

Relationship among School Atmosphere, Self-esteem and Loneliness of Left-behind Children

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Abstract. The school atmosphere questionnaire, self-esteem questionnaire and loneliness questionnaire were used to investigate 547 left-behind children to explore the relation among school atmosphere, self-esteem and loneliness of left-behind children. The results showed that the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support is significantly negatively correlated with loneliness of left-behind children ($r_1 = -0.25$; $r_2 = -0.24$, $p_s < 0.001$). Moreover, self-esteem plays a part in mediating the relation between the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support and loneliness of left-behind children. In other words, the two variables not only have a direct effect on the loneliness of left-behind children, but also can reduce their loneliness by improving their self-esteem.

Keywords: left-behind children; school atmosphere; self-esteem; aloneness.

1. Introduction

School atmosphere refers to the lasting and stable characteristics of the school's humanistic environment which can not only be perceived or experienced by students and teachers but also have impacts on their psychology and behavior [1]. Research shows that a good school atmosphere can help alleviate students' bad mood and improve their psychological adaptation [1, 2]. However, most of the current research conclusions are based on the survey of ordinary children and adolescents, while there are very few researches on the group of left-behind children. It is worth noting that a large number of empirical studies have shown that left-behind children are more likely to have emotional problems due to lack of care from their parents [3, 4]. Among these problems, loneliness is a typical emotional experience of left-behind children, and its level is significantly higher than that of non-left-behind children [5, 6]. In this context, this study intends to examine the impact of school atmosphere on the loneliness of left-behind children.

In order to guide the intervention practice more effectively, it is necessary to further investigate the internal mediating mechanism of school atmosphere affecting the loneliness of left-behind children. On the basis of literature review, the author holds that self-esteem may be an important mediating variable of school atmosphere affecting loneliness of left-behind children. A empirical study found that good teacher-student relationship and student-student relationship can promote teenagers' self-esteem level, while bad ones can reduce their self-esteem level [7]; at the same time, low self-esteem is closely related to children's loneliness, and the lower the self-esteem level, the more likely it is to produce loneliness [8,9]. Additively, related research also showed that self-esteem plays a part in mediating the relation between teacher-student relationship and youth internalization [10]. Therefore, it is believed in this study that self-esteem may be an important mediating variable between school atmosphere and loneliness of left-behind children.

To sum up, this study intends to investigate the impact of school atmosphere on the loneliness of left-behind children and introduce the indicator self-esteem to investigate the potential intermediary mechanism of relationship between the two, with the purpose to providing scientific basis and reference for intervention in practice.

2. Objects and Methods

2.1 Objects

Taking the class as a unit, 547 left-behind children from Grade 4 to Grade 6 in township primary schools in XX District were surveyed, including 279 boys (51.0%) and 268 girls (49.0 %); 189 of the participants (34.6%) were from Grade 4, 159 (29.1%) from Grade 5 and 199(36.4%) from Grade 6.

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 School Atmosphere Questionnaire.

The Perceived School Atmosphere Questionnaire used in Jia and others' research [11] was adopted in this survey, and this questionnaire consisted of 25 items to measures three aspects: perceived teacher support, perceived classmate support and autonomy opportunities. The questionnaire adopted a 4-level score, with 1 indicating “never” and 4 indicating “always”. The higher the score is, the higher the support level of teachers and classmates and the more opportunities for autonomy.

2.2.2 Self-esteem Scale.

Self-esteem Scale developed by Rosenberg [12] was adopted. There were 10 items in the scale. The scale uses a 4-level score to calculate the total score of all items. The higher the score is, the higher the self-esteem level.

2.2.3 Children Loneliness Questionnaire (CLS).

Children loneliness questionnaire developed by Asher et al [12] was adopted. The questionnaire included 24 questions, 16 questions to assess loneliness, and 8 questions to be irrelevant. Five-level score was used, and then the 16 basic items were simply superimposed. High scores indicate serious loneliness and social discontent.

2.3 Research Procedures

After obtaining the consent of the school and the students themselves, a college psychology teacher was designated as the experimenter. Students accepted group test on a class-by-class basis, and all tested classes received the unified instruction. The students answered anonymously and the questionnaires were collected on the spot.

