Social Interaction of Rural Left-behind Children in Dafang County, China

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Abstract
Rural left-behind children in Dafang County lack education and care due to the long-term absence of their parents. Some of the left-behind children are withdrawn and reluctant to interact with others. Coupled with teachers and guardians' lack of teaching of interaction skills, the left-behind children have poor interaction skills and difficulties in social interaction. This study will use qualitative and case study methods using interview protocols to interview six children at a primary school to find out the reasons for the difficulties in interaction among left-behind children. Observation checklist and document analysis also was used as an instrument. Through interviews, the researcher found that some of the reasons why left-behind children have difficulties in social interaction are due to their personalities, and some are due to the lack of a platform for interaction. The researcher improved the social interaction difficulties of the left-behind children by taking group work activities, which enhanced their sociability. This study's findings will help improve social interaction difficulties among left-behind children in rural Dafang County. The researcher emphasizes using social work methods to enhance the communicative skills of rural children left behind and address their difficulties in social interaction, which has substantial replication value.
Keywords: Rural Left-Behind Children, Social Interaction, Communicative Competence, Social Work, Group Work

Introduction
    Dafang County is located in the northwestern part of Guizhou Province, China, with 3,500.11 square kilometers. The arable land in the county is relatively small, with only 0.00142 km2 per capita (Zhao, 2020). The poor geography of Dafang County and the low crop yields directly contribute to the low income of farmers in the county.
    Dafang County has a large agricultural population, and due to the small amount of arable land, a large rural workforce has no land to cultivate. In this context, many farmers migrate to the east for work. According to Dafang County Bureau of Statistics statistics, 60% of the rural population (aged 20-50) in Dafang County go out to work. For various reasons, most farmers go out to work without taking their children with them, thus creating a large group

of children left behind in Dafang County. According to information released by the Dafang County Education Bureau, the total number of students in compulsory education in Dafang County in 2021 is 122,403, of which 25,378 are left-behind rural children, accounting for 20.7% of the total number of students in school (Wang, 2021). From 2018 to 2021, the proportion of rural left-behind children to school students will be approximately twenty percent. The number of children left behind in rural areas is high, and the proportion is large (Wang, 2021).See the Table 1 below.

Table 1
Statistics on rural left-behind children of primary school students in Dafang County

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of left-behind children in rural areas	19029	18484	25741	25378

Data source: Da Fang Yearbook (2021)

The Study Context

Children left behind in rural areas experience many difficulties in their development due to the prolonged absence of their parents. Zhang (2018) argues that children left behind have parents who are not around, and such children may be discriminated against, ridiculed, and isolated by other children, thus causing difficulties in interaction. Mazvita & Mahlapahlapana (2019) found a similar situation when investigating Zimbabwe. Many children were reluctant to interact with children left behind in rural areas, believing that they lacked parenting, leading to social difficulties for children left behind.

One of the significant problems of children left behind is their poor social interaction with their peer group and their inability to socialize. This situation is detrimental to the development of the left-behind children themselves. Zou & Ye (2018) argue that rural left-behind children have minimal contact with people, and the essential group they come into contact with is their peer group and that children can only grow up with the involvement of their peer group. Through interaction with peer groups, children develop their expressive and communication skills and social skills and initially learn and gradually integrate into society.

Jia (2019) believes that group activities can effectively cultivate children's social skills. Therefore, a small group can be established first. After the group is established, the members do not become socially close to each other immediately. However, as the time spent getting to know and interacting with each other increases, individual competence and the members' sense of Interaction increase. Therefore, establishing a growth group as part of the group work model is essential. The growth group focuses on each group member's growth and positive change. It emphasizes group dynamics and social learning theory to help group members explore themselves, realize their potential, get along better with others, and adapt to the group.
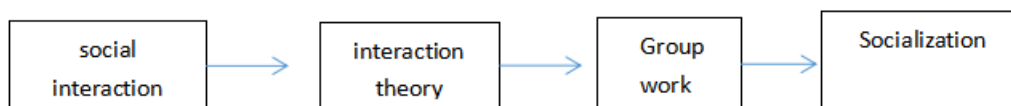
Theoretical Framework

