

Addressing Educational Barriers Faced By Left-Behind Children in Rural China

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ABSTRACT

Rapid internal migration has reshaped family structures in China, giving rise to a significant population of left-behind children—those who remain in rural communities while their parents seek work in distant cities. This study explores the educational challenges these children face and identifies strategies that may support their learning and emotional development. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 12 rural left-behind children and 5 educators, the research reveals that barriers exist across multiple domains, including emotional insecurity, limited parental guidance, school resource constraints, and structural inequities. Many children report feeling unsupported or misunderstood in school, particularly in environments with understaffed faculties and scarce counseling resources. While some schools offer academic remediation, few provide integrated supports that link families, teachers, and communities. Despite these challenges, the study also identifies sources of resilience—including school belonging, peer encouragement, and teacher emotional support. The findings call for more holistic interventions that connect home–school communication, community-based mentoring, and systemic investment in rural education. Recommendations include strengthening rural teacher training, promoting regular parent–child contact, and scaling up school–community partnerships. By centering children’s lived experiences, the study contributes practical insights for policymakers and educators seeking to reduce educational disparities and improve learning outcomes for vulnerable rural populations.

Keywords: left-behind children, rural education, educational barriers, school engagement, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Rapid internal migration has reshaped family life across China, creating a large cohort of “left-behind children” who remain in rural communities while one or both parents work elsewhere. UNICEF’s country monitoring reports indicate that 66.93 million children were classified as left-behind and 71.09 million as migrant children in 2020, underscoring the scale of mobility-related childhoods and their implications for education (UNICEF, 2022, 2023). By contrast, statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs focusing narrowly on rural left-behind children documented 6.97 million in 2018, with subsequent analyses citing higher counts in later years—differences that largely reflect definitions and coverage (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2018). These distinctions matter for both prevalence estimates and policy targeting.

National policy defines the problem space and the state’s response. The State Council’s Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of the Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas (2016) established a multi-stakeholder system—family, government, school, and society—and affirmed children’s rights to basic public services such as education (State Council of the PRC, 2016). This framework continues to guide provincial and county implementation.

Educational barriers for left-behind children in rural areas arise at both system and school levels. Despite sustained central investment—e.g., the Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015–2020) and the long-running Special-

Post Teacher Program to recruit and retain teachers in under-served regions—rural schools still face difficulties in staffing stability, subject coverage, and guidance capacity (MOE, 2021; State Council, 2015–2020; Oxford Research Encyclopedia, 2020). These constraints intersect with uneven resource allocation and limited school-based student services, contributing to persistent urban–rural disparities in opportunity and outcomes.

At the child level, separation from parents is consistently associated with elevated risks to mental health and socio-emotional development, which in turn undermine motivation and school engagement (Hu & Mi, 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

Program responses have expanded, yet evaluations suggest supports remain fragmented, often emphasizing either academic remediation or psychosocial care rather than integrated designs that connect families, schools, and communities.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how left-behind children perceive education, which barriers (emotional, familial, school, and systemic) most hinder their engagement, and which strategies show promise for improving participation and learning. In line with contemporary scholarship, the study seeks to examine the interplay of individual, familial, institutional, and community-level dynamics that shape their educational outcomes. This study adopted a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of left-behind children and their educators. The goal was to capture their lived experiences and generate practice-oriented implications for local authorities and schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Disparities and Structural Constraints

Left-behind children in rural China face marked educational disadvantages. These stem from systemic inequalities—such as hukou-based restrictions, unequal resource allocation, inadequate infrastructure, and persistent teacher shortages (Hannum et al., 2022). Rural school consolidation policies, though intended to improve education through economies of scale, have in some cases inadvertently reduced access for girls and ethnic minority students, increasing dropout risks (Hannum et al., 2022).

Psychosocial Well Being and Risk Behavior

Meta-analytic findings reveal elevated rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and behavioral problems among left-behind children, especially in rural contexts (Wu et al., 2019). A community-based intervention in Guangdong demonstrated meaningful reductions in emotional symptoms, peer difficulties, and hyperactivity among left-behind preschoolers following a structured family–community workshop program (Zhang et al., 2020).

