

Left-Behind but Not Forgotten: Challenges and Strategies in the Educational Experiences of Rural Children in a Chinese County

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Abstract

Left-behind children, those residing in rural areas while their parents migrate to urban centers for work, represent a significant demographic in China. These children face unique educational challenges stemming from parental absence, inadequate caregiving, and systemic disparities in rural education. Despite existing research on the psychological and social issues faced by left-behind children, limited attention has been given to the interplay of individual, familial, institutional, and community factors shaping their educational experiences. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the educational challenges and potential strategies to support left-behind children in Zhuzhai County, China, using an exploratory qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews with 10 left-behind children and 9 teachers were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed critical challenges, including inadequate school resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, emotional and psychological struggles, limited academic motivation, and the burden of caregiving roles. Participants emphasized the need for targeted strategies such as extracurricular learning initiatives, teacher mentorship programs, emotional support services, and stronger parental and community engagement. The study highlights the importance of equitable resource allocation, professional development for rural teachers, and integrated emotional support systems. By addressing these systemic barriers, policymakers, educators, and communities can create inclusive learning environments that better support the academic and personal growth of left-behind children. These findings provide valuable insights to inform educational reforms and targeted interventions in rural China.

Keywords: Left-Behind Children, Educational Experiences, Rural Areas, China

Introduction

The phenomenon of left-behind children—those who remain in rural areas while their parents migrate to urban centers for work—has become a pressing social issue in China. With rapid urbanization and economic development over recent decades, millions of rural-to-urban migrant workers have sought better livelihoods in cities, leaving their children in the care of grandparents, relatives, or even to fend for themselves (Sun, 2024). According to recent reports, there are over 9 million left-behind children in China, with most of them residing in

economically underdeveloped rural areas (China Foundation for Rural Development & Beijing Normal University China Institute of Education and Social Development, 2023). These children face unique challenges that significantly affect their well-being, development, and educational experiences (Li, 2023). Their situation underscores the growing divide between urban and rural areas in China (Pan, 2024), despite ongoing governmental efforts to promote balanced development and equitable access to education through policies such as the Compulsory Education Law and rural teacher training initiatives.

Education is a critical pathway for rural children, including left-behind children, to break the cycle of poverty and improve their future prospects. However, left-behind children often struggle with barriers that hinder their educational progress. These challenges include emotional distress due to prolonged separation from parents, inadequate caregiving arrangements, limited access to quality educational resources, and a lack of social support (Chen & Guo, 2024; Dai, 2023; Zhang, 2021). Moreover, rural schools frequently face issues such as insufficiently trained teachers, outdated curricula, and limited extracurricular opportunities, compounding the difficulties left-behind children encounter (Lv, 2021; Yang, 2023). Such challenges are particularly acute in less developed counties, where systemic inequalities are most pronounced.

Despite a growing body of literature addressing the plight of left-behind children, much of the existing research focuses on their psychological well-being and health outcomes (Li, 2023; Liu, 2023; Zhang, 2021), with relatively less attention paid to the factors influencing their educational experiences. The intersection of personal, familial, school, and community factors shaping these children's access to and success in education remains underexplored (Yang, 2023), particularly at the county level, where local policies and resources play a crucial role. Furthermore, few studies have examined the impact of recent educational reforms and targeted poverty alleviation initiatives on left-behind children's schooling (Dai, 2023). These gaps highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the educational challenges faced by left-behind children and the systemic factors that influence their academic trajectories.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by left-behind children in a Chinese county and to identify the key strategies that can improve their educational experiences. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the interplay of individual, familial, institutional, and community-level dynamics that shape their educational outcomes (Hu & Mi, 2024; Wang et al., 2023). By doing so, the research not only sheds light on the complex barriers these children face but also offers insights into how educational policies and practices can be tailored to better support their needs. The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to ongoing discussions on rural education reform and equitable development in China. By focusing on a county-level context, this research provides a localized perspective that can inform targeted interventions and policymaking.