In modern society, the interaction between people is necessary as an inevitable trend in current social development. Children also need social interaction because such interaction enables them to learn various knowledge and skills in group life. Communication and interaction between people are conducive to forming a healthy personality and can meet people's needs for emotional exchange and recreation. Social interaction can also reduce the

distance between people, especially when both parties face common problems. The interaction between the two parties facilitates the sharing and exchange of information, which leads to psychological support. This interaction is crucial for children left behind in rural areas. The interaction can boost their confidence, correct their learning attitudes and behavior, and alleviate personal problems. However, individuals do not interact blindly. In most cases, the basis of interaction between individuals is acquiring value or profit. In such cases, individuals are willing to interact.

The researcher should make complete reference to the theory when conducting group work. For group work to be successful, the researcher needs to recruit members. Therefore, the researcher must first consider attracting rural left-behind children to join the group. The researcher may need to consider factors such as rewards and the realization of values to persuade the left-behind children to join the group.According to the social interaction theory, when recruiting members, social workers should let rural children know the benefits and values they will gain by joining the group. The social worker should explain to the left-behind rural children that by joining the group, they can improve their abilities, receive relevant benefits and solve their difficulties through interaction. Gaining benefits and realizing values will make them more interested in joining and participating in group activities.

Table 2
Methods and Sample

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│   social     │ ───> │ interaction  │ ───> │  Group   │ ───> │  Socialization │
│ interaction  │      │   theory     │      │  work    │      │                │
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A qualitative research method was used in this study. The interviewees were six primary school students from Yu Chong Primary School in Dafang County, all left-behind rural children with social interaction difficulties. The interviewees included three boys and three girls. They were studying in Grade 5.

The interviewees are generated in the following ways: firstly, they are recommended by the class teacher to whom the student belongs. The class teacher is the student's teacher and directly manages and supervises the student's daily life. Therefore, the class teacher knows their students best. As interviewees, students recommended by the class teacher will help improve the interviewees' accuracy and representativeness and simplify the researcher's process of selecting interviewees.

Secondly, as a school social worker, the researcher will work at Yu Chong Primary School for a while. During the work period, the researcher will contact the respondents recommended by the class teachers to understand their situation and judge whether they meet the requirements of the respondents. Based on the actual situation, the researcher has chosen six left-behind children from Yu Chong Primary School to participate in the social interaction project. The details are as follows.

Table 3
Basic information about the six interviewees

Code	Name	Gender	Age	Grade	School	Question type
P1	Student 1	girl	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	Social interaction
P2	Student 2	girl	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	Social interaction
P3	Student 3	girl	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	Social interaction
P4	Student 4	boy	10	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	Social interaction
P5	Student5	girl	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	Social interaction
P6	Student 6	boy	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	Social interaction

At Yu Chong Primary School, the researcher will carry out an activity of group work. The activity aims to improve the social interaction of children left behind in rural areas. During the group work, the researcher conducts participant observation. Through observation, he can identify problems in the group activities and the group members' acceptance of the activity plan and adjust the program in time.

Findings and Discussion
1.Difficulties encountered
Social interaction is crucial to successfully entering rural left-behind children into primary socialization. The state of social interaction directly affects the development of their personality, psychology, and behavior. During interviews with the six left-behind children, the researcher found that they had developed many negative emotions that affected their interactions with their peer group due to their parents' prolonged absence, avoidance mentality, and weak communication skills.

I don't like talking to other students at school. Their parents are around, and their lives are happier than mine, so I feel disappointed when I hang out with my classmates. (Student 1)

I don't like to talk to well-off students in my class, especially when they put on new clothes or take out some new school supplies and deliberately show them off in front of everyone. (Student 2)

I love comics and would love to find friends with the same interests. I'm rather shy and afraid to ask other students. I think I'm missing a platform to make friends. (Student 3)

I don't like living at my aunt's house because she is very biased. She just spoils her two children and never cares about me. If my relatives don't care about me, it is even more unlikely that others do, so I don't want to talk to my classmates at school. (Student 4)

My grandfather's family was in the mountains and had difficulty with water. I rarely bathed or washed my clothes and didn't like brushing my teeth. My classmates are always away from me, and I have few friends. (Student 5)

My verbal skills are weak, and I stammer. My male classmates often talk about games, and I don't know the content and can't join their circle. (Student 6)

From the interviews, the researcher found that the reasons for the difficulties in social interaction among rural left-behind children are manifold. They find it difficult to change their status quo and need external intervention to help them change their plight.

