

# Analysis and Optimization of Factors Influencing the Academic Development of Left-behind Children

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## ABSTRACT

Left-behind children are a special group in Chinese society. While their healthy growth has been widely attended, it is worth noting that the academic problems of left-behind children is less noted. In order to analyze the factors affecting the academic achievement of left-behind children, this paper applies for a selective literature review and discusses the impact of 1) parental migration types, 2) family education and 3) family income on the academic achievement of left-behind children. It helps to have a more comprehensive understanding of academic achievement of left behind children. After excluding other factors, we obtained important information that parental migration had little effect on the academic performance of the left-behind children. However, for left behind children, the lack of family education is the most essential difference between them and other children in the process of development. As the results of parents' absence, left behind children not only lack emotional care, but also lacks guidance from parents while they enter society from school. The emotional lack will affect their psychological status. Personality formation and psychological problems will affect their academic performance. In summary, this research shows that the lower income a family earns in rural areas, the higher risk their children will be left behind. Consequently, it affects the LBC's academic performance. According to the results, we conclude that the type of parental migration has little impact on the academic achievement of left-behind children, but family education and family income are closely related to the academic achievement of left-behind children.

**Keywords:** Left-behind children, parental migration, family education, family income

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As China has undergone rapid urbanization over the past three decades, more and more residents from rural communities have been moving into urban areas to seek better jobs and human development opportunities [1]. However, due to the instability of work and some institutional challenges, such as housing and education, many of those migrating chooses to leave their school-aged children behind to be taken care of by others [2, 3]. Under such a situation, these labor population movements in China have resulted in a significant, potentially vulnerable sub-population of approximately 61 million left-behind children (LBC) [4].

Nevertheless, the impacts of parental migration on LBCs are complicated and diverse. On one side, parental migration might benefit the children in many ways, including better educational performance. For instance, the higher income that migrants earn in the cities compared to what can be made in the countryside could be used for additional assistance for schooling [2, 5]. On the flip side, the absence of one or both parents with a lack of care and guidance that would result costs in terms of educational performance and mental health [6-8]. Since the impacts are yet to be clarified, more and more scholars and researchers are raising their attention to issues around parental migration.

Empirical studies mainly focus on examining 1) academic performance, 2) mental health, 3) physical well-being of the LBCs; however, they have not produced conclusive results regarding what effects parental migration brought about on children [9]. For example, some studies found that the impact of parental outmigration is negative due to the fall in the quality of parenting [7, 10, 11]. In contrast, other studies found positive [12]. In these studies, parental migration improves household economic circumstances and allows for more education investments in LBCs [5, 14]. There also are studies that demonstrated that LBCs performed the same academically as children living with both parents [13].

While there are many reasons why there are differences in findings among different studies, one methodological-based source of the inability to identify the effect of migration is that most of the studies described above have only examined the correlation/association between parental migration and educational outcomes. Consequently, there is little evidence of whether any of these relationships are causal.

While few studies have examined the causal impact of migration on the academic outcomes of students, even fewer have considered the difference between the effects of different types of parental migration (i.e., whether one or both parents are absent), which may be one of the crucial reasons for the inconclusive results in the existing literature. The past results of studies on the relationship between types of parental migration and LBC outcomes are not always consistent. Chen (2009) and Bai (2016) both found that there was no significant difference between the academic performance of those children who had one parent who migrated vs. those who had two parents who migrated. Specifically, some studies have found that there to be no significant difference between one-parent migration and both-parent migration [11].

Although research in different national contexts has demonstrated that migration can profoundly impact LBC's educational development, the relationship between parental migration and LBC's academic achievement is inconclusive [9]. The main reason for this situation is that the former studies fail to categorize the effects, in other words, the influence factors parental migration has brought about.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the influence factors of LBCs' academic achievement. To meet the paper's objective, the article applies for a selective literature review to provide comprehensive perspectives on distinct factors. Factors are 1) parental migration types, 2) family education, and 3) family income.

The significance of the paper is to offer a clearer vision of how different influence factors affect LBCs' academic performance, which is not presented in any of the former works. This would definitely contribute to the literature.

