The Effects of Parent Educational Expectations on the Competence Development of Rural Left-Behind Children: An Empirical Study Based on CEPS Data

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Abstract: *Based on data from the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS), this study conducted an empirical analysis of the effect of parent educational expectations on the competence development of rural left-behind children and the underlying mediating mechanism. The research findings reveal that rural left-behind children have far less developed competencies than their non-left-behind counterparts and that parent educational expectations significantly and positively influence the competence development of left-behind children. Specifically, parent academic expectations impose the greatest impact on academic results of left-behind children; parent expectations of child education levels have the widest effects on various competencies of left-behind children; Parent involvement and teacher support exert a chain mediating effect on the relationship between parent educational expectations and the competence development of rural left-behind children. The mediation effect of teacher support or the concurrence of teacher support and parent involvement remarkably promoted the competence development of rural left-behind children, while parent involvement alone results in masking effects, which impede the improvement of their competencies to some extent.*

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Raising the Questions

Against the backdrop of the economic transformation and dualistic structure of urban and rural areas in China, a massive rural labor force has flowed to urban areas. The issue of rural left-behind children induced by the labor migration has become the focus of concerns of the government and the public. The announcement of the Opinions on Strengthening the Protection and Service for Rural Left-behind Children by the State Council in 2016 signaled that the issue has been incorporated in the state's policy framework. Over the years, as a result of the advancements of rural revitalization and poverty alleviation strategies, the scale of rural left-behind children has been gradually brought under control

The present study utilized the data from the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS) and adopted the perspectives of the neo human capital theory to address the following questions: Are there any significant differences in the competence development among rural children? Do parent educational expectations have substantial influences on the competence development of rural left-behind children? If yes, what is the influencing mechanism?

Research Hypotheses

In this study, the competence of rural left-behind children is measured by three indicators: student academic results, cognitive ability, and non-cognitive ability. Parent educational expectations are classified into four categories: expectations of child academic achievements, education levels, future occupations, and future life, to facilitate the discussion on the relationship between "the great ambitions of lower class for their offspring" and the competence development of their left-behind children. We assume that there may be a chain mediation relationship between parent involvement and teacher support, which jointly work on the impact of parent educational expectations on the competence development of rural left-behind children. Hypotheses are proposed as follows:

H1: Rural left-behind children have lower levels of competence, parent educational expectations, parent involvement, and teacher support than their non-left-behind counterparts.

H2: The four dimensions of parent educational expectations (expectations of child academic achievements, education levels, future occupations, and future life) can positively predict the competence development of rural left-behind children.

H3: Parent involvement mediates the relationship between parent educational expectations and the competence development of rural left-behind children.

H4: Teacher support mediates the relationship between parent educational expectations and the competence development of rural left-behind children.

H5: Parent involvement and teacher support have chain mediating effects on the relationship between parent educational expectations and the competence development of rural left-behind children.

Research Design

Data Sources

This study drew on data from the CEPS conducted by the National Survey Research Center at Renmin University of China. Follow-up data was employed as the main body of sources whilst baseline survey data as supplements. A left-behind child was defined as the kid who cannot live with their parents because the parents (or one of them) are migrant workers but has to stay at their rural registered residence (Huji). 954 rural left-behind children and 2796 non-left-behind children were included in this study according to the types of Huji, locations of Huji, and living with parents or not.

Variables

- *Predicted Variables*

Children's competence was examined in three dimensions: academic achievements, cognitive ability, and non-cognitive ability. Student academic achievements were represented by the results of standardized Chinese, mathematics, and English mid-term exams in 2013 (averaged by this study). Student cognitive ability was measured by a specialized test designed by the CEPS, which focused on student logical thinking and problem-solving ability rather than specific disciplinary knowledge taught by school curriculum. The CEPS's database could provide cognitive ability test scores of each student. Considering the data availability and qualities of rural left-behind children, this study measured their non-cognitive ability in four dimensions: self-regulation, self-efficacy, communication and interaction, emotional regulation. The scores from all question items under each dimension were aggregated and then averaged to obtain a composite value, which was converted into a dummy continuous variable. The higher the student scored for the four dimensions, the stronger their non-cognitive ability.

- *Explanatory Variables*

Parent expectations of child academic achievements, education levels, future occupations, and future life, the four major components of parent educational expectations, were explanatory variables in this study. Partial coding adjustments were made to these variables. The higher the scores of each variable, the greater parent educational expectations.

- *Mediating Variables*

Taking specific circumstances of migrant worker parents into consideration, this study looked at parent involvement from two aspects: instructions for child learning and concerns for child daily life. Teacher support was divided into academic, emotional, and social support.

- *Control Variables*

Demographic characteristics and family backgrounds are control variables in this study. Demographic variables include "gender" (0= male, 1= female) and "being the only-child or not" (0= Yes, 1= No); family background-related variables include the parent education level and family economic status.