Carrying Out Group Work

Kevin (2020) believes Group work is the process by which social workers bring together homogeneous groups of people facing similar problems and use professional methods to carry out activities and solve problems. Wilson et al (2018) believe Group work can effectively solve group members' problems. It can unite people with joint problems and unify them to solve them, saving human, material, and financial resources. Indeed, Group work is a suitable option for solving the difficulties of people who encounter the same problems.

The researcher's interviewees, from Student 1 to Student 6, all experienced social difficulties, and their difficulties were highly similar. At the same time, they had difficulty overcoming difficulties and improving their communication skills due to personality and ability factors. Therefore, these rural children left behind faced highly consistent difficulties and similar problems with weaker resolution skills. The researcher took the form of group work to help the six rural left-behind children, which not only saved time and increased efficiency, but the six rural left-behind children had weak communication skills and developed a sense of awe for the researcher. The one-to-one help model is not ideal. The use of group work, bringing the six children together, reduces the constraint of facing the researcher alone and allows them to feel surrounded by people like themselves, to let down their guard and interact in the atmosphere. Thus, conducting group work is both a process and a means to an end. Both the group's motivation and the group's process positively impact the attitudes and behavior of the group members, thus effectively increasing their willingness and ability to interact interpersonally.

Burlingame et al (2018) believe group work should go through four stages: start, plan, implement, and finish. The researcher will work according to what these four stages require. The specific process is as follows.

Preparation Phase

The group's activities were based at Yuchong Primary School, with the playground and student activity rooms of Yuchong Primary School being the main focus of the activities. The primary school provided all the necessary information and materials for the activity.

Regarding recruiting group members, the social worker included students 1-6 as group members. The members of these groups have problems in social interaction, manifesting in a general lack of self-confidence and even low self-esteem. These left-behind children generally lacked the etiquette to interact with others, behaved impulsively and rudely, and did not

know some social skills. The early recruitment process was not smooth. Some of the children were not familiar with the researcher. They were worried and scared when they heard they would participate in a new activity. The researcher repeatedly mobilized them through the class teacher before they agreed to participate in a group activity.

Make a Plan

The growth group model was chosen for the group work carried out in this session. Growth groups make members feel safe and accessible, so they can relax their psychological guard and interact with others smoothly. Through the exchange of information and feedback, group members can recognize their problems and reflect on them, thus adjusting their behavior and ultimately achieving self-change.

Stewart (2012) states that growth groups should undergo three stages: thaw, change, and reinvention. The "thawing stage" reflects a person's behavior through interaction. As a member of a growth group, the thawing phase begins when members become aware of their underperforming behavior and are mentally ready to explore directions for change. "The 'change phase' process involves changes in attitude and behavior. Group members acknowledge their attitudes and behaviors in the interaction and are encouraged to find new patterns of behavioral reflection in the safety and comfort of the group situation. The final stage is 'reinvention.' With new patterns of changed behavior, the group member becomes a growing and changing individual who can gradually interact effectively with others. The researcher has developed a group work plan based on the three stages of the process that growth groups need to go through.

Table 3
Group activity design

group stage	Active process	Activity time	Venue	activity theme
Thaw stage	first event	2022.5.7	Primary school playground	Nice to meet you
change stage	second event	2022.5.14	Primary School Meeting Room	Real me
	third event	2022.5.21	Primary School Meeting Room	easy communication
	fourth event	2022.5.28	Primary school playground	happy to fly
restyling stage	fifth event	2022.6.5	Flower Valley Meadow	happy outdoor activities
	sixth event	2022.6.11	Primary School Meeting Room	truth or Dare
	The seventh event	2022.6.18	Primary School Meeting Room	Tomorrow will be better

Implementation Plan
First group work: Nice to meet you

The first group activity began with the social worker warmly greeting the group members and welcoming the participation of the left-behind children. Next, the social worker introduced herself and let the members know that the social worker was a competent and

professional teacher who was there to help with the group's difficulties. The social worker explained to all the children why they had been invited to join the group and introduced the general objectives the group activities intended to achieve.