## ***2.1. Parental migration's effects on this of LBC at different learning stages and recommendations***

As China's rapid pace of urbanization and its rapid development in the economic and political aspects after the reform and opening up, the phenomenon of unbalanced development appears in some regions. Therefore, the labor force in poor areas will go to developed areas for better job opportunities to support their families so that to earn their living. Because of the economic pressures and the nature of China demographic policies, many of these migrants have been forced to leave their children, they have to be in their original residence with relatives, that is why exists the problem of left-behind children, Left-behind children have always been a huge problem, relevant discussions have also emerged on this issue [19,20]. This is the focus of the current article: how the different methods of parental migration in the family effect this. There is also much related literature [9,21-23]. However, there is few knowledge conclude its unity currently. Therefore, our article will go through the relevant research. It also provides some help for better helping these students and better education policies in the future.

To explore the differences in parental migration's effects on this of LBC at different learning stages, this article should discuss this from the following five aspects: 1) parental migration's effects on the academic performance of LBC at different school stages (compare primary school student with junior high school students), 2) the statistics from schools in rural China, summarize them, and put forward suggestions from the social government, family aspects and other aspects.

### ***2.1.1. Parental migration's effects on the academic performance of LBC at different learning stages***

The impact of parent's migration on the academic performance of junior high school students is not significant, but it has a negative impact on the academic performance of primary school students. The possible reason is that primary school students are still young and more attached to their parents. Therefore, parents' migration has a greater influence on their emotions, besides, another possibility is that in the learning stage of primary school, children with parents at home are easier to get parental tutoring. However, living in school is beneficial to the study of junior high school students. If children are sent to a boarding school when they are still young, it is easy to feel homesick and easy to have a sense of withdrawn, which is not conducive to the learning and growth of primary school students. However, this has an obvious positive impact on junior high school students. Junior high school students have certain self-care of themselves and independent ability, the strict schedule

and discipline are conducive to the study of left-behind children, and there are many classmates, which is also very beneficial to the physical and mental development of junior high school students [9, 24-26]. After reading this, we came up with an interesting thought that as the left-behind children become younger, maybe the impact parental migration has on children's academic achievements is greater.

### *2.1.2. Discussion and Recommendations*

After finishing the above study, we summarized and reflected on it.

1. There is no significant difference between the academic performance of left-behind children and non-left-behind children, individual characteristics and behavioral habits have a significant impact on the academic performance of left-behind children.

2. After excluding other factors, we obtained important information that parental migration had no significant effect on the academic performance of the left-behind children.

3. Compared to children at different learning stages, their academic achievement is different. The impact of junior high school students is not significant, but it has a negative impact on primary school students. It cannot help make us realize that, maybe as children's age becomes younger, the impact parental migration has on children's academic achievements is greater.

### *2.2. The influence of family education on left-behind children*

The narrow definition of family education is elaborated from two aspects. The first aspect is the direct education of parents to their children. The second aspect is that parents' words and deeds have an indirect and subtle impact on children, parents' bad habits are also likely to be imitated by children. In a broad sense, family education also refers to the interaction between family members.

Family is the first place where children receive education, and parents are the first teachers who provide education. Family education plays a fundamental role in children's growth. Parents should correct their children's behavior, set an example for them, help them distinguish right from wrong, shape good values and world outlook, and guide them to realize and recognize their self-worth. Family education, school education and social education also constitute the three pillars of national education, which is of great significance to personal and social development. It can be seen that the role of family education in children's development cannot be underestimated. However, for left behind children, the lack of family education is the most essential difference between them and other children in the process of development.

Some factors that may affect the development of family education, or can also be said to affect the effect of family education are as follows.

1) Parents' own knowledge level. If parents' own educational level is not high, they will not be able to give their children more in-depth counseling with their children's academic improvement. It is difficult for left behind children living with their grandparents to obtain their substantive guidance on learning from their grandparents. If parents themselves have received a relatively high-end and good education, they will be able to provide more long-term and accurate guidance to their children's studies.