Literature Review

Left-behind children in China refer to those who remain in rural areas while one or both of their parents migrate to urban centers for employment (He, 2024). This phenomenon emerged as a result of China's rapid industrialization and urbanization (Li & Zhou, 2023), coupled with the household registration (*hukou*) system that limits rural migrants' access to social services, including education and healthcare, in cities (Wang, 2024). These systemic

factors compel many parents to leave their children behind in the care of grandparents or other relatives, creating a unique demographic group with distinct social, emotional, and educational experiences. Estimates suggest that there are over 9 million left-behind children in China, predominantly concentrated in rural areas with high rates of labor outmigration (China Foundation for Rural Development & Beijing Normal University China Institute of Education and Social Development, 2023). These children often live in villages with limited resources, minimal social infrastructure, and schools that face significant challenges in providing quality education. The prevalence of left-behind children reflects broader economic disparities between urban and rural regions (Ye, 2020), where employment opportunities are scarce, forcing rural adults to seek work in cities.

The educational experience of left-behind children is closely linked to the absence of their migrant parents, which often leaves them without adequate academic support at home. Caregivers, such as grandparents, may lack the educational background or resources to assist effectively, leading to reduced motivation and weaker school performance (Chen & Guo, 2024; Wang, 2024). Emotional challenges from parental separation can further hinder their focus and engagement in learning (Zhao, 2020). Rural schools, where most left-behind children are enrolled, often face systemic deficiencies, including inadequate funding (Yang, 2022), a shortage of qualified teachers (Zeng & Cheng, 2022), and outdated resources (Zhang & Li, 2024). These factors exacerbate the educational disparities, contributing to lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates among left-behind children compared to their peers (Li et al., 2015). While some children manage to succeed academically, their success often depends on external support, which remains unevenly distributed, underscoring the urgent need for targeted policies and interventions.

The sociocultural context of rural China further influences the educational experiences of left-behind children. Deeply rooted traditional values, which emphasize familial obligations, often place these children in caregiving roles for younger siblings or elderly grandparents, roles that frequently compete with their time and energy for schoolwork (Pan, 2024; Xu, 2020). This dual responsibility not only affects their academic performance but also contributes to emotional stress and fatigue (Zhang, 2020), further hindering their ability to focus on education. In addition, local community attitudes toward education can significantly influence the level of encouragement and resources available to left-behind children.

In some rural areas, education is highly valued as a pathway to social mobility (Duan & Jiang, 2022; Fan, 2020), prompting schools and caregivers to provide strong support. However, in other communities, economic hardships or traditional beliefs may deprioritize education, especially for girls, in favor of early entry into the workforce or household responsibilities (Wei & Wang, 2020; Yang, 2022). This dynamic underscores the necessity for localized interventions that address the unique cultural and economic realities of rural communities.

In response to the educational challenges faced by left-behind children, the Chinese government has implemented policies to improve their schooling experience. The “Two Exemptions and One Subsidy” policy aims to reduce financial burdens by waiving tuition and providing free textbooks for compulsory education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, n.d.). This initiative has been instrumental in increasing school enrollment and reducing dropout rates among disadvantaged children. Complementing this, rural

teacher training programs and targeted subsidies aim to attract and retain qualified educators in remote areas, where teaching resources are often scarce (Meng & Gao, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these policies has been mixed, with notable gaps in their implementation and impact. Financial assistance, while crucial, addresses only surface-level barriers and often fails to tackle deeper systemic issues such as outdated curricula and a lack of individualized support systems (Lv, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2024). For example, many rural schools continue to struggle with limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and an absence of modern teaching methodologies.

These deficiencies undermine the quality of education and disproportionately affect left-behind children, who rely heavily on school-based support due to the absence of parental guidance. Furthermore, existing policies frequently overlook the emotional and social dimensions of education, which are critical to academic success (Wang et al., 2023). While some schools have piloted initiatives such as peer counseling and extracurricular activities to address these needs (Chen & Guo, 2024; Liu, 2023), such efforts remain sporadic and insufficiently integrated into broader policy frameworks.

