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**A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry: Probing Challenges and Prospects  
of Left-behind Children Education in the Northern Shaanxi Province, China**

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## **A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry: Probing Challenges and Prospects of Left-behind Children Education in the Northern Shaanxi Province, China**

### **Abstract**

This research presents the lived experience of left-behind children living in the northern Shaanxi province, China. Herein hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry is employed to identify the main challenges faced by those left-behind children who are in the primary school stage and underlying causes. Unstructured observations in classroom and recess sessions are conducted. Ten left-behind children in the age range from 9-13 years, their guardians, and teachers in two towns are interviewed. The findings report the personal feelings and experiences of these children, including academic skills, socializing abilities, life, and psychological stress. Recommendations for policy and practice are offered. Arguably, the findings in the study might not only potentially serve as viable targets for universal preventive interventions and socially inclusive education of the group but also facilitate a more supportive and inclusive life and educational process for similarly marginalized groups outside China.

**Keywords:** challenges, China, hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, left-behind children, prospects,

## Introduction

Chinese left-behind children refer to those who have to be looked after by their grandparents and other guardians in rural areas in that their parents cannot afford their living and education in urban areas (Wang, Zhang, & Zimmerman, 2015). These children are under a long separation with their parents because their parents (one or both) have to go out to work to increase the family's income and obtain more economic resources to provide children with nutrition, medical and educational opportunities (Duan & Zhou, 2005). The rapid industrialization and urbanization of China over the past few decades have forced tens of millions of young and middle-aged people in rural areas and small towns to leave their hometown and flood in urban areas to mainly undertake burdensome manual jobs. Many of them have become parents. The fact renders a long separation between parents and their children, which underwrites the widespread left-behind children phenomenon that has been leading to discrimination and marginalization against this disadvantaged children group in schools and communities (Lu, 2012; Wang, et al., 2015). According to the 2018 census data, there were 6.97 million rural children left behind in China (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People Republic of China [MCAPRC], 2018). The phenomenon of left-behind children is remarkably common in Shaanxi province's rural areas and closely linked to the geographic position and social economic situation of the province. Specifically, Shaanxi province located in the west of China mainly is distributed in plateau mountainous and desert areas. This leads to repercussions for the natural environment of this province. In northern Shaanxi,

most of local rural residents are living under an impoverished condition due to the relative lack of water resources. As a result, when the large-scale rural labor force comes to urban areas, it also inevitably produces a large number of left-behind children (approximately 623,000) in the province. The children's distribution features are as follows: (1) the number of children left behind in southern Shaanxi is relatively large, accounting for 44.4% of the province; (2) Over 2/3 of the children in the province are school aged and more than 50% of them are in rural boarding schools or private schools; (3) Close to 47% of these left-behind children lack parental care (Shaanxi Women's Federation [SWF], 2014). Recently, a disturbing trend has emerged with more children displaying developmental and behavioral issues, such as withdrawing or aggressive behaviors relating to limited educational opportunities, unhealthy home environments and malnutrition (Hu & Szente, 2010). The problem seems to be getting worse in spite of educators' interventions and counselling services (Hu & Szente, 2010). From the general situation of this province, only 42% of left-behind children enjoy regular communication with their parents, 54% of left-behind children rarely communicate with their parents, and 4% of the children have no communication with their parents (Liu, 2012). Most of these children do not make friends and are socially isolated (Liu, 2012). Unquestionably, adverse effects of their situation will have future implications. The media are already reporting accidents, violence, suicide, and crime involving left-behind children (XinHuaNet, 2015). Ironically, parents leave their homes to improve the economic situation of their families for the lives of their children with improved nutrition, medical,

and educational opportunities. However, these children have to face loneliness, fear, and depression. By such, it appears to contour a kind of landscape of marginalization.

### **Institutional Exclusion: The Household Registration System**

The household registration (*Hukou*) system in China contributes invisibly to the marginalization mentioned above. Precisely, as early as the 1950s, the household registration system has been designed to divide all the population into the agricultural and non-agricultural, and the local and non-local (Wei & Hou, 2010; Leitch, Ding, & Song, 2016). Furthermore, the household registration system (*Hukou*) and public services, social welfare system are closely linked together. This means, for a long time, migrant workers and their families are hard to enjoy social services and benefits, such as public education, medical insurance, and housing allowances as enjoyed by local residents without local household registration (Hu & Szente, 2010; Solinger, 1999). Under the restriction of the household registration system, the inferior working condition of migrant workers also contributes to their difficulties in looking after their children. Those jobs taken up by these migrant workers, such as factory workers, construction workers, waiters, cleaners, and couriers have a hard workload with low pay. Understandably, these parents cannot afford the high cost of raising their children in a city. In response, ever since the late 1990s, all levels of the Chinese government have adjusted the household registration system (*Hukou*). Accordingly, in some senses, the adjustment asks migrant workers and their families to settle in urban areas (Chan & Will, 2008; Wang, 2004). Even so, migrant workers' children are registered as peasants on their *Hukou* (Lan, 2014). Most of these

children still have to be looked after by their illiterate grandparents and live in impoverished environments.

