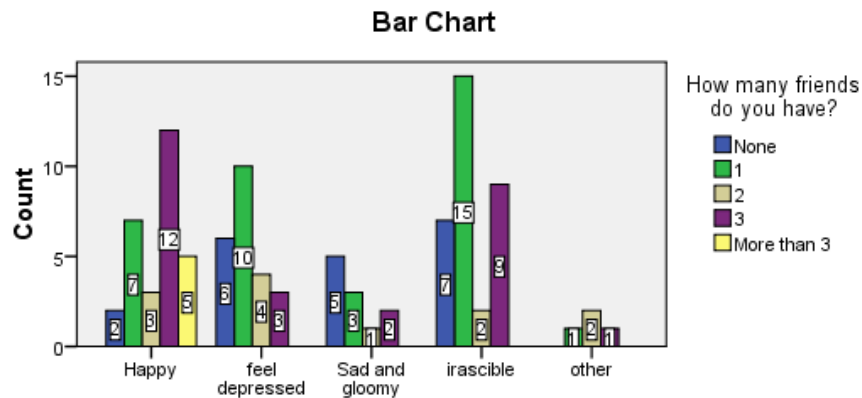


Figure 2: Q: How do you define your emotions most of the time?

A "crosstabulae" was also run to determine the joint distribution of types of emotions and who they like to play and stay with when their parents were working outside their county so that more evidence to which can show how being left in hometown affects their psychological situation can be obtained. From figure 3, participants who felt negative emotions most of the time and liked to be alone constituted 37% of the entire researched population. Only seven participants who felt happy wanted to be alone, which is significantly lower than the percentage of participants who felt negative emotions. About 69% (20/29) of the participants who felt happy liked to stay with friends, which is significantly higher than the percentage of participants who liked to stay with friends in the group of participants who had negative emotions (36%, 15/67). Only 7% of the participants stated that they liked staying with relatives, which deserves to be noticed.

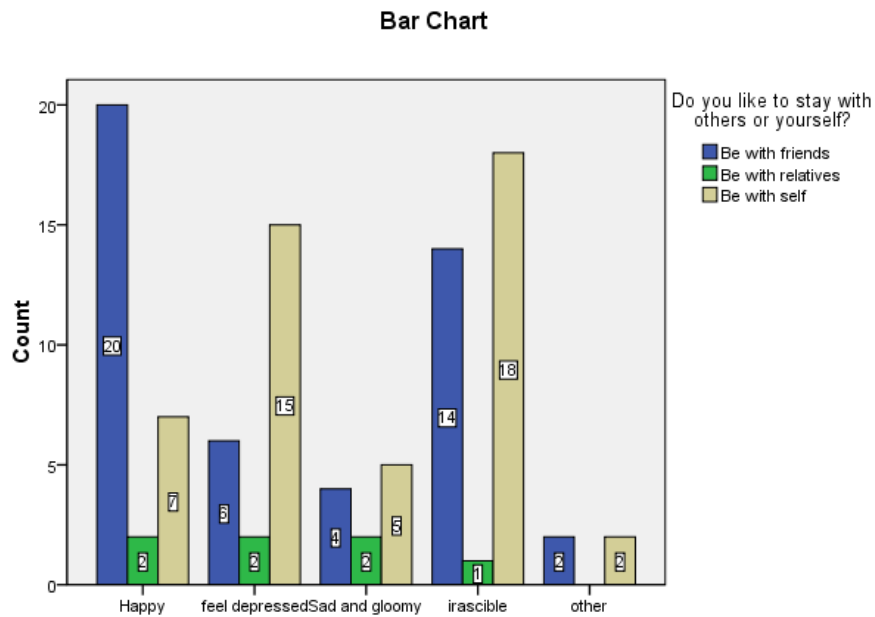


Figure 3: Q: How do you define your emotions most of the time?

4.4 How Do Their Psychological Situations Impact Their Academic Progress?

Children’s academic achievements were related to their emotions. To be more exact, most of the participants who reported having negative emotions showed average or below average academic achievement. About 49% (6/33) of participants who felt irascible had poor or very poor academic achievement; only one obtained very good achievement. It is also worth noticing that no participant who felt sad reported having very good scores and only one of them reported having good scores.