In order to let the six left-behind children get to know each other as soon as possible, the social workers organized a game of "charades" and awarded prizes after the game. The game allowed the children to communicate with each other in word and deed, and the prizes were given out to increase the children's goodwill towards the social workers. Finally, the social worker explained the main content and format of the following six activities, set out the requirements for future activities, and reached a consensus with the six left-behind children. The social worker played the role of facilitator in the activities, guiding the group members to introduce themselves and guiding them to interact with each other to form a good group atmosphere.The shortcomings of the activity were that some group members did not fully understand the content of the group activities, and they were not fully integrated into the group due to their psychological alertness. The social worker needs to continue to work on the follow-up activities to strengthen group cohesion.

Second Group Work Session: The Real Me

The second group activity aimed to make the six left-behind children aware of the importance of communication and gain a deeper understanding of themselves. The confidence of the children to interact was increased through positive comments from other group members and social workers. The activity captured the team members' attention by watching a film on children's development. After the film, the social worker asked the six left-behind children: What communication problems did they encounter in their growing up process? What are the effects of poor communication? The social workers used the questions to help children realize the importance of interpersonal communication. In this activity, the social worker mainly played the role of a demonstrator and facilitator. As a demonstrator, the social worker provides group members with examples of correct interaction behavior and helps them to improve their behavior. As a facilitator, the social worker organized the group to watch a video, guided the children to express their feelings about life and making friends, and guided the group members to discuss the methods and experiences of social interaction with each other.

Third Group Work Session: Easy Communication

The third group activity was aimed at developing the children's communication skills. The social worker gave lessons on how to communicate with others. The social worker introduced interaction skills and the mindset children should have during the interaction through numerous case studies. In the final stage, the children shared their experiences, discussed communication skills, and summarised their experiences. Through the activity, everyone gained something and a new understanding of communicating with others. The social worker played a significant role as a supporter in this activity. The social worker becomes a resource center in the children's minds, teaching them communication skills and providing video materials to help them improve their confidence in making friends.

Fourth group work content: Flying with Joy

The fourth group activity was an interactive exercise for group members. By organizing four different types of games, the social workers exercised the cooperation skills of the left-

behind children. The interaction allowed the left-behind children to enhance their sense of initiative and trust and to share their experiences after the games, to sum up, their successes and find their shortcomings, with good results. The social worker played the role of coordinators and supporters in the activities. The social worker coordinates and directs team members during the organization of activities and the distribution of prizes. When team members were involved, social workers acted as coordinators to resolve the conflicts and reconcile the two sides. When team members encounter difficulties or setbacks in the game, the social worker acts as supporters and should encourage and help them continue to complete their tasks.

Fifth Group Work: Happy Outdoor Activities

The fifth group activity was for the group members to practice interactively. Six left-behind children from Baina Primary School were invited to participate in this activity. The aim was for the group members to fully interact with these six left-behind children and for the group members to understand that it is a common phenomenon for left-behind children to have social and communication difficulties. Therefore the group members should be calm and relaxed but dare to overcome their difficulties. The social worker was a resource provider and coordinator in the activities. The social worker was a resource provider, providing resources such as beef, dumpling skins, cooking utensils, and kites, which laid the material foundation for the smooth running of the activities. In addition, six left-behind children from Baina Primary School participated in this activity, who did not know who the group members were. In order to enable quick acquaintance and communication between the two parties, the social worker acted as coordinators, coordinating their activities and encouraging them to interact.

Sixth Group Work Session: Truth or Dare

The sixth activity of the group will focus on taking stock and sharing experiences. Each group member will talk about their understanding of proactive communication since they participated in the event. Each group member is to discuss the changes and gains they have made in their interactions and analyze their shortcomings. Other group members will also assess the speakers, including positive affirmations and shortcomings. The social worker will make concluding remarks, pointing out the successes and shortcomings of each team member's performance since participating in the activity. Each team member will reflect profoundly and adjust his or her behavior after receiving suggestions from the social worker and other team members. The social worker played a significant role as an evaluator in the activities, assessing the changes and extent of group members' participation in group activities.