Despite significant progress in understanding and addressing the challenges faced by left-behind children, critical gaps in the literature and policy implementation remain. Existing research has predominantly focused on broad trends and systemic barriers, offering limited insight into the nuanced, localized experiences of left-behind children within specific rural contexts. For example, while studies have highlighted the role of parental absence (Chen & Guo, 2024; Dai, 2023), school deficiencies (He, 2024; Zhang & Li, 2024), and sociocultural factors (Wei & Wang, 2020; Yang, 2022), few have explored how these challenges interact dynamically to influence individual educational trajectories.

Considering that most previous research has adopted a quantitative approach, especially using survey methods (Chen & Guo, 2024; Li, 2023; Wang et al., 2023), another notable gap is the lack of qualitative research capturing the voices and lived experiences of left-behind children, which are crucial for designing interventions that resonate with their specific needs and aspirations. These gaps, therefore, justify the design of the present study.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Zhuzhai County, located in Jiangsu Province, China. Zhuzhai is representative of rural areas experiencing high rates of parental outmigration due to economic disparities between urban and rural regions. The county's socio-economic profile is characterized by its reliance on agricultural production and labor migration. Many children in Zhuzhai are classified as left-behind, living under the care of grandparents or other relatives while their parents work in urban centers. The educational infrastructure in the county faces challenges common to rural China, such as limited resources and a shortage of qualified teachers, making it an ideal site to investigate the educational experiences of left-behind children.

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design, which is particularly suitable for gaining in-depth insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of participants. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to delve into the complexities of human experiences that are often difficult to quantify (Sensing, 2022). In the context of

left-behind children, understanding the interplay between emotional, social, and educational challenges requires a method that can capture subjective realities, personal narratives, and contextual influences. Unlike quantitative methods, which are limited to numerical data and predefined variables, qualitative research offers the flexibility to explore participants' perspectives in their own words, uncovering hidden layers of meaning that might otherwise be overlooked. The exploratory nature of the design was especially appropriate for this study, given the limited research on the specific factors influencing the educational experiences of left-behind children in rural China. By engaging directly with participants, the study was able to identify patterns, themes, and nuances that extend beyond what can be measured by standardized instruments (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2018). This approach also allowed the researcher to adapt to emergent findings and probe deeper into areas of interest as they arose during the interviews.

The study involved both left-behind children and school teachers from Zhuzhai County in Anhui Province. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants were directly relevant to the research objectives and could provide valuable insights into the educational experiences and challenges faced by left-behind children (Hu & Zhou, 2024). This sampling method was chosen because it allows the deliberate selection of individuals who have specific knowledge or experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enhancing the richness and relevance of the data collected (Wu & Thompson, 2021). The inclusion criteria for left-behind children required that participants have one or both parents working in urban areas and be enrolled in local schools within Zhuzhai County.

This ensured that the children were directly affected by the phenomenon of parental migration and were representative of the target population. Teachers were selected based on their firsthand experience teaching and interacting with left-behind children in both classroom and extracurricular settings. Inclusion criteria for teachers included a minimum of three years of teaching experience in Zhuzhai County, familiarity with the educational challenges faced by left-behind children, and active involvement in strategies or interventions aimed at supporting these students. Consequently, 10 left-behind children and 9 school teachers, a sample size satisfactory for qualitative saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2020), were recruited with informed consent, whose demographic information is in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Cohort	Age Range	Gender	Years of Schooling/Teaching Experience
left-behind children	10-16	male: 60% (n = 6) female: 40% (n = 4)	4-10
teachers	25-42	male: 33% (n = 3) female: 67% (n = 6)	3-12

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary research instrument for this study. This format allowed the researchers to delve deeply into the lived experiences of left-behind children and the perspectives of their teachers, while also ensuring that the discussions

remained aligned with the study's objectives (Sensing, 2022). The interview protocol was adapted from previous research on rural education and left-behind children in China (e.g., Wang, 2024; Wang et al., 2023) to ensure its relevance and validity in addressing the specific context of Zhuzhai County.

Separate interview protocols were developed for the two participant groups to address their unique perspectives. For left-behind children, the questions focused on topics such as academic support, interactions with caregivers, relationships with teachers and peers, emotional well-being, and perceived challenges in school. Example questions included, "Who helps you with your homework at home?" and "What makes it difficult for you to focus on your studies?" For teachers, the interviews addressed themes such as their perceptions of the academic and emotional challenges faced by left-behind children, strategies used to support these students, and the broader systemic issues affecting education in rural areas.