### **Systemic Exclusion: Village Schools**

Another contributing factor associated with left-behind children is that village schools attract little funding and supervision. The reason is that the Chinese public school system remains potentially the signal of hierarchy in structures (i. e., state key schools, provincial key schools, general city schools, town schools, and village schools). Located at the bottom, village schools are inclined to be operated loosely with a disorder (Leitch et al., 2016). Negative school climate, unqualified instructors (a high school certificate or a two-or-three-year college degree), backward hardware facilities, and the high dropout ratio, indubitably render serious challenges faced by left-behind children. Moreover, in general, village schools merely cover the elementary grades (grade 1-3), which means those students above the third grade have to go to the nearest towns or live in boarding schools. This alienates more from their original families. In addition, guardians of left-behind children have limited educational opportunities (primary grade schooling or illiteracy), resulting in lower parental expectations for educational attainment of the children. These factors make left-behind children lack competitiveness with urban school students who have more highly qualified teachers, rigorous curriculums, and ascendant learning atmosphere in the great important university entrance examination (*Gaokao*).

### **Social Stigma and the Forging of Identities**

The left-behind children who are fortunately living with their parents are suffering a social stigma from the school community and the wider community. Migrant workers and their children generally are labeled as having low educational quality and moral level (Ma & Xiang, 1998). Crowded public transportation and delinquency can be attributed to migrant workers and their children. Furthermore, although these children attend mainstream public schools, they are more likely to be labeled (e.g., “the second generation of migrant workers” or “floating children”) (Ling, 2011) and alienated by their peer groups. Teachers label them intentionally or inadvertently with the lower academic skills and expectations as they are said to come from rural schools with the inferior academic level as usual (De Boer, Bosker, & van der Werf, 2010). Arguably, this may contribute to the lack of a sense of belonging of these children. Prince and Hadwin (2013) presented that a sense of belonging to school and community was linked closely with a range of positive academic, psychological, behavioral, and social outcomes for children with special educational needs. Conversely, a poor sense of belonging is often associated with a wide range of negative indicators such as “behavioral problems, lower interest in school, lower achievement, and increased dropout” (Prince & Hadwin, 2013, p.249). As such, migrant workers are more likely to choose to leave their children behind in rural areas.

### **A Social Justice Approach: Working Forwards Meaningful Change**

Social justice, on a global scale, refers to the fair and just relation between the individual and society. It is measured by the explicit and tacit terms for the allocation of

wealth and opportunities for personal activity and social privileges. On the level of social justice, the disadvantaged children group should be granted more survival rights. Therefore, based on the aforementioned negative effects and consideration of social justice, it suggests a need for constructing a deeper interpretation and understanding of the lived experience of left-behind children to inform more effective intervention approaches.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions to be answered by this study are:

1. What are the academic, social and personal experiences of left-behind children who live in the northern region of Shaanxi province?
2. What are the sources of challenges and supports for the group?
3. What are the underlying causes resulting in their challenges such as academic skills, socializing abilities, life experiences, and psychological stress?
4. How do left-behind children perceive their personal and contextual issues and whether or not it will affect their growth?

### **Literature Review**

Numerous efforts and concerns have been made in recording, analyzing, and solving China's left-behind children educational issues in a global scale pertaining to guardianship, life, psychological stress, academic development, conducting and emotional problems, socialization, nutrition, and health. Moreover, these researchers



mainly consider those left-behind children who are in the period of nine-year compulsory education (Grade1-9) (Guo, 2007). Expansive literature relating to this group has provided a theoretical and empirical grounding for the present study.