Intervention Models and Integrated Support

A scoping review of interventions for left-behind children in mainland China found that programs emphasizing mental health—such as group activities, sports, and holistic approaches—yielded significant benefits, but most lacked sustained impact due to fragmentation in design (Wang et al., 2020). Similarly, more recent reviews highlight the need for integrated approaches combining academic tutoring, psychological support, family involvement, and community-based mechanisms (Li, 2023).

Educational Expectations, Communication, and Resilience

Using China Education Panel Survey data, recent research shows that parental migration disrupts parent–child communication, indirectly lowering children’s educational expectations; however, robust communication can buffer these effects (Xu & Fu, 2024; Nature Social Science, 2024). In a complementary multisystemic analysis, academic resilience among rural left-behind adolescents was significantly shaped by support across individual, family, school, and community systems.

Summary

This review highlights that structural disadvantage—particularly unequal resource allocation and hukou-related constraints—continue to restrict educational access for rural left-behind children. These systemic conditions intersect with heightened emotional and behavioral vulnerabilities, which further undermine school participation and learning. Evidence also indicates that the most effective responses integrate psychosocial care with academic support while actively engaging families and community resources, rather than relying on isolated interventions. Finally, consistent parent–child communication, reinforced by coherent system-level support, plays a pivotal role in shaping children’s resilience and sustaining their educational expectations. Despite these advances, there remains a gap in empirical work that explicitly unpacks how individual, familial, institutional, and community dynamics interact to shape educational outcomes for left behind children. The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the multilevel interplay influencing both learning participation and psychosocial resilience.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative design using semi structured interviews as the sole data collection method. Such interviews offer a balance between structured guidance and flexibility, allowing participants to express rich narratives while aligning with the study’s core themes (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Knott et al., 2022).

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants with direct experience of being rural left behind children, as well as educators familiar with their circumstances (Hennink & Kaiser, 2020). Recruitment targeted children aged approximately 10–16 and local teachers, aiming for saturation with around 10–15 participants per group.

A total of 17 participants were interviewed, comprising 12 left-behind children (7 girls and 5 boys) aged 10 to 16 from three different rural schools, and 5 teachers (3 female, 2 male) teaching Chinese, Mathematics, and Moral Education, with an average teaching experience of 11 years. The sampling process concluded once thematic saturation was achieved. Thematic saturation was determined after the eleventh participant, when no new codes or themes emerged in subsequent interviews. The primary themes identified included emotional distress, academic disengagement, resource constraints, and adaptive strategies. These themes were consistently mentioned across both child and teacher groups, indicating data sufficiency. The saturation point was established after iterative transcript review and code comparison during analysis.

Interview Procedure

Individual semi structured interviews were conducted in schools and village settings. Children were asked open-ended questions relating to their perceptions of education, emotional well-being, and the influence of family and community dynamics. Teachers were queried on observed educational challenges, support practices, and systemic constraints. The interview guide followed frameworks previously used in studies of left behind populations (Gao et al., 2022; Care for Left Behind Children, 2017).

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary. Data were coded thematically using NVivo software. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking and peer debriefing (Hennink & Kaiser, 2020).

Thematic saturation was determined after the eleventh participant, when no new codes or themes emerged in subsequent interviews. The primary themes identified included emotional distress, academic disengagement, resource constraints, and adaptive strategies. These themes were consistently mentioned across both child and teacher groups, indicating data sufficiency.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant education authorities. Parental consent and child assent were acquired, and confidentiality maintained by anonymizing all personal identifiers.

FINDINGS

Emotional Distress and Academic Disengagement

In-depth semi-structured interviews with left-behind children reveal pervasive emotional hardship. Many children described feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and a weakened connection to school life, especially after prolonged separation from migrating parents (Gao et al., 2022; Jyothi et al., citing Wu et al., 2019 findings).

“I miss my parents all the time. When they don’t call, I feel like no one really cares about me.” (Child 4)

“Sometimes I feel sad in class, but I don’t know how to tell the teacher. So I just stay quiet.” (Child 1)

These negative emotions were accompanied by academic disengagement, marked by poor learning habits and diminished school satisfaction (Wu et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2022).