2) Parents' awareness of the importance of their education. If parents have enough educational awareness, they will naturally pay attention to family education. The higher parents' expectations of their children, the more likely they are to invest more time in counseling and more funds in their children's education.

3) Children's attitude towards their parents. If children get along well with their parents, the more likely children are to listen to their parents' instructions and spontaneously imitate their parents' good behavior habits, so as to show a more ideal effect from family education.

4) The practices of other people around parents and their children will also have an impact on the development of family education. Human beings are social gregarious creatures, which will be more or less affected by conformity psychology, and the behavior of people around will also interfere with the development and final effect of family education to a certain extent.

Family education actually plays an intermediary role between school adaptation and social support. For the left behind children in junior middle school, their family function can not only directly affect their mental health development, but also indirectly affect them through social support and school adaptation [27]. Children learn theories in school, learn how to externalize the knowledge through direct or indirect education by parents, and then apply them to social practice. For left behind children, the absence of parents not only makes them lack emotional care, but also lacks guidance from parents while they enter society from school. Emotional lack will affect their psychological status. And personality formation, psychological problems will affect their academic performance, and personality and academic achievements will eventually affect their positioning after entering the society. The following diagram shows the relationship between various units and the impact mechanism of family education on the academic achievements of left behind children.

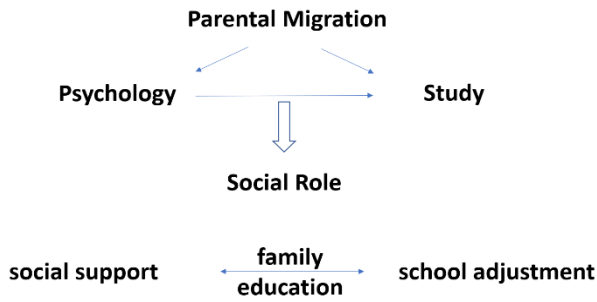


Figure1 The relationship between various units and the impact mechanism of family education on the academic achievements of left behind children

The fundamental way to solve the problem of left behind children is to let more children go to the city with their parents. But why do most migrant workers not bring their children into the city [28]?

First, affordability. The relatively high cost of living in the city, especially the high school fees, is the direct reason why many parents give up taking their children to school in the city.

Second, school acceptance. Most migrant workers gather in the urban-rural fringe, schools in this area have less resources, which makes the school unable to accept the children of all migrant workers. And also, many schools are unwilling to accept these students on the grounds that the quality of left behind children is not high.

Third, government support capacity. Whether the children of migrant workers can go to school and the acceptance ability of urban schools depend on the support ability of the government to a considerable extent, especially the financial support. However, as more and more children enter schools, the government will face greater financial pressure.

Forth, students' adaptability. Due to the great differences between urban and rural areas, there are many differences in economy, life and concept between migrant workers' children and urban students. Because of their maladjustment to urban life and social prejudice, many students give up going to school in the city.

### 2.3. Analysis and Optimization of Factors Influencing the Academic Development of Left-behind Children

#### 2.3.1. Economics

Human capital gaps created in early life can continue to widen for lifetimes, resulting in income inequality [38]. Studies show that parental time inputs, as opposed to resource investments, are more important to children at early ages than investments in time for their human capital development [39]. The initial thought of migrating into bigger urban cities is to create opportunities for the next generation to get a higher level of education. Hence,

"Left-behind children" (LBC) are the product of this phenomenon. The restriction of parental migration causes their children to be left behind in their homes, also known as "stay-at-home children" [40]. The impacts of rural family's income on the left-behind children will be analyzed from three different perspectives: migration issues and schooling, social cost, and rural family's income.

#### 2.3.2. Migration Issues and Schooling

The findings of both a theoretical and empirical study [41] support the conclusion that parental migration significantly affects the time to enrollment in school for children from less well-off families. Moreover, migrants are likely to invest more in a children's education to compensate for the loss of parental care time. The overall impact of parental migration on the timely enrollment of children is negative. Given the heterogeneity of wealth deriving from parents' wealth, these findings suggest that the left-behind children of more affluent parents may face poorer human capital outcomes [41].