### **Challenges Faced by Chinese Left-behind Children**

In the existing studies of this issue, academic performances and skills of Chinese left-behind children are examined on the top priority. These children's left-behind experiences have remarkably negative repercussions on the children's schoolwork. To be more exact, the lack of family education and generation-skipping education render poor academic conditions for the group (e.g., Wang & Wang 2005; Wang & Wu 2003). Liang, Hou, and Chen (2008) described a more in-depth investigation of the schoolwork of left-behind children. This was based on data from a large-scale sampling survey with multivariate regression models from students' grade, gender, family factors, and school characteristics. Hu and Szente (2009) presented that those younger left-behind children fortunately living with their parents in urban areas still had limited access to education such as costly tuition for admission to public kindergartens and complicated enrollment regulation. Dong (2016) highlighted how those martial arts students, who were the left-behind children, engaged with the structural, symbolic, and normalized violence in martial arts schools, such as limited curriculums, discrimination from teachers and peers, and parents' negative discourses. Secondly, the impact of guardianship and the psychological wellbeing of the group also are analyzed and stressed. As a result of left-behind children's cross-generation fostering, it makes left-behind children lack the

opportunity to communicate with their parents, which leads to an adverse effect on children's psychological health (Zhou, Zhou, & Wang, 2017). Rural children in the western region of China have been facing a serious neglected situation. The neglected rate of left-behind children is higher than that of non-left-behind children (Zhong et al., 2012; Pan, 2007). Thirdly, emotions and behaviors of left-behind children also are considered as an imperative aspect of previous studies in the field. Juvenile delinquency refers to criminal acts committed by those who are in a specific range of age (14 to 25 years old) (Shi, 2014). The proportion of juvenile delinquency is quite high among left-behind children. The negative trend not only follows common reasons for juvenile delinquency (e.g., bad addictions) but also is related to the "left-behind syndrome" (Wang, 2006). In the absence of parents' loving care and effective supervision from the society, left-behind children are more likely to be exposed to an unhealthy social environment and socialization process (Liu, 2007). Based on an investigation of the left-behind children in Guizhou province (a mountainous province in southwest China), 27.9% of left-behind children's problem behaviors are identified as a normal level, i.e., emotional problems and hyper-action. 24.6% of the group are posited on a marginal level, i.e, the problems of peer interaction and pro-social behaviors. However, surpassing 47.5% of them are considered as having ill-natured behavior problems, such as bullying, stealing, cheating, and fighting and so on (Ban, Song, & Wu, 2013; He, Tang, & Jiang, 2011). Fourthly, some studies have focused exclusively on the socialization of Chinese left-behind children. Zhang (2015) investigated how Chinese left-behind children viewed missing roles of

parents. He also considered how parent-child relations in such families were impacted over time by in-depth case studies of two left-behind children with different family backgrounds in a village of Henan province (a province in central China's yellow river valley). Harmonious parent-child relationships have been linked with better academic performances and fewer behavioral problems (Fuligni, 1998; Tseng, 2004). Some studies examine the nutrition and hygiene of Chinese left-behind children. The left-behind children whose mothers are absent often suffer more serious nutritional problems. Energy, protein, iron, and nutrient intakes are insufficient (Duan, 2009).

### **Research and Government-Sponsored Programs Regarding Countermeasures**

At present, research and government-sponsored programs focusing on coping strategies to challenges left-behind children facing have been improved and implemented. For example, left-behind children care has been included in the Family Education Plan (FEP) and Children Development Plan (CDP) in Shaanxi province, which offers a clear guideline to the left-behind children care service system. Precisely speaking, since 2011, the province spent 8 million RMB creating "A home of left-behind children growing up", and 45 "happy homes" in order to carry out the training of guardians and psychological aids of left-behind children (Guo, Wang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2014). These programs can help left-behind children develop an extensive range of positive personal, social, and intellectual traits to some extents. Nevertheless, these projects do not work well in that they usually are one-size-fits-all without special consideration in demographic and regional discrepancies. Moreover, the Volunteer Center plays an

imperative role in helping China's vulnerable children group as a part of the comprehensive strategy for revising the *Hukou* system and promoting the economic development of rural and western China (Leitch et al., 2016; Kwong, 2011). However, this kind of non-profit organization is operated in a narrow range (e.g. some metropolises) so the model still needs thoughtful consideration by policy-makers, funders, and practitioners for dissemination and trials in other parts of China (Leitch et al., 2016; Kwong, 2011). In 2008, Shanghai (on China's central coast) formulates a new policy accepting migrant children into urban public schools (Lan, 2014), which offers an opportunity for them to accept high-quality education. Additionally, in 2003, UNICEF and the Chinese government have jointly introduced the *Tianjin Development Mode*, which encourages cooperation among government, community, and society in the care of left-behind children (Zhou, 2014). However, some studies refute that Chinese household registration system (*Hukou*) has been converted into more hidden forms of institutional exclusion that reproduces cultural prejudice and intensifies group boundaries (Lan, 2014). To be more exact, registration of *Hukou* is relaxed in some metropolises, which means migrant workers can be allowed to register city *Houkou* with same social welfares as local residents. Their children can enroll in city public schools. Nonetheless, migrant workers are suffering from marginalized challenges that the dominant group employs implicitly cultural and discursive formation to normalize status hierarchy. Educational institutions are excluding invisibly left-behind children based on spatial and discursive segregations. For example, older students transferred from peasant-worker schools are inclined to be

arranged in separate classes situated on different floors or in different buildings from local students (Lan, 2014).