Seventh Group Work Session: Tomorrow will be better

The seventh group activity focused on a summary of the content and achievements of the group since its inception. The aim of the activity was further to consolidate the communication skills of the group members. The social worker discussed and developed a plan for future development with the group members. The social worker mainly played the role of evaluator and advocate. In the role of evaluator, the social worker assessed the achievement of the group's objectives and the satisfaction of the group members. At the same time, in the role of supporter, the social worker expressed her support for the future

development of the group members with warm words and encouraged them to continue to improve their communication skills and gain more friendships in the future.

Feedback

The group work was conducted for two months, with social workers carrying out targeted activities and working with six rural left-behind children with social interaction difficulties. At the end of the group work, the researcher interviewed the six rural left-behind children, and both parties discussed the results of the group work and the follow-up work.

I attended these events and found that I was not the only one who felt inferior. The feeling of inferiority disappeared during the time I spent with the other group members, and maybe that's what having friendships is all about. (Student 1)

My mother's death made me jealous of other students and reluctant to socialize with them. After attending the event, I realized that many children were in the same situation as me. I started to be willing to socialize with others. (Student 2)

I am willing to socialize with others, but I am too embarrassed to initiate contact with others and lack a platform for communication. Thank you, teacher Zhang for organizing such a group activity. It has allowed me to make more friends. (Student 3)

In the past, because my aunt was biased and didn't like me, I didn't think outsiders would like me either. Since I joined the group, I have found that some of my classmates are willing to socialize with me, which is a good feeling. (Student 4)

Participating in group activities and listening to what other students had to say about me made me realize that poor hygiene was the direct cause of my lack of friends. I changed my habits to avoid being disliked by my friends. (Student 5)

I dared to speak in front of everyone at the event, and my self-confidence grew. My classmates also told me about popular games and anime content, and I was able to have common topics of conversation with everyone in the class. (Student 6)

Conclusion and Suggestion

Some of the children left behind in rural areas have difficulties in social interaction, and to solve this difficulty, they should be placed with their peer groups and all work together to solve it. Therefore, by bringing the children together for group work, the researcher could better exercise the communicative skills of the left-behind children in communication.

In modern society, "interpersonal alienation" is a normal phenomenon. The decline of grassroots social groups has become an almost common problem for social development. In primary groups, parent-child relationships are weakened by the departure of parents. China is currently in a period of rapid social transformation, making it more prone to open interpersonal relationships, lose social ties and alienate individuals from the public world. In such circumstances, group work methods and techniques can be of greater use. Group work organizers design various activities for members to collaborate on, and experiences are often accompanied by discussion and sharing to improve understanding between members. When a student in a group gets out of his world and 'interacts' with another person, he is less alone. Group work helps to repair or build harmonious connections between people.

The application of group work can help members of society to respond positively to changes that occur in their personal lives and social processes, transforming them into a driving force for development. Group work is used more often with children left behind. This age group faces various problems, such as academic stress, emotional confusion,

interpersonal tensions, and economic hardship. Group work guides left-behind children to affirm the value of their self-existence, understand and accept themselves, improve their self-confidence, learn practical interpersonal skills, and develop personal characteristics and interests.

This change in the problematic social interaction of the children left behind at Yu Chong Primary School is primarily due to the guidance and involvement of the social worker. Therefore, the researcher strongly recommends that the position of school social worker should be created within the school. School social workers can professionally educate students and enhance their social skills with good results. The presence of a school social worker can also relieve the pressure on teachers and allow them to concentrate more on their lessons. Therefore, the researcher suggests that schools could allocate a portion of their annual funding to recruit social workers to work in schools and professionally teach children. In conclusion, the researcher has used the professional social work approach to take group work action with rural left-behind children who have difficulties in social interaction, enhancing their social skills, boosting their self-confidence, and improving their plight. Group work has proven to be an effective means to promote the development of rural left-behind children and is worthy of being extended to other areas.

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