Example questions included, "What challenges do left-behind children typically face in your classroom?" and "How do you support these children to succeed academically?" The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Mandarin to ensure participants could express themselves comfortably in their native language. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the participant's availability and the depth of the discussion. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent.

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, which provided a structured framework for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within the data. The analysis involved the following steps: familiarization with the data, open coding to label segments of text, axial coding to group related codes into broader categories, and selective coding to refine and integrate themes into cohesive narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). NVivo software was utilized to assist with data organization, code management, and visualization, ensuring a systematic and transparent analytical process. Regular team discussions were held to cross-check interpretations and validate findings and enhance the credibility and rigor of the analysis. This process enabled the identification of key themes that captured the complex educational experiences and challenges faced by left-behind children in rural China. An endeavor was also made to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, including member checking, triangulation, and maintaining an audit trail.

Findings

Challenges Faced by Left-Behind Children

Inadequate School Resources

The study revealed significant resource constraints in rural schools attended by left-behind children, severely limiting their educational opportunities. Participants highlighted the lack of funding as a fundamental barrier, with schools often unable to afford essential teaching aids, modern classroom equipment, or adequate infrastructure. Teachers reported working with outdated textbooks and limited access to digital resources, which hindered their ability to deliver engaging and effective lessons. Extracurricular programs, crucial for holistic development and fostering social skills, were notably absent or poorly implemented in these schools. Both teachers and students emphasized the scarcity of enrichment activities such as sports, arts, and academic clubs, which could have provided much-needed outlets for creative expression and stress relief. Furthermore, overcrowded classrooms and insufficient staffing

further compounded the issue, making it difficult for teachers to offer personalized attention or innovative teaching methods. These findings underscore the pressing need for targeted investment and policy reforms to address the systemic inequities in rural education, ensuring that left-behind children receive a learning experience that equips them for future success.

“Our school doesn’t have a library, and the books we use are old... Sometimes, I want to learn more about science or other topics, but there’s nothing here to help me.” (Children)

“We try our best with the [limited] resources, but without proper funding or updated materials, it’s hard to keep the students engaged or provide them with a competitive education.” (Teacher)

Shortage of Qualified Teachers

The findings revealed a significant shortage of qualified and experienced teachers in rural schools, which adversely impacted the quality of education for left-behind children. Many teachers lacked specialized training or experience in addressing the diverse academic and emotional needs of their students, particularly those of left-behind children. Additionally, high turnover rates among rural teaching staff disrupted continuity in instruction and mentorship. The lack of consistent and skilled educators often resulted in overcrowded classrooms, where individualized attention and support were minimal. Teachers frequently expressed frustration over their inability to meet the unique challenges faced by left-behind children due to insufficient professional development opportunities and limited institutional support. Left-behind children, on the other hand, reported feeling neglected or unsupported in their learning environment, with some mentioning that teachers seemed too overwhelmed to address their questions or concerns.

This shortage further widened the educational gap between rural and urban schools, leaving left-behind children at a disadvantage in terms of both academic achievement and personal growth. The findings emphasize the critical need for targeted recruitment strategies, enhanced teacher training programs, and incentives to retain qualified educators in rural areas to bridge the disparities in educational quality.

“Our teacher changes almost every year, and some of them don’t really know how to explain things clearly. When I don’t understand something, I don’t feel comfortable asking for help because they’re always so busy.” (Children)

“There’s a lot of pressure here because we don’t have enough teachers to handle all the students, let alone provide individual support... Many of us are not trained to deal with the emotional and academic struggles of left-behind children, which makes our work even harder.” (Teacher)

Emotional and Psychological Challenges

Emotional and psychological challenges were a recurring theme among left-behind children, with many expressing feelings of abandonment and loneliness due to prolonged separation from their migrant parents. These emotions often had a direct impact on their academic focus and classroom engagement. Children frequently described missing parental guidance and

support, which led to a lack of motivation and diminished confidence in their abilities. Teachers also observed that some students appeared withdrawn, struggled with self-discipline, and found it difficult to concentrate on their studies. The emotional distress was further compounded by the limited availability of counseling or psychological support services in rural schools. While some schools attempted to address these issues through extracurricular activities or peer support programs, these efforts were often insufficient in meeting the children's complex emotional needs. As a result, emotional challenges not only hindered academic performance but also contributed to a broader sense of disengagement from the school environment.