However, most of the aforementioned studies are quantitative in approach and fail to provide the in-depth experiences of these children without solid theoretical frameworks to guide their research. These researchers seem to blur the lines between methodology and research methods with less literature reviewed to justify the importance of their studies. In the present study, the researchers are interested in extending and deepening the existing studies of the field and exploring the lived experiences of left-behind children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A hermeneutics paradigm serves to locate the present study and guide the ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researchers. Hermeneutics is concerned more with interpretations of texts including both verbal and non-verbal communication (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Heidegger (1927) mentioned that meaning should be mediated and interpreted further in a symbolic interaction (as cited in Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). He also suggested “the historicity of human understanding” and saw “ideas as nested in historical, linguistic and cultural horizons of meaning” (as cited in Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 26). In the present study, hermeneutics allows the researchers to not only further interpret and understand Chinese left-behind children’ lived experiences but also delve into situated meanings of the experiences such as marginalized identities. Gadamer (1998) claimed “language is the universal medium in

which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting.” (p. 389) Therefore, the context of these children’s discourses can specifically be considered as well.

### **Methodology**

Based on the aforementioned theoretical framework, methodologically, hermeneutic phenomenology endows researchers a conduit to the taken-for-granted experiences for creating meaning and developing an understanding with the consideration of the backgrounds of those who live it (van Manen, 1990). Researchers seek to gain meaning of how people interpret and respond to phenomena via language in a hermeneutic circle (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). In the present study, the researchers expect to excavate the phenomenon of Chinese left-behind children by the narratives of the group, their teachers, and guardians. The researchers’ interpretations move from seeking to understand the particular components of their experiences such as the traumas suffered by left-behind children to develop a sense of the whole that includes social exclusion and inclusion. Added to the interpretations is the lens of culture given a fuller meaning and understandings.

### **Data Collection**

Over a two month period, semi-structured and unstructured interviews were employed to collect data from left-behind children, their teachers, and guardians. The participants were not seen as the “subject” of analysis as usual. In fact, the researchers strived to recognize a cultural regularity in participants’ accounts. This took the analysis of the phenomena to a macro-sociological level. As a hermeneutic phenomenological

inquiry, the researchers encouraged participants to speak out and shared their perspectives. Lasting approximately 30 minutes, all of the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed in Chinese by the main author. The participants told their stories with rural and local accents. Considering these interviews of children could potentially re-evolve trauma, the researchers tried to employ more child-friendly interview methods such as drawing. The transcripts were shared and verified by the participants and then translated into English for coding. Although data collection was undertaken from two towns where these left-behind children were living, they enrolled in the same school located in one of the towns. Therefore, these left-behind children and their teachers' narratives aligned with the sampling elementary school, River elementary (pseudo name). The school population is about 650 pupils, including 114 left-behind children (17% of the school population). This school was purposively chosen for its rural location and a high number of left-behind children. In addition, three follow-up interviews with their guardians were conducted in local villages at their convenience. Permission to enter the school was given by authorized authorities. Meanwhile, informed consent was given by the participants (due to the sampling children under the age of 18, their consent forms were signed by their guardians).

Class 1 Grade 6 in the school involving 5 sampling students of the study was chosen for unstructured field observations in weekly classroom and recess sessions to observe academic skills, classroom behaviors, and friend circles with a predesigned observation schedule and field notes. The main author acted as an observer and blended

as a “teacher.” For avoiding the observations biased, the teacher in charge of the class who was blind to the research hypotheses participated in the observations as well. The observations and field notes provided triangulation of data and confirmed the findings in the interviews.

### **Study Participants**

The study employed a purposeful sampling technique. In purposeful sampling, the researchers attempted to select individuals who had the experiences and could provide informed perspectives of the phenomenon. The purpose of the selection was to ensure that the participants were “information rich” (Patton, 1990, p.16). Interviews were conducted with ten left-behind children including four girls and six boys aged 9-13 years old (See Table 1) in that children in the age group have independent consciousness and thinking, which helped the researchers to glean valid data. Meanwhile, their guardians and four teachers also were involved in the follow-up interviews in order to verify the reliability and validity of these children narratives. It should be noted that participants’ names are pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. Participants were recruited through local government officials and the principal of River Elementary School with the official notification.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

It is important to note that there are a large number of left-behind children in China. This study specifically focuses on a group living in the northern part of Shaanxi province, China. China has 23 provinces, 4 municipalities directly under the central government,



and 5 autonomous regions. Further studies could be conducted elsewhere, including comparisons between different provinces, and regions, as well as genders and ages.