Apart from that, the research also identifies the negative effects of "inclusion" on students' academic performance. Parents who are separated from their children or children whose mother has left them require special attention [42]. Such a situation causes teachers to have higher pressure and extra work dealing with the left-behind children and putting more effort into helping them improve their grades. Therefore, parental migration is not a favorable choice from all aspects [41].

China's massive rural-to-urban migration will present a great deal of socioeconomic mobility challenges, the upward or downward movement from one social class or economic level to another, to rural youth [43]. Considering that education is a crucial transition for youths to assimilate, the lack of quality education is to blame for their poor societal prospects. Another factor is that there is a lower probability for left-behind children of completing compulsory education since their ambitions are lower due to the lack of parental care [44].

#### 2.3.3. The Role of Social Cost

Social costs are comprised of private and external costs. The effects of parent migration on children are various, primarily negative, including an increase in workloads, fewer resources for tutoring, and the absence of affection from their parents. Moreover, since most surrogate caregivers, mostly elderly, are often worn out from supporting their families, they have difficulties in caring for their children and ensuring their safety [45]. So, it is not a cost-effective choice in terms of social cost. From the private costs' perspective, those parents and children are all affected mentally in some way, like worries or pressure. Additionally, elder members of the family are automatically considered into the "parental

migration plan” and are charged with the left-behind family. From the external costs’ standpoint, left-behind children have fewer resources and will be left behind at school.

On the other hand, data estimate that approximately 106 million children in rural areas were affected by migration in 2010, with 35.81 million migrating with their parents to urban areas, while 70 million remained largely rural [46]. Due to the educational disadvantages, parents’ migration will further the inequalities hurting the millions of children left behind, especially as they gain resources and must make difficult decisions about how to utilize them. Up to a point, low-wealth migrants enhance the educational outcomes of their children. As migrants become more affluent and additional funds do not produce significant marginal returns, heterogeneous wealth effects will ultimately put downward pressure on educational attainment differentials [41]. Thus, is it worth

taking this thirtyish percent chance to migrate to urban cities?

2.3.4. The Role Rural Family’s Income

According to 89.4% of migrants, their average household income is between 300 and 1500 USD per month. Household incomes for migrants vary from province to province, as shown in Figure 2. According to the high standard deviation, there is wide income inequality within provinces [10]. The likelihood of a juvenile committing a crime increases for LBC, especially if they live in a low-income situation. It could also contribute to their failure to do well in class. In contrast, children left behind are less likely to fall behind when households have high incomes. It is more likely that parents with the Rural Cooperative Medical Insurance will bring their kids to the city. Unemployment insurance recipients are more likely to leave their children at home.