2.4 Data Processing

The data processing was completed with SPSS 20.0, including descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Relationship Among School Atmosphere, Self-esteem and Loneliness of Left-behind Children

Pearson correlation analysis found that the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support is significantly negatively correlated with loneliness, indicating that the higher the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support of left-behind children, the less likely they are to feel lonely. In addition, perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support is significantly positively correlated with self-esteem, while self-esteem is significantly negatively correlated with loneliness, which provides support for further testing the mediating effect of self-esteem between left-behind children's perception of school atmosphere and loneliness, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation analysis of school atmosphere, self-esteem and loneliness (r)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived teacher support	1.00				
2. Perceived student support	.26***	1.00			
3. Autonomy opportunities	.48***	.08	1.00		
4. Self-esteem	.30***	.23***	.06	1.00	
5. Loneliness	-.25***	-.24***	-.04	-.33***	1.00

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2 Mediating Effect Test

Before the test, all variables (virtualizing gender, male = 0 and female = 1) were centralized to reduce collinearity. As shown in table 2, regression analysis indicated that both the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support can significantly predict loneliness after controlling age and gender factors ($b_1 = -0.25$; $b_2 = -0.18$, $ps < 0.001$), and the two variables also significantly predict self-esteem ($b_1 = 0.30$; $b_2 = 0.17$, $ps < 0.001$). Furthermore, when self-esteem was included in the regression equation of loneliness, it is found that the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support still play a significant role in predicting loneliness, but the prediction coefficient is significantly reduced ($b_1 = -0.17$; $b_2 = -0.14$; $p_1 < 0.001$, $p_2 < 0.01$; $\Delta b_1 = 0.08$, $\Delta b_2 = 0.04$), and self-esteem plays a significant role in predicting loneliness ($b = -0.25$; $p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Test of mediating effect of self-esteem

	Equation1 Calibration: Aloneness			Equation1 Calibration: Aloneness Loneliness			Equation1 Calibration:Aloneness		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Age	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.05	0.04	1.17	0.01	0.04	0.23
Gender ^a	-0.04	0.08	-0.43	-0.10	0.08	-1.25	-0.06	0.08	-0.76
Perceived teacher support	-0.25	0.05	5.19***	0.30	0.05	6.34***	-0.17	0.05	-3.59***
Perceived student support	-0.18	0.04	4.29***	0.17	0.04	3.94***	-0.147	0.04	-3.36**
Autonomy opportunities	0.09	0.05	1.94	-0.10	0.05	-2.14	0.07	0.05	1.44
Self-esteem							-0.25	0.04	-6.01***
<i>R</i> ²	0.11			0.13			0.16		
<i>F</i>	12.66***			15.55***			17.24***		

Note: ^a indicates that gender is a virtual variable, male = 0, female = 1; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

4.1 Perceived Teacher Support and Perceived Classmate Support can Reduce Loneliness of Left-behind Children

It is found in this study that the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support (two important aspects of school atmosphere) are significantly negatively related to loneliness, indicating that the higher the two variables of left-behind children, the less likely they are to feel lonely. This is consistent with previous research findings. Empirically, Zhao Jingxin et al found that peer acceptance can significantly reduce the loneliness of left-behind children [13]; Yu Li's research showed that the

perceived teacher support and perceived student support can significantly negatively predict loneliness of left-behind children [14]; Ling Hui et al found that friendship quality is closely related to loneliness of left-behind children, and variables including affirmation, relationship, help and guidance are significantly negative predictors of loneliness of left-behind children [15]. At the same time, according to the Social Bond Theory [16], teachers and classmates are very important to the left-behind children in schools. If they can feel the support from teachers and classmates, they can better adapt to school life and thus reduce the negative emotional experience such as loneliness.

4.2 The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem between School Atmosphere and Loneliness of Left-behind Children

In this study, self-esteem was introduced to further investigate the mediating mechanism of school atmosphere on loneliness of left-behind children. It is found in this study that self-esteem plays a significant part in mediating the relation between the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support of left-behind children and their loneliness. In other words, the perceived teacher support and perceived student support can not only directly reduce the loneliness of the left-behind children, but also indirectly reduce their loneliness by promoting their self-esteem level. These findings show that, for the left-behind children, the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support have a direct effect on their loneliness, and also play a role through an important “bridge”, namely self-esteem. Empirical research also supports the rationality of self-esteem as an intermediary variable. For examples, the research of Zhou Yonghong found that self-esteem plays a complete mediating role in the relation between interpersonal communication and orphans' anxiety [17]; Tang Miao Yan et al found that self-esteem plays a part in mediating the relationship between teacher-student relationship and youth internalization [10]. It is worth noting that this study introduced the mediating role of self-esteem into the relation between school atmosphere and loneliness of left-behind children and clarifies the internal transmission mechanism of this role, expanding previous research conclusions. At the same time, the results of this study provide ideas for the prevention and intervention of loneliness of left-behind children.

5. Conclusion

It is found in this study that the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support are significantly negatively related to loneliness of left-behind children; self-esteem plays a partial mediating role in the relation between the perceived teacher support and perceived classmate support of left-behind children and their loneliness, that is, the two variables not only have a direct inhibitory effect on loneliness of left-behind children, but also can improve their self-esteem and thereby reduce their loneliness.

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