Structural Resource Constraints

Teachers and children repeatedly emphasized inadequate school infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and limited extracurricular activities in rural settings.

“Our school library has very few books, and we hardly ever have art or music classes.” (Teacher 3)

“Sometimes one teacher has to teach three subjects. We do not have enough staff.” (Teacher 1)

These systemic deficiencies were recognized as major impediments to student motivation and learning continuity (Gao et al., 2022; Hesketh, T. et al., 2017).

Low Motivation and Limited Academic Expectations

Participants noted that uncertainty about future prospects dampened academic ambition.

“I don’t really know why I study. Maybe I’ll just work like my uncle after middle school.” (Child 9)

“They don’t see much future, so they stop trying hard. Even homework is not seen as important.” (Teacher 5)

Many children lacked clear educational aspirations, viewing schooling as a routine rather than a transformative opportunity. Teachers corroborated this, stating that reduced family oversight and support led students to deprioritize homework and class engagement (Hesketh, T. et al., 2017; Gao et al., 2022).

Emerging Adaptive Strategies

Despite the challenges, some children displayed resilience by adopting adaptive coping strategies.

“I started studying with my friend every evening—it makes it less boring.” (Child 6)

“Some students begin setting small goals, like finishing their work before dinner.” (Teacher 1).

These included self-directed study habits, peer learning group participation, and incremental goal-setting behaviors linked with positive social adjustment and emerging independence (Turn-key themes from social adjustment study, paralleling findings in MDPI study) (Xiao, 2015; MDPI social adjustment study, 2022).

Stakeholder-Identified Support Needs

Teachers, caregivers, and community members emphasized several key areas of support that could improve the educational experiences of left-behind children.

“If we had more afterschool programs, they would have something to enjoy and not feel so alone.” (Teacher 2)

“Many grandparents don’t know how to help, so we need volunteers to talk to the kids more.” (Caregiver 1)

These include implementing targeted extracurricular activities that foster both academic interest and peer connection, as well as enhancing teacher mentorship and professional development to strengthen both instructional quality and emotional responsiveness. Emotional support services such as counseling and peer support groups were also seen as crucial in helping children cope with feelings of loneliness and anxiety. In addition, stakeholders highlighted the importance of building stronger community and parental engagement structures, including regular remote communication between children and migrant parents and the establishment of local volunteer networks to offer consistent care and guidance (Gao et al., 2022; Hesketh, T. et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study explored how rural left-behind children perceive education, the barriers affecting their academic engagement, and the multilevel strategies they use to persist. Through semi structured interviews, participants vividly conveyed the emotional struggles arising from parental absence—feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and disengagement from schooling. These narratives align with broader empirical evidence demonstrating higher rates of depression, anxiety, and behavioral issues among left-behind children compared to non left-behind peers (Hannum et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2019).

The findings of this study underscore how barriers at the institutional, school, family, and community levels do not operate in isolation, but interact in complex and mutually reinforcing ways to shape the lived experiences of left-behind children. For example, a lack of qualified teachers and limited extracurricular opportunities at school not only constrain academic support, but also make it difficult to offer adequate emotional or psychological counseling. As a result, many children experiencing loneliness or anxiety have no trusted adult to confide in, leading to deepened emotional distress and a greater sense of alienation from the school environment. Simultaneously, parental migration weakens home–school communication and leaves caregivers—often grandparents—less able to provide homework guidance or emotional support. When community support structures are limited, this chain of disadvantage is rarely broken. These interconnected factors ultimately contribute to reduced motivation, academic disengagement, and lower educational aspirations, as vividly described by participants in this research. The multilevel interplay between resource scarcity, limited support systems, and disrupted relationships thus forms a self-reinforcing cycle that perpetuates educational and psychosocial vulnerabilities among rural left-behind children in China (Hannum et al., 2022; Xiao, 2015).