This study is limited by several conditions. First, this study's sampling is not broad enough to generalize to other parts of China. In addition, as the main author has to use the Chinese language (local dialect) to gather research data and translate all data into English, some information may be omitted or misunderstood to English speakers.

### **Findings**

As mentioned above, the data sources included semi-structured and unstructured interviews' transcripts and classroom and recess observations' field-notes. These data were analyzed and coded. The researchers were concerned with the interpretive process, concentrating on the cultural and intended meanings of the lived experience of left-behind children. Through constant comparison, a complete data set was confirmed. This process ensured and organized the data in a consistent and credible manner.

#### **Positive Academic Expectations: Negative Academic Performances**

From the children's narratives, most participants strived for strong academic skills and performance, especially mathematics and language. They believed that education provided opportunities to improve their economic status and this could be achieved through hard work. As *Wu* (female, Grade 6) mentioned, "I like all subjects taught at school. My happiest moment is playing with my classmates. But I always feel unhappy when I cannot be well done in my subjects. In the future, I look forward to becoming a college student so I must work hard." *Guo* (male, Grade 6) also said that "I

enjoy the atmosphere of my school. During exams, I always feel very nervous because I worry my mum will scold me if I cannot get good marks. I usually finish my homework in catch-up classes. In the future, I want to become a paddler. I will register a ping pang club.” However, the interviewer noted that these students showed unintentionally hesitation and the lack of eye contact when they were talking about academic skills. Discourses serve to reveal the symbolic construction of special realities (Brown & Kelly, 2001). Actually, these students were not performing at a level that they desired. Through the interviews with their teachers, it was found the left-behind children were not performing equally with the other children in both mathematics and language. All interviews of the sampling teachers reported that these children had difficulty concentrating on their studies and completing homework, and had poor relations with other students. The children who had grandparents as caregivers got the worst. *Shi* (a Chinese language teacher) stated,

In general, the academic records of non-left-behind children are better than that of left-behind children because most of them are looked after by their grandparents so they cannot get any help from their parents on their homework. From grade 4, students are permitted to board so in grade 1-3; students need more assistance from families. However, left-behind children families exactly cannot offer help. Personally, the atmosphere of families is the main factor for left-behind children to improve because they unavoidably feel depressed and down when they see that other classmates’

parents can participate in campus activities while their parents are absent. Therefore, based on emotional interruption, they cannot totally concentrate on their study. Their families cannot facilitate them to go forward but hinder them in their study. In class, obviously, some of them cannot focus on what teachers are teaching.

Furthermore, based on *Guo's* grandma's narrative, she expressed obvious helplessness and sadness in her grandson's study. She stated in a heavy local dialect that

My son and daughter-in-law are working in cities for a long time because we are so poor so they have to make a living. I look after my grandson but I cannot educate it well because I never leave my village and am illiteracy. I cannot do anything except for cooking for him. I feel his teacher can give more help because children's study shall be managed by their teachers.

The family situation had profound repercussions in meeting academic needs of these children. Even though these children had the desire to succeed but their family situation seemed to impede their academic progress.

### **Expected Socializing: Realistic Alienation**

Generally, most of the sampling children had positive attitudes towards their relationships with other children, communicating with their guardians and teachers, and participating in school activities. They seemed to be unaware of how some community members stereotype them as unsophisticated and unintelligent. These negative identity labels appeared to be unproblematic and inconsequential for them and they immersed

themselves into the day-to-day activities of the school and their interpersonal relationships. As *Wang* (female, Grade 6) noted, "I enjoy the moment when I play with my classmates at school. When I play table tennis and throw bean bags with my classmates in recess, I feel so happy. I have many good friends. I like making friends. I like sharing my trouble with my friends. Sometimes, I communicate with my mother about my situation." *Zhang* (male, Grade 6) also mentioned that

At school, I do not feel lonely because there are teachers and classmates around me. I board at school and almost do not stay at home so I feel better at school. If someone bullies me, I will ask my friends whose fault it is. Then, I tell this situation to my teachers to solve... Basically, I feel ok to live in such a family. My parents often phone me at night in order to learn my situation at school and at home. My father always asks more if other students bully me at school instead of my study.

However, six sampling children also expressed their sense of alienation and isolation. They supposed to hide their inner feelings and privacy, although they expressed that they were willing to share happiness and sadness with their friends and guardians,

*Liu* (male, Grade 4): when I feel unhappy, I am not willing to tell my friends. I don't want to let them know what I am thinking in my mind. For example, when other classmates have some stuff such as dresses and stationeries that I do not have, I don't want to let them know because I feel self-abased.