"I feel sad when I see other kids with their parents. My grandparents try to help, but it's not the same. Sometimes I just don't feel like studying because I miss them so much." (Children)

"Many of these children seem distracted or distant in class. They carry a lot of emotional weight, and without their parents around, it's hard for them to stay motivated or focused [on their studies]." (Teacher)

Limited Academic Motivation

The study revealed that left-behind children often exhibited diminished academic motivation, driven by multiple interconnected factors. A lack of encouragement and role models, particularly in households where caregivers such as grandparents had limited educational backgrounds, left children without the support or inspiration needed to value academic success. Teachers frequently noted the challenge of engaging these students in classroom activities, as they often displayed apathy or disengagement.

Furthermore, many children perceived education as irrelevant to their rural lives or future prospects. The absence of visible pathways connecting education to tangible career opportunities contributed to this sense of disinterest. In some cases, students expressed a preference for entering the workforce early, mirroring the migration patterns of their parents, rather than continuing their education. This lack of academic drive was further compounded by the systemic issues in rural schools, such as inadequate resources and large class sizes, which left students feeling unsupported and disconnected from the learning process.

"I don't see the point of studying so much. My parents went to the city to work without finishing school, and they still earn money. Maybe I will do the same someday." (Children)

"Many students don't believe that education will change their lives. They see their parents working hard in the cities and think that school is just a temporary thing, not a path to a better future." (Teacher)

Burden of Caregiving Roles

Many left-behind children faced significant caregiving responsibilities, such as looking after younger siblings, preparing meals, or tending to elderly relatives. These roles often detracted from their time and energy for studying, leading to inconsistent school attendance and limited focus on academic tasks. Teachers observed that these additional burdens frequently left

students fatigued or distracted during lessons, further impacting their performance and engagement. Caregiving responsibilities also created emotional stress, as children struggled to balance familial obligations with academic demands. For some, the pressure to fulfill adult-like responsibilities at a young age left little room for personal growth or leisure, deepening their sense of isolation. The absence of parental figures exacerbated the situation, leaving children with no choice but to assume these roles, often at the expense of their education. Despite these challenges, a few children expressed resilience and pride in supporting their families, although this seldom translated into sustained academic success.

“I have to take care of my little brother after school because my grandparents are too old to manage everything. By the time I finish cooking and helping him with his homework, I’m too tired to study for myself.” (Children)

“Some students come to class already exhausted. They’re juggling so many responsibilities at home, like looking after younger siblings or doing chores, that it’s hard for them to focus or keep up with their studies.” (Teacher)

Lack of Parental Support

The absence of parents due to migration emerged as a significant factor affecting the educational experiences of left-behind children. Without parental presence, many children lacked essential academic guidance and emotional encouragement, which are critical for fostering motivation and engagement in their studies. Caregivers, often elderly grandparents, struggled to fill this gap due to limited educational backgrounds and an inability to provide effective academic support. This dynamic left many children feeling isolated in their learning journey, further exacerbating challenges in keeping up with schoolwork. The limited involvement of parents in their children’s education also hindered communication between families and schools, reducing opportunities to address issues such as declining academic performance or behavioral concerns. Teachers often noted that the lack of parental oversight led to reduced accountability for homework and inconsistent attendance. These challenges highlight the profound impact of parental migration on the holistic development of left-behind children.