The percentage of participants with poor or very poor achievements also accounts for a certain proportion (more than 30%) of the group of participants who felt depressed. In contrast, more than 55% (16/29) of participants who felt happy most of the time reported obtaining high grades. Only one reported having very poor achievements, which is much lower than the number of participants who felt negative emotions.

According to Tang (2007), whom the left-behind children liked to be with can reflect whether they are introvert, eccentric and unsociable which means their psychological situations can be reflected. Thus, a “crosstabulate” was run to analyse how social interaction influenced their academic achievements. As shown in Table 3, the proportion of children who reported good academic achievement in the groups of participants who liked to be with their friends or relatives is much higher than in the percentage of children who liked to be alone. 23 participants who liked to be with friends or relatives reported good achievement whereas only 10 participants who liked to stay alone reported good achievement. In addition, the number of children who liked to stay with others and reported having poor academic achievement is much lower than the number of children who liked to stay alone and reported poor academic achievement. Only 17 children who liked to stay with others stated that they had poor academic achievement, while 26 children who liked to stay alone stated they had poor or very poor achievement.

Table 3: Do you like to stay with others or yourself * How do you define your study? Crosstabulation

count		How do you define your study?					Total
		good	very good	average	Poor	very poor	
Do you like to stay with others or yourself?	With friends	13	6	13	8	6	46
	With relatives	4	0	0	3	0	7
	Alone	5	5	11	18	8	47
Total		22	11	24	29	14	100

5. Discussion and Suggestions

Previous studies by Gong Zhenghua (2004) and Liu Wenyan (2005) in Sichuan Province, and Cui Li Juan (2009) considered that being separated from their parents causes most left-behind children (about 80%) to have psychological problems such as being unwilling to interact with others and related poor academic achievement. According to the findings of this research, some participants had healthy psychological conditions and good academic achievement when their parents were working in urban areas. For example, 25% of participants felt happy. Also, most of the participants (80%) stated that they had friends, and 32% of them had three or more friends. The data shows that even though a certain percentage left-behind children in Ma San County had psychological problems and poor academic achievement, there were still a number of left-behind children with considerable healthy psychological situations and satisfactory academic achievement. The situation of left-behind children in Ma San County, therefore, varies from those of left-behind children in Sichuan Province. Gong, Liu and Cui's results led to the impression that left-behind children and psychological problems and poor academic achievement go hand-in-hand. It is inaccurate to equate left-behind children with problem children with mental health issues and poor academic achievement, and generalizing about all left-behind children by only using statistics of left-behind children from one locale is inadvisable.

The findings also show that some left-behind children are unable to maintain their education or sustain their attendance. To be more exact, 27 participants were between 15 and 16 years old; this accounts for 27% of the total number of participants. According to the Nine-year Compulsory Education Law, children should begin compulsory education when they are six (Nine-year Compulsory Education Law, online). Since these participants were students in grades 1 and 2 of Ma San National Middle School, their ages should have been around 11 to 14. However, the participants' ages indicate that more than 1/4 of left-behind children are not in the normal age-range, which means that they may have quit school temporarily or failed a year and repeated it. Thus, it can be deduced that their academic progress was affected in some way, leading to a delay in their studies.

Being introverted, eccentric and unsociable are common psychological problems observed within the group of left-behind children. More precisely, the majority of children were persistently introverted and avoided interaction with other people (47%) and more than 55% had no friends or only one friend. Interaction between children and parents was also threatened since 20% of the researched left-behind children did not know where their parents worked. To some extent this reflects the lack of communication and interaction between these 20 left-behind children and their parents. This finding also supports the results of research conducted by Qiao Lihua and Duan Hongwei (2009) who suggested that approximately 64.4% of left-behind children rarely or never had intimate talks with their parents when they were at home.

According to Junlin (2008), lacking parental love, care, guidance and help is the root cause of the psychological problems amongst left-behind children. Her ideas are supported by the findings of this research. 58% of the researched children's parents were working in other provinces, which meant they worked at least one day's travel away from their homes. They rarely returned home, in order to save money. Left-behind children showed that they felt de-pressed, upset and unhappy about their parents' absence and some even felt abandoned by their parents. 76% of participants stated that they missed their parents. When asked how they felt about being left in their hometown, participants who had negative feelings made up the largest proportion (59%). Participants who felt traumatic and lonely represented 23% and 21% respectively, and children who felt helpless and abandoned occupied 15% and 9% respectively.