*Chen* (female, Grade 5): I like to tell my parents about my situation but the moment always is so short-lived. I have some friends but I do never tell my privacy.

*Guo* (male, Grade 6): I want to share something happening at school with my friends instead of my privacy at home. For example, my parents always quarrel with each other and ask me that I would choose who look after me if they divorce. I worry they will despise and laugh me.

From the interviews with four sampling teachers, the children were placing themselves in a contradictory situation. They longed for social inclusion but with conflicts in their families and unhealthy family environment, they intentionally veiled their true feelings and hid in a “cage” to avoid discrimination and ridicule from others. As *Zheng* (female, a teacher) expressed that “they always lower their heads without any eye contact when talking with teachers. I hope their parents can spend more time accompanying them. They always are not willing to speak out.”

### **Outside Optimistic: Inside Pessimistic**

These children appeared to exhibit psychological tension. On the surface, most participants deliberately presented an optimistic attitude to their life and they were more active, talkative, and humorous during the interviews. However, as general, they seemed to be quieter in the classroom and interact more with teachers than with their peers. In private, they seemed pessimistic and mildly depressed. Although they wanted to present themselves confident and independent, they hid their fears and insecurities. *Huang*

(female, Grade 6) said that “I have a talent in dancing but I have no money to sign up a training course because my mother is working in a city but I learned it privately from other students who have dancing courses. I also dance well and often perform as the main dancer.” *Guo* (male, Grade 6) also indicated that “at home, it is impossible for me to finish my homework because my grandma is illiterate but I still can do well because I can check them by cell phone.” The teachers confirmed this observation of a positive outward appearance with serious negative feelings inside. As *Dong* (male, a math teacher) noted,

They always have a negative attitude. Although we tell them what is right or wrong, they don't know how they can do. Many habits usually have been formed in their childhood so it seems to be hard to change, which causes the gap to widen as they grow up.

*Shi* (female, a Chinese language teacher) also mentioned,

A student's father ran up huge debt and her mother left to work in a city. When I mentioned her parents, she always sobbed and cried. Although they seem to be positive, they have some inner pain that cannot be touched and let them down.

Because of the family situation, these children were forced to be more independent and mature beyond their age. They sought inclusion and adult attention but they found themselves hiding behind “walls” for self-protection.

### **Issues Facing Left-behind Children**

The children's narratives revealed four issues of concern: parent-child relations, guardian-teacher relations, curriculum design, and emotional/psychological support.

**Parent-child relations.** Childhood is a critical period for the development of emotional management (Zhong et al., 2012). The sampling children lacked emotional communication with their parents. In particular, mother-child relations seemed cold and uncaring, leading to feelings of neglect and abandonment. As *Wu* (female, Grade 6) said, "I do not miss my father because I have not more love and impression to him with a long separation. My mother hardly plays with me and learns my situation at school." *Zhang* (female, Grade 6) also noted that "sometimes, I communicate with my mother about my situation. But it seems that my mother cannot understand me so I usually hide my privacy and worries instead of sharing them to her." During the research, *Wu's* mother happened to return and the main researcher interviewed her at her home. She said in an upset voice that "I am always eager to see my daughter, but she does not seem to miss me at all. I have to work hard in order to give her a better life so I am always so exhausted that we do have enough time to communicate with each other."

**Guardian-teacher relations.** From the interviews with both the children and teachers, it was difficult for teachers to contact parents when facing some issues relating to academics, boarding concerns, and/or negative behaviors. All guardians thought that the children's study should be managed by teachers instead of them. They emphasized their disadvantaged life, poverty, and poor education. *Dong* (male, a math teacher) noted that

It is not smooth for me to contact with their parents. For example, a student had erythema; however, we had no idea how to contact her parents so we had to take her to see a doctor. In the study, we meet the same barriers because their grandparents only are responsible to look after them such as eating and sleeping, meanwhile, their parents have no enough ability to support themselves. Let alone their children. They do not actively communicate with teachers so we have to contact them but sometimes we are unable to get through on the phone.

**Curriculum design.** The school curriculum was highly competitive as usual, which disadvantaged these left-behind children. These children would benefit from a more humanist approach with individual learning. *Dong* (male, a math teacher) said: “specific curriculums are not designed for them in our school except for some extra-curricular activities such as sports and drawing. I feel it would be more beneficial for them to have a class outside the school.”