Analysis Paths

Descriptive statistics were utilized to identify the differences in the competence development and parent educational expectations between rural left-behind children and their non-left-behind peers via Software Stata15.0. Additionally, the OLS multi-variable regression model was adopted to analyze the relationship between parent educational expectations and the competence development of rural left-behind children.

Empirical Analysis Results

The Results of Descriptive Statistics

There were significant gaps in competencies between rural left-behind children and their non-left-behind peers; the latter outperform the former in academic achievements, cognitive ability, self-regulation, self-efficacy, communication and interaction, emotional regulation, etc. In addition, there were considerable disparities in most factors influencing student competence development between the two groups. Rural left-behind children experienced lower parent expectations of child education levels and future occupations than non-left-behind kids; they also scored less in variables such as parent involvement, teacher support, and family backgrounds. Thus, H1 was verified.

The Influence of Parent Educational Expectations on the Competence Development of Left-behind Children

Model 1 demonstrated that all the four dimensions of parent educational expectations significantly and positively affected academic results of left-behind children. In other words, the rise in parent educational expectations help improve academic performance of left-behind children. Judging by regression coefficients, parent academic expectations had the greatest impact on left-behind children's academic results (10.723), followed by parent expectations of child future occupations (1.284) and life (0.194). Parent involvement negatively affected academic results of left-behind children, whereas teacher support positively influenced them. Model 2 illustrated that both parent expectations of child academic achievements and education levels had significant positive effects on cognitive ability of left-behind children; comparatively, the influence of parent expectations of child academic achievements (0.204) is greater. Parent involvement imposed considerable unfavorable impact on cognitive ability of left-behind children, while home economic status and parental education levels were positively correlated with child cognitive ability. Model 3 revealed that parent expectations of child academic achievements, education levels, and future occupations were significantly and positively correlated with left-behind children's self-regulation, with parent expectations of

child academic achievements having the greatest influence (0.233), while the effect of parent expectations of child future life was of no statistical significance. Moreover, parent involvement and teacher support had remarkable positive impact on left-behind children's self-regulation. Left-behind children from impoverished families displayed stronger self-regulation in adversity. As per Model 4, parent expectations of child academic achievements and future life posed positive effects on left-behind children's self-efficacy, significant at 5% and 1% levels, respectively; comparatively, parent expectations of child future life had a greater effect (0.182). Teacher support was favorable for the cultivation of left-behind children's self-efficacy. Model 5 demonstrated that parent expectations of child education levels and future occupations positively influenced left-behind children's ability in communication and interaction, with a greater effect from parent expectations of child education levels (0.025). According to Model 6, parent expectations of child education levels and future life had positive impact on emotional regulation of left-behind children, effectively reducing the occurrence of their negative emotions and enhancing their self-regulatory ability in response to unfavorable emotions. In light of the analytical results, H2 was partially validated.

Mediating Effects of Parent involvement and Teacher Support

The proved relations between parent educational expectations, parent involvement, teacher support, left-behind children's competence, and other variables provided prerequisites for testing mediating effects. Based on the foregoing empirical results and research hypotheses, a chain mediation model was established with parent educational expectations as the exogenous variable and parent involvement, teacher support and left-behind children's competence as the endogenous variables, to test the mediating effects on the relationship between parent educational expectations and left-behind children's competence.

The test of mediating effects of parent involvement showed that in this path, the indirect effect value of the influence of parent educational expectations on left-behind children's competence was -0.127, and the 95% confidence interval did not contain 0, which denoted a significant mediating effect of parent involvement on the relationship between parent educational expectations and the competence development of left-behind children. Hence, H3 was corroborated.

The test of mediating effects of teacher support demonstrated that in this path, the indirect effect value of the influence of parent educational expectations on left-behind children's competence was 0.012, and the 95% confidence interval did not contain 0, which marked a significant mediating effect of teacher support on the relationship between parent educational expectations and the competence development of left-behind children. Thus, H4 was confirmed.

In the path of the joint mediating effect of parent involvement and teacher support, the indirect effect value of the influence of parent educational expectations on left-behind children's competence was 0.027, and the 95% confidence interval did not contain 0, indicating that there existed the chain mediating effects of parent involvement and teacher support and that H5 was supported.

A comparison of the effect sizes of the three paths revealed that parent involvement had the greatest mediating effect on the relation between parent educational expectations and left-behind children's competence and generated a certain level of masking effects. The chain mediating effects of parent involvement and teacher support turned out to be stronger than the mediating effect of teacher support alone.

Conclusions

First off, rural left-behind children display a lower level of competence in all dimensions than their non-left-behind peers. Second, parent expectations of child academic achievements, education levels, future occupations, and future life are prominently and positively related to academic achievements, cognitive ability, and non-cognitive ability of left-behind children. Third, via the mediation of parent involvement and teacher support, parent educational expectations yield indirect effects on the competence development of left-behind children, aside from their direct influences. Lastly, previous research investigated the effects of parent involvement and teacher support on academic achievements, cognitive ability, and non-cognitive ability separately, whereas the current study found that there is a chain relation between the two variables, which jointly work on the competence development of rural left-behind children.