“I miss my parents a lot, especially when I don’t understand my homework. My grandma tries to help, but she doesn’t know much about school stuff. Sometimes I just give up because there’s no one to explain things to me.” (Children)

“Without their parents around, many of these children lack the discipline and motivation to focus on their studies. Grandparents do their best, but they often can’t help [with academic work] or even communicate effectively with the school.” (Teacher)

Expected Strategies for Improving Educational Experiences

Extracurricular Learning Initiatives

Participants consistently highlighted the potential of extracurricular programs to enhance the educational experiences of left-behind children and offer opportunities to engage with learning beyond traditional classroom instruction. Teachers emphasized that initiatives such as academic workshops, peer tutoring programs, and enrichment activities could address gaps in engagement and learning, particularly in schools that heavily relied on rote teaching

methods. These programs were seen as critical for sparking students' curiosity and fostering a more well-rounded educational experience by integrating hands-on and collaborative learning approaches. Both teachers and students acknowledged that extracurricular activities provided an avenue for developing academic interests, increasing motivation, and building confidence. Teachers observed that such initiatives often encouraged shy or disengaged students to participate more actively, helping them feel a sense of achievement outside regular academics. However, resource constraints in rural schools, including limited funding and lack of trained facilitators, frequently hindered the sustained implementation of these programs. These findings underscore the need for sustained support for extracurricular learning initiatives, particularly in resource-limited rural schools, to create dynamic and inclusive educational environments for left-behind children.

"I enjoy activities where we can work together on projects or learn through experiments. It's a lot more fun than just reading from the textbook, but we don't have many chances for things like that in our school." (Children)

"When we organized a science club last year, students were much more engaged and excited to participate. They asked more questions and seemed more eager to learn [compared to regular classes], but we lack the resources to sustain such programs... It's a shame because the impact was clear." (Teacher)

Teacher Mentorship Program

Participants emphasized the potential benefits of establishing teacher mentorship programs to enhance the instructional quality in rural schools. Teachers frequently expressed the need for professional development opportunities, particularly through collaboration with experienced educators in urban areas. Such mentorship was perceived as a means of addressing skill gaps, introducing innovative teaching methods, and tailoring instructional strategies to better meet the unique challenges faced by left-behind children. Teachers described feeling isolated and under-resourced in their roles, often lacking exposure to updated teaching methodologies or guidance on addressing students' diverse needs. They believed that structured mentorship programs could provide practical insights, foster creativity in lesson planning, and boost their confidence in managing classrooms with varying academic abilities.

Several participants noted that mentorship could help bridge the gap between urban and rural educational practices, ensuring that rural schools adopt effective, learner-centered approaches. These findings highlight the need for institutionalized teacher mentorship programs to promote continuous professional growth, enrich rural classrooms, and ultimately enhance the educational experiences of left-behind children.

"I sometimes feel like we're stuck using outdated methods. If we could connect with experienced teachers from urban schools, they could share ideas and strategies that we might not think of on our own." (Teacher)

“A mentorship program would give us someone to turn to for advice on teaching challenges, especially when dealing with students who struggle emotionally or academically. It’s not just about learning new methods; it’s about having support.”
(Teacher)

Providing Emotional and Psychological Support

Interviews highlighted the critical need for emotional and psychological support systems to address the challenges faced by left-behind children. Many students spoke about their feelings of loneliness and abandonment resulting from prolonged separation from their parents, which often left them without a strong emotional foundation at home. These feelings significantly impacted their ability to concentrate on schoolwork and maintain consistent academic engagement. Teachers observed that such emotional distress frequently manifested in behavioral issues, withdrawal, and reduced classroom participation, which ultimately affected academic performance.

While some schools had informal support systems, such as peer groups or occasional teacher interventions, these measures were often inconsistent and lacked professional guidance. Teachers emphasized the importance of establishing formal school-based counseling services to provide children with a safe space to express their emotions and receive appropriate guidance. Structured peer mentoring programs were also suggested as a way to create a sense of belonging and shared understanding among students. Both students and educators agreed that emotional well-being plays a vital role in improving educational outcomes, highlighting the need for systemic and sustainable initiatives to address these challenges within the school environment.