**Psychological support.** These children were inclined to hide their negative emotions and express inappropriate reactions of either isolation or withdrawal or acting out and rebellion (Zhang, 2015). All sampling teachers felt the need for more individual counselling and guidance support. They also felt foster groups and peer support groups could help these children. As noted by *Shi* (female, a Chinese language teacher), “we have no specific curriculum to the group except for some psychological aids just as *happy growth station*. Sometimes, some so-called psychological experts have provided some



lectures and organize some activities in our school. Some relevant organizations also have offered some support such as donating clothes and stationeries, and organizing love outreach activities during Children Day.” *Zheng* (male, an art teacher) indicated that “we often organize some campus clubs according to their interests in order to let them be happy and relax. Meanwhile, we also communicate routinely with them and try to solve their psychological problems.” The teachers were doing their best but they were not trained in social work or psychology. Moreover, the occasional psychological lectures were inadequate enough to aid these children. There was a serious need for professional social work or psychology to meet needs of these children.

Classroom and recess observations took place weekly with the Grade 6(1) group. The findings reinforced the interviews with the children, their parents and teachers. The children generally displayed short attention spans in class. Particularly the boys had difficulty concentration on their teacher’s direction and often were distracted. They seemed hyper and even experienced difficulty simply copying homework assignments from the blackboard. As a consequence, they were frequently criticized for poor work or uncompleted assignments. During recess, however, when most of the sampling children were free to gather on the playground, they were well behaved and socialized with other children. In one instance, one child isolated himself from the others because his classmates were “bullying” by gossiping that his parents were divorcing. In terms of discipline and self-control, many of these children queued in an orderly fashion for meals, cleaning their dormitories and washing clothes. It was worthy of mentioning that they

were displaying a contradictory status in class and outside of class. These observations confirmed the findings from the interviews that the children were hiding their negative emotions by “putting on a brave face.” The consistency in the findings added important credibility and reliability to the study.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

From the findings, it is clear that the social phenomenon of left-behind children is far more complex than first understood. The researchers unveiled three main contradictions in these children’s lives (high academic expectations and poor academic skills, socializing and isolation, and optimistic surface and hidden pessimistic emotion). At the same time, four factors that left these children disadvantaged were revealed including parent-child relations, guardian-teacher relations, curriculum design, and psychological support. Therefore, the discussion below is organized under two headings based upon the three conflicts and the adverse issues these children are facing.

#### **The Conflicts**

**High academic expectations and poor academic skills.** All of the children are self-conscious of their low economic and social status in the community, which is negatively impacting their sense of self. Self-esteem is a key component of healthy living and affects their emotional management and coping methods (Zhou et al., 2017). Being disadvantaged, the children yearn for being included and accepted into the school and community culture. They hope to break out of the generational cycle of poverty by improving their academic skills but they are seriously hindered by low self-esteem.

Moreover, children in Grade 4 and beyond can be permitted to live in residence, leaving children in Grade 1-3 alone with their grandparents. More assistance is needed for these younger left-behind children (Shi, interviews, 2018). In addition, due to the long separation, parents are absent and unable to provide family support such as assistance with homework. As *Dong* (male, a math teacher) noted, “they unavoidably feel depressed and down when they see that other classmates’ parents can participate in campus activities while their parents are absent.” Grandparents believe that it is their main responsibility to provide only basic care such as meals and laundry instead of offering support for their grandchildren’s schoolwork. Such a situation contributes to the discrepancy between the academic expectation and performance of the group

**Socializing and isolation.** Parsons and Bales (1998) emphasized the significance of peer group in shaping a sense of belonging and non-adult acceptance in healthy socialization. These left-behind children long for acceptance and inclusion and attempt to make friends, engage in playing games, and participate in extra-curricular activities. Nevertheless, due to the long-term lack of parental companionship, care, and guidance, left-behind children are sensitive and emotionally fragile (Zhou et al., 2017). They hide their loneliness. As *Guo* (male, Grade 6) said about his parents living away, “I want to share something happening at school with my friends instead of my privacy at home. For example, my parents always quarrel with each other and ask me that I would choose who look after me if they divorce.”

**Optimistic surface and hidden pessimistic emotion.** With parents missing from the family at an early age, the children in the study are forced to be independent and mature and appear to be positive beyond their age. In fact, they have to hide their real feelings and believe it is necessary to be self-sufficient. Although their grandparents can meet their basic living needs, they still thirst for the emotional and moral comfort from parents. As was mentioned by Hoang and Yeoh (2012), "while the 'caring-for' can be easily provided by people other than parents, there is less certainty about the 'caring-about' " (p. 311). The emotional needs of left-behind children are severely neglected under the disguise of self-reliance and independence. *Wang* (male, Grade 4) said, "Nobody can assist me to finish my homework so I have to check online. I don't need my parents because I am able to do many things." But, when asked about his dream, he quietly said, "In the future, I do not know what I will be able to do but at least, I hope my family members can have a reunion."