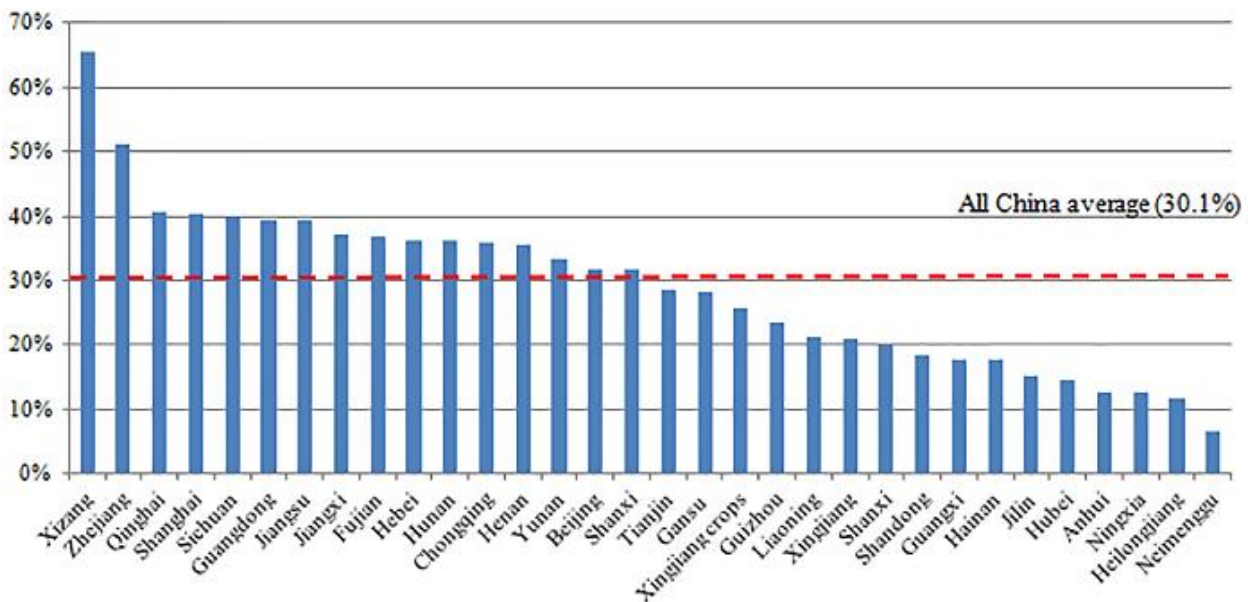


Figure 2 Percentage of left-behind children generated by migrant parent in 32 host provinces [47].

In summary, this research shows that the lower income a family earns in rural areas, the higher risk their children will be left behind. Consequently, it affects the LBC’s academic performance. It can also be argued that LBC is a sacrifice for rural families. In developing countries, urbanization is achieved at the price of rural migrants and their families, particularly children who are left behind.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

1.The academic weakness shows the problem of the hierarchical structure distribution of resources. We should focus on narrowing the gap from the quality of teachers, and pay attention to the construction of the education support system for them.

2.From the school aspect, the rural conditions are not perfect, and it is necessary to carry out more activities, moral education and other aspects.

3.From the perspective of the major policies, as it is a long-term and systematic work, the government, school and family, need to fulfill their responsibilities and build a systematic ecological environment for the academic improvement of LBC from the aspects of teaching resources, fundamental resources and maybe the law and system.

4.The school should improve the education mode, explore the education mode suitable for left behind children, and make up for the lack of family education as much as possible.

5.Improve the care service mechanism. Parental

supervision is an important factor in the process of children's socialization. To mobilize schools and communities to build care networks with the help of scientific and technological means, establish the connection between parents and students.

6.The government should strengthen the legal guardianship responsibility of parents and improve the guardianship system. Strengthen their publicity and guidance, to resource families to shoulder more responsibilities, and to guide migrant parents to take practical actions to support and help their left behind children.

7.To effectively improve the quality of urbanization, accept more migrant children to study in the city, ensure equal access to education for migrant children. To accelerate the construction of new rural areas and small towns, attract migrant workers to return home for employment and entrepreneurship, and encourage, support and help qualified migrant workers to migrate to cities.

8.Strengthen mental health education for left-behind children. Popularize safety and mental health knowledge. Psychological counseling rooms should be set up as far as possible, with qualified psychological counseling teachers, and school teachers should receive regular training in mental health related courses.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The current article focuses on the factors that influence the academic achievement of left-behind children. The results show that although there are differences among different research results, the three aspects of parental migration type, family education and family income all have an important impact on the academic achievement of left-behind children. According to the research results, we can gain the following conclusions:

1.Left-behind children are only vulnerable groups, not problem children.

2.There is no significant difference between the academic performance of left-behind children and non-left-behind children, individual characteristics and behavioral habits have a significant impact on the academic performance of left-behind children. parental migration had no significant effect on the academic performance of the left-behind children, maybe as children's age becomes younger, the impact parental migration has on children's academic achievements is greater.

3.Family education actually plays an intermediary role between school adaptation and social support. The absence of parents makes them lack emotional care, which affects their psychological state and thus their academic achievement.

4.The lower income a family earns in rural areas, the higher risk their children will be left behind. Consequently, it affects the LBC's academic performance.

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