“I miss my parents a lot, [especially] during festivals. Sometimes, I feel like I have no one to talk to about my problems. It’s hard to focus on school when I feel this way.”
(Children)

“Many of these children don’t just struggle academically; they carry a lot of emotional burdens. Without someone to guide them or listen to their concerns, it’s difficult for them to stay motivated in class.” (Teacher)

Engaging Parents and Caregivers

Interviews revealed that maintaining parental involvement and equipping caregivers with the necessary skills are critical for improving the educational experiences of left-behind children. Many teachers emphasized that regular communication between parents and children can help alleviate feelings of abandonment and encourage students to stay engaged in their studies. However, the lack of structured communication systems often leaves children disconnected from their parents’ guidance. Teachers also noted that caregivers, often elderly grandparents, frequently lack the educational background or awareness to effectively support the children academically or emotionally. Participants suggested that establishing regular phone or video calls between parents and children could foster a stronger sense of connection. Additionally, caregivers expressed a willingness to learn strategies for supporting children, such as helping with homework or managing stress, but reported a lack of accessible training or resources to do so. These findings highlight the potential benefits of implementing

formalized communication systems and targeted caregiver training programs to bridge the gap left by parental absence.

“I only get to talk to my mom once a month, and she doesn’t know much about what’s happening [in school]. It would feel better if I could talk to her more often about my studies.” (Children)

“Many grandparents care deeply for these children, but they don’t know how to help with schoolwork or handle emotional issues. Regular training sessions could make a big difference in how they support the kids.” (Teacher)

Enhanced Community and Government Support

Interviews with children and teachers underscored the critical need for more robust support from both the community and the government to improve the educational experiences of left-behind children. Teachers highlighted the lack of resources and initiatives at the community level, which left children without academic and emotional support outside of school. Many children expressed a desire for accessible after-school programs or community-led tutoring sessions, emphasizing their potential to provide additional guidance and alleviate feelings of isolation. Teachers also noted that government efforts to fund rural schools were often insufficient or unevenly distributed, resulting in outdated facilities and limited opportunities for teacher training.

They suggested that targeted government policies should prioritize equitable resource allocation and professional development programs for rural educators. Children, too, voiced hopes for better school environments and more engaging learning activities supported by the government. These findings reveal a shared sentiment among stakeholders: collaborative efforts involving the community and government are crucial for fostering an inclusive and enriched learning environment for left-behind children.

“It would be great if there were places in the village where we could go after school to get help with homework or just talk to someone. Maybe the government or people [in the community] could create something like that.” (Children)

“If the local government could invest more in our school, like providing funds for after-school programs or bringing in social workers, it would create a better support system for these children. The community alone can’t handle this scale of need.” (Teacher)

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by left-behind children in rural China, as well as potential strategies for addressing these issues. These insights align with and expand upon existing literature, offering critical implications for educational policy and practice. The inadequate school resources reported in this study echo findings from previous research that highlight systemic disparities in rural education (Wang, 2024; Xu, 2020; Zeng & Cheng, 2022). Rural schools are often underfunded, with outdated materials and insufficient extracurricular opportunities, which limit holistic development and engagement. These challenges underscore the need for equitable resource allocation, as recommended by Tian (2024) and Yakun Zhang (2023), and for prioritizing rural schools in

national education reform agendas. However, this study also emphasizes the voices of children and teachers, bringing a human dimension to statistical accounts of inequality, and highlighting the urgent need for targeted investments that go beyond basic infrastructure to include enrichment programs and digital tools.

The shortage of qualified teachers has been widely documented (Ye, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2024), but the findings of this study reveal deeper nuances, such as the emotional toll on teachers and their feelings of professional isolation. While teacher recruitment initiatives and rural incentives have been implemented in China, their effectiveness remains inconsistent, particularly in retaining skilled educators (Meng & Gao, 2024). This study highlights the need for sustainable teacher mentorship programs that bridge the urban-rural divide by fostering collaboration between experienced urban educators and rural teachers. These programs could also address professional development gaps and empower teachers to adopt innovative, learner-centered methodologies tailored to the specific needs of left-behind children (Yang, 2022).

Emotional and psychological challenges experienced by left-behind children are also well-documented, with previous studies linking parental absence to feelings of abandonment and loneliness (Li, 2023; Sun, 2024; Wei & Wang, 2020). However, this study highlights the inadequacy of existing informal support systems and emphasizes the importance of structured school-based counseling services. While Duan and Jiang (2022) have noted the positive effects of peer mentoring and extracurricular activities, the current findings suggest that these initiatives need to be professionally guided and consistently integrated into school programs to address the deeper emotional needs of students.