Between the ages of 11 and 14, children are in a period of psychological and intellectual development, regardless of whether they have been left behind or not (Zhang, 2009). In this special time period, parents are the attachment figures that can fulfil the love, care and help children demand in order to develop healthy emotional and psychological situations (Ains-worth, 1962). Sigmund Freud (1920) theorized that the human psyche could be divided into three parts: id, ego, and super-ego. Children between 11 and 14 are in the process of establishing a moralized super-ego. If their psychological demands cannot be fulfilled and they cannot grow up with parental love and care, psychological problems can easily manifest during this period (Tang, 2007).

Furthermore, the attachment theory and "maternal deprivation" (Andry, 1962) concepts are helpful for explain the situation. Parents are attachment figures of children and love, care and help coming from them are essential for children's psychological development. "Family [separation and] disruption can lead to depression in children (Caplan and Douglas, 1969 cited in Rutter, 1981, p.55)." "Maternal deprivation" will pose a traumatic influence on children's emotional and psychological development,

since parental love and care are basic needs for children's emotional development (Freud, cited in Gao, 2008).

Most of the participants who felt negative emotions had average or below average academic achievement. Approximately 49% (6/33) of participants who felt irascible had poor or very poor academic achievements; only one reported very good achievement. No participant who felt sad reported very good scores. The proportion of participants reporting poor or very poor achievement also makes up more than 30% of the group of participants who felt depressed. By contrast, more than 55% (16/29) of participants who felt happy most of the time had high scores. Only one reported very poor achievement, which is much lower than the number of participants who felt negative emotions.

In addition, the proportion of children with good academic achievement in the groups of participants who liked to be with their friends or relatives is much higher than in the percentage of children who liked to be alone. 23% of participants who liked being with friends or relatives reported good achievement, while only 10 participants who liked to stay alone reported good achievement. Conversely, the number of children who liked being among others and reported poor academic achievements (17) is much lower than the number of children who liked to stay alone and reported poor academic achievement (26).

Therefore, it can be inferred that how well students perform academically is closely related to and influenced by their emotions and psychological condition. Provided that children can study with positively and with healthy psychological conditions, they are more likely to obtain good or satisfactory academic achievement rather than poor or very poor scores. Various psychological problems make left-behind children unable to concentrate on their studies, becoming a cause of low academic achievement. Low academic achievement then makes them feel inferior and lowers confidence, which causes other psychological problems such as anxiety, eccentricity and unsociability (Zhang, and Xie. 2008). This becomes a vicious cycle in which left-behind children are trapped.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Some of the findings support the results of other research. For example, many psychological problems such as being introverted, eccentric, unsocial, irritable, irascible, and finding it hard to control their emotions were found within the researched left-behind children. They also lacked confidence and felt inferior. Their academic achievements were also demonstrated to be influenced by their unhealthy psychological situations. However, some other findings contradicted previous findings in other research. For instance, it is wrong to equate left-behind children with children who have mental problems and poor academic achievement, since the findings in this study show that a certain percentage of left-behind children have healthy mental conditions and can obtain good academic achievements.

Three recommendations have been developed from the study's findings. Firstly, establishing nurture groups, as many schools in foreign countries do, should be considered to provide students with a secure, safe and comfortable environment that provides the conditions necessary for them to develop emotionally, socially and cognitively (Boxall, 2007; Cooper and Tikmaz, 2007). Secondly, better communication between the relatives that left-behind children live with is also helpful. If children can share their experiences with other family members, they can provide what left-behind children need. Finally, making the household registration policy more flexible. If parents could take their children with them when working in ur-ban areas, and access various social services and facilities without being limited by this policy, children could continue living with their parents.

Left-behind children are the next generation of the rural population as well as the next generation of China. Their personalities will have a direct impact on the development of rural areas and even the whole country. Education is one of the most important ways to help rural populations develop rural areas. If an individual's academic life has been negatively influenced by psychological problems, the slow development of rural areas may ensue. This may slow the development of China as well. Therefore, more research regarding left-behind children must be conducted, providing the basis of more effective and feasible solutions that can help children who suffer from mental and academic problems. Left-behind children should have the right to enjoy their lives and study like children who grow up with parental love, care, guidance and help, and they deserve the support of society.

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