### **Barriers to Education**

Left-behind children have numerous barriers to successful education. The lack of parent-child relations is a critical issue in the left-behind children education. Due to limited household registration (*hukou*), rural migrant children are limited to where they can attend school. In addition, migrant workers suffer under heavy manual labor and low pay with discrimination and prejudice from local urban residents (Chen, 2005; Li, 2004). After the parents leave the children, their contact and communication diminish, leaving these children "hungry and thirsty for family affection."

Second, the findings suggest that it is difficult to form and sustain healthy guardian-teacher relations. Theoretically, the active cooperation of parents and teachers can create a quality growth environment for the children's development. In cooperation, parents and teachers are partners in children's education (Zhang, 2006). Nevertheless, as the left-behind surrogate parents, the grandparents are with a limited educational background, which renders communicative barriers with teachers. From grandparents' perspectives, the children's education should be the exclusive domain of educational institutions. As *Shi* (female, a Chinese language teacher) said, "their grandparents only are responsible to look after them in eating and sleeping. Meanwhile, their parents indeed are unable to make a living to support themselves, let alone their children."

Third, all of the children, regardless of status, are receiving the same curriculum and evaluation criteria such as performance-based examinations, memory-based trainings, and rote learning. A broader and more inclusive approach to education was presented by Popham (1970) who promoted taxonomic educational objectives (i.e., cognitive objectives, affective objectives, and psychomotor objectives) (p.102). Based on detailed and specific educational objectives, performance is clearer and more concise, avoiding misunderstandings and confusion. For this perspective, the purpose of education is to motivate individuals' thinking and feeling. Learners are a dynamic group that needs to find balance and harmony between one's internal needs and the external environment (Tyler, 1949). However, for left-behind children, emotional and psychological needs are neglected (Zhong et al., 2012). The curriculum views the children

as a homogenous group and does not include the special needs of left-behind children. The curriculum that is student-centered and embodies humanistic care would be more successful to these children.

Finally, providing teachers with psychological lectures and asking teachers to assume a counselling role is grossly inadequate for these children because teachers have to spend more time teaching the prescribed subjects rather than counselling psychologically. Moreover, as far as left-behind children are concerned, the so-called psychological lectures made by psychologists are one-size-fits-all, which is not enough practical and effective to deal with their authentic psychological problems. As *Zhang* (female, Grade 6) mentioned, "I usually hide my privacy and worries instead of sharing them to anybody including my good friends. When others mention my father, I feel unhappy. I have no dream." In addition, due to limited education, their guardians are unable to truly understand what psychological experts are teaching so they cannot really provide help for left-behind children as well. Therefore, professional social work groups are seriously needed for these children and their families.

### **Recommendation**

Based on the literature and the findings from this study, three recommendations are offered in policies and practices. Firstly, it would be helpful to have a specialized curriculum for left-behind children. For example, considering local geographic condition and characteristics of left-behind children, rural schools can design appropriate rural family games so that parents learn to properly care for their children, in return, children

can learn about communication with parents. Additionally, children can have outdoor classes such as picking up leaves and branches, and making handmade stuff, which helps improve self-invention skills (Lin, 2009). Secondly, it would be productive to have professional counselling services and social work groups for these children. Social workers can offer counselling services such as home visits and stopping discrimination in the level of human rights and mental health. Thirdly, it would be helpful to improve communication and strengthen community relations among teachers, parents, grandparents, and children. Regular contact and information sharing would improve the lives of these children. Specifically, parents can be empowered more responsibility in left-behind children education and promised to have a special leave (a week or more) with regular pay(subsidized from local governmental funding) for accompanying their children. Schools can establish a bridge between schooling and parenting. Communities are expected to offer effective public services such as rural libraries and family chatting club.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Participants (left-behind children)

Age	Gender	Grade	Family members	Parents company statuses	Guardian statuses
13	Male	6	Father and grandma	Without parents to accompany due to parental divorce and father's working outside	Grandma
13	Male	6	Grandparents	Without parents to accompany due to parental divorce	Grandparents
13	Female	6	Mother, uncle, and aunt	Without parents to accompany due to parental divorce and mother's working outside	Uncle and aunt
10	Male	4	Father and grandparents	Without parents to accompany due to parental divorce and father's working outside	Grandma
9	Female	3	Parents	Mother has a serious mental health issue. Father is working in a city	Mother
11	Female	5	Mother, brother, and grandma	Mother is working in a city. Father was dead	Grandma
13	Male	6	Parents, younger brother, and grandparents	Parents are working in a city	Grandma
10	Male	4	Parents	Parents are working in a city	Aunt
11	Male	5	Parents, brother, and grandma	Father has left his hometown to work in a city for years and never went back.	Mother and grandma
12	Female	6	Parents and grandparents	Parents both are working in a city	Grandparents