The issue of limited academic motivation among left-behind children reflects findings from Liang (2024) and Yaoyu Zhang (2023), which link low engagement to a lack of role models and perceived irrelevance of education. However, this study emphasizes the role of systemic factors, such as inadequate teaching methods and a lack of pathways connecting education to tangible opportunities. These findings suggest a need for more career-oriented curricula and practical demonstrations of the value of education in rural contexts, as advocated by Meng and Gao (2024). The findings also highlight the burden of caregiving roles, which significantly detracts from the time and energy children can devote to their studies.

Previous studies have acknowledged this issue but often overlooked its long-term implications on children's academic trajectories and emotional well-being (Chen & Guo, 2024; Dai, 2023). This study underscores the need for policy interventions that provide targeted support to these children, such as after-school care programs or subsidies for professional caregiving assistance.

In terms of expected strategies, this study builds upon existing literature by providing practical insights from stakeholders. For instance, the call for extracurricular learning initiatives aligns with evidence suggesting that hands-on activities and peer tutoring can enhance engagement and motivation (Duan & Jiang, 2022). However, this study reveals the practical challenges of implementing such programs in resource-constrained schools, highlighting the need for sustained funding and capacity building. The findings also emphasize the importance of engaging parents and caregivers, a strategy supported by Chen and Guo (2024), who note the

critical role of parental involvement in student success. This study goes further by advocating for formalized communication systems and caregiver training programs to bridge the gap left by parental absence. Similarly, the emphasis on community and government support extends previous recommendations (Ye, 2020; Yakun Zhang, 2023) by illustrating the specific gaps in funding and program implementation that hinder rural educational reform.

Overall, the study generates valuable implications for multiple stakeholders, emphasizing a collective responsibility to improve the educational experiences of left-behind children. For policymakers, the findings stress the importance of allocating equitable resources to rural schools and prioritizing the development of well-equipped learning environments that include modern teaching tools, extracurricular programs, and access to digital resources. Policies should also address teacher shortages through targeted recruitment and retention incentives, such as salary bonuses, professional development opportunities, and housing benefits for rural educators (Zeng & Cheng, 2022).

For schools and educators, the study underscores the necessity of integrating structured emotional and psychological support into the school framework. This includes establishing counseling services, peer mentorship programs, and teacher training focused on managing the emotional well-being of left-behind children. Schools should also prioritize fostering a culture of inclusivity by tailoring teaching methods to the unique needs of this demographic (Hu, 2024; Yang, 2022), such as incorporating career-oriented curricula and interactive learning methods to spark interest and engagement.

For parents and caregivers, the study highlights the critical role of maintaining consistent communication with children, even when separated by geographical barriers. Structured communication systems, such as scheduled video calls and regular updates from teachers, could help mitigate feelings of abandonment and foster a sense of connection (Zhang, 2020). Caregivers, particularly grandparents, could benefit from training programs aimed at equipping them with the skills needed to support children academically and emotionally. For community organizations, the findings suggest opportunities to provide after-school programs, tutoring sessions, and other extracurricular activities that supplement formal education. These initiatives could serve as a critical support network for left-behind children to address gaps in academic and social development that schools alone may not be able to fill.

Conclusion

The study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by left-behind children in rural China, including inadequate school resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, emotional and psychological struggles, limited academic motivation, and the burden of caregiving responsibilities. These barriers significantly impact their educational outcomes and overall development. However, the findings also underscore the potential of targeted strategies such as mentorship programs, extracurricular learning initiatives, emotional and psychological support systems, and enhanced engagement with parents, caregivers, and community stakeholders. Together, these approaches can create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for left-behind children.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The findings are based on a single county in China, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the study focuses solely on qualitative interviews, excluding quantitative data that could provide complementary insights. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches and expand the geographical scope to include diverse rural settings. Longitudinal studies could also explore the long-term impacts of targeted interventions on the educational and personal trajectories of left-behind children. By addressing these gaps, future work can further inform policies and practices aimed at reducing educational disparities in rural China.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants of the study.

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