Despite these challenges, some children showcased resilience through adaptive strategies including peer learning groups, intrinsic goal setting, and informal support networks. These emergent behaviors highlight the agency of left behind children when coping with adversity.

Participants also underscored the need for holistic, integrated support: combining academic tutoring, psychological counseling, teacher mentorship, and strengthened family and community engagement. This echo calls for interventions that bridge family, school, and community support systems (Gao et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2020).

Overall, the study offers nuanced insights into the intersection of individual experiences and institutional contexts. Policymakers and educators should consider designs that support emotional well being alongside academic skill-building, anchored in a multilevel, child-centered framework. Attention to systemic investment

(teacher training, resource equity), psychosocial support, and sustained community involvement can help foster educational resilience and motivation among rural left behind children in China.

Breaking this cycle will require coordinated, multi-sectoral interventions that address not only school resources and teacher training, but also family engagement and community support mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and the broader literature on interventions for rural left-behind children, this section proposes targeted, evidence-based recommendations across four interconnected domains: education infrastructure, psychosocial support, family engagement, and community school collaboration.

Strengthen Educational Infrastructure and Teacher Capacity

Enhance teacher training and retention in rural areas, especially through incentives under the Special-Post Teacher Program and guidelines by central authorities (Policy-Oriented Examination, 2024).

Expand extracurricular programming such as academic clubs, tutoring, arts, and sports, these initiatives have proven effective at improving learning engagement and emotional resilience (scoping review interventions, 2024).

Boost Family Communication and Educational Expectations

Promote regular parent–child communication channels, including structured digital check-ins and scheduled phone calls—this foster stronger educational expectations among left-behind children and buffers the impact of parental absence (Mediation model study, 2024).

Offer parental communication workshops (aimed at caregivers and grandparents) to improve emotional support and reinforce educational aspirations (Community-based model, 2020).

Expand Psychosocial Support via Community-Based Interventions

Implement community-based family workshop programs, shown to significantly reduce emotional symptoms and social adaptation difficulties among preschool-aged left-behind children (Frontiers in Public Health, 2020).

Scale up Children’s Clubs or centers offering structured peer support, creative activities, and caring adult guidance—found feasible and acceptable in rural China settings (realist evaluation, 2017).

Promote School–Community–Family Collaboration

Foster multi-sector coordination by integrating resources from education, social welfare, and local government to deliver cohesive services aligned with State Council and UNICEF guidance (UNICEF press release, 2016; Policy analysis, 2024).

Encourage locally adapted stakeholder forums where caregivers, teachers, and community volunteers co design support activities and monitor their progress.

Foster Equity Through Policy and Coverage Expansion

Extend educational and wellbeing programs to all rural children—not only those identified as left-behind to close broader gaps and level educational opportunity (Stanford/Health Affairs review, 2015).

Address structural equity through hukou reform and resource redistribution ensuring rural schools receive stable funding and oversight (Policy-oriented recommendations, 2024).

LIMITATIONS

This research is subject to several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, comprising only 12 left-behind children and 5 teachers from three rural schools in a single region. As such, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all left-behind children in rural China, especially given the diversity of rural contexts and family circumstances nationwide. The regional focus may limit the extent to which unique local factors—such as specific school policies or community resources—shape experiences and outcomes. Therefore, while this study offers valuable insights, its conclusions should be interpreted as context-specific and not representative of the entire population of rural left-behind children in China. Future research with larger and more geographically diverse samples would help to validate and extend these findings.

To translate these recommendations into action, we suggest adopting a phased implementation approach. For example, local education authorities could initiate a pilot program in a selected rural county or group of schools, focusing on integrating teacher training, extracurricular expansion, parent–child communication initiatives, and community-based psychosocial support. The pilot should be collaboratively designed with input from local stakeholders—including educators, caregivers, and community leaders—to ensure contextual relevance and community buy-in. Progress and outcomes can be systematically evaluated through mixed-methods monitoring, including both quantitative indicators (e.g., attendance, academic performance, well-being surveys) and qualitative feedback from children and teachers. Based on pilot results, successful interventions can then be refined and scaled up to benefit a broader population of left-behind children across different regions.

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