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Dispositional Hope Level of Left-behind Children in Specific Primary Schools of Rural Ethnic Groups Bai and Shui

Shuchen Li[1,a,*]

[1]*Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, 518017, China*
a. s20120.li@stu.scie.com.cn
**corresponding author*

Abstract: The aim of the study was to explore the perception of goals achieved by left-behind children (LBC) in two specific rural elementary schools, namely Zhenxing Central Complete Primary School in Yunnan and Sandong Primary School in Guizhou, comparing with the corresponding data in the sample of the general population of non-left-behind children (NLBC) in China's first-tier city Guangzhou. The research employed the quantitive study method of self-report. Quantitive data were collected from 13 August to 20 September 2022, by using self-reporting questionnaire as the Children's Hope Scale (CHS). The study result shows relatively lower overall scores average in LBC groups than that of the NLBC group. However, all three average scores are in the scope of 17-24, which indicates a majority of highly hopeful mental status. The negative correlation between children's ages and overall points gained also shows the influence of parent-separation length and sensitivity of children's perceptions at different ages.

Keywords: Left-behind children, dispositional hope, perception of goals achieving

1. Introduction

The recent statistic estimated that China's floating population had reached 376 million, indicating a dramatic growth (as much as 70% in one decade) in the migrant population (The 6th National Population Census of China, 2010; the 7th National Population Census of China, 2022). The progression of China's economy highly motivates rural labours to migrate from rural to urban regions for better job opportunities and lucrative rewards, leading to an increase in the possibility of parent-children separation since education and daily expenditure in urban areas is relatively high [1]. According to the 6th National Population Census of China, the amount of rural left-behind children, who are forced to leave behind by their migrant parents for over 12 months under the age of 18, reaches approximately 61.02 million; occupies as much as 21.88% of all the Chinese children [2,3].

Significantly, the number and proportion of left-behind children among China's ethnic minorities is relatively high due to the development and economic backward [4]. Various of Chinese ethnic groups, including our target groups of Bai and Shui, have been distinct by having large populations of floating labor as well as left-behind children. Though both Chinese central and local governments have already took action to emphasise the importance of mental health education especially in the rural minority area (conducting mental health education; encouraging migrant parents to back home), the current covid-19 pandemic makes it more difficult for left-behind children to receive their parents' company [5,6].

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Dispositional hope refers to the positive perception of achieving personal goals, having high relevance to people's well-being situation and psychological adjustment [7]. Strong evidence points out that the long-term parent-children separation is more likely to increase the children's risk of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, isolation, emotional stress, loneliness and so on, resulting in lower dispositional hope levels [8-9].

Nowadays, migration has gradually become an influential international phenomenon and the situation of left-behind children has attracted increasing research attention, supporting the provision of appropriate and sufficient aid by official organisations (government, educational bureau and so on) [10]. The dispositional hope and life satisfaction level can be considered the effective indication of the current progress since it validly shows individual's attitudes toward life [11]. The findings might be able to help government departments and the general society to obtain a profound understanding of the current situation and weaknesses. The possible causes of the discovered phenomenon and further approaches to improve the situation will also be part of the discussion.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Design

Using cross-sectional data collected from three provinces in China, this study examined whether LBC in two ethnic groups and NLBC differed in dispositional hope level. A six-point Likest-type scale of Children's Hope Scale (CHS) is used. CHS has strong technical quality due to the similar reliability and validity data obtained across samples, including clinical, non-clinical samples and medical samples [11]. The measure is relatively brief (6 items only) and the wording and phrasing of each item are simple and easy to understand, enabling all primary school participants to complete the questionnaire successfully.

2.2. Study Sample and Procedure

The participants of the project were recruited using opportunity sampling. Appropriate permission from the school board was obtained before all participants engaged in the study. Each participants and their guardians were informed of the voluntariness and anonymity of the study. The LBC groups were selected accurately based on the definition of LBC and the NLBC group was controlled carefully to reduce the extraneous variables. All participants were between the ages of 7 and 12 and the average ages were controlled (mean of 9.68 in Yunnan, 9.51 in Guizhou and 9.4 in Guangzhou).

In each province, I contacted the accessible schools to receive permission. The survey launched in Guangzhou was administered to participants via Questionnaires Star, a professional online questionnaire platform, while in Yunnan and Guizhou, paper version questionnaires were printed by school and given to participants. The paper version questionnaires were collected by school teacher and expressed to me through SF-express. The final sample consists of 198 participants (50.36% boys), including 66 participants respectively in each of three different primary schools.

2.3. Study Area

The study was conducted at three primary schools (two with LBC in ethnic groups Bai and Shui; one with NLBC in Guangzhou), namely Zhenxing Central Complete Primary School, Sandong Primary School and Yuming Primary School. Zhenxing Central Complete Primary School is located in Fengxiang Village of Fengyu Town in Eryuan County in Dali, representing the LBC in Bai minority group in Yunnan. According to the data from its school board, more than 85% of students were left-behind by their parents and approximately 98% of students are from Bai ethnic groups. Sandong Primary School in Zhonghe Town in Sandong Shui group Autonomous County contains all students

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from Shui ethnic group. It's estimated that 5601 primary school students in this county are LBC, occupying as much as 78 percent of all primary school students [12]. In contrast, the contrast group of NLBC is in China's first-tier city Guangzhou.

3. Data Analysis and Result

3.1. Data Processing

All analyses were conducted using JASP version 0.16.3. Firstly, preliminary analyses, including descriptive statistics (Mean, mode and standard deviation), were conducted. Secondly, regression analyses of the correlation of children's ages and their total points obtained were conducted to explore the influence of parent-children separation on children in different ages.

3.2. Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics of the collected data, including mean of age, mean of total score, mode of total score and standard deviation of total score, are presented in Table 1. The means of age in the three groups are similar, indicating that the variable of age might be properly controlled to reduce the error. As for the total score, NLBC in Yuming Primary School in Guangzhou ranks highest in average number (reaching about 28 points), showing a relatively high dispositional hope level. In contrast, the average score of participants in LBC group in Bai region is the lowest among all (about 21 points). Interestingly, though Shui group participants are all LBC as Bai group, the average total score is only two points behind the NLBC group.

Table 1: The descriptive statistics of the total points and age in Sandong Primary School in Guizhou

Name of Schools	Mean of age	Mean of total score	Mode of total score	Std. Deviation of total score
Sandong Primary School in Guizhou (Shui Group)	9.677	26.577	22.000	5.253
Zhenxing Completed Primary School in Yunnan (Bai Group)	9.403	21.537	21.000	6.056
Yuming Primary School in Guangzhou	9.507	28.104	32.000	5.505

3.3. Children's Age and Dispositional Hope Level in LBC and NLBC

Children who experience separation with their parents at a younger age are more likely to undergo certain symptoms of anxiety and depression. This effect was especially pronounced for children who were separated from their mothers or from both parents, indicating that the companions of both parents are significant to the development of children's mental state [13-14]. It's assumed that the children of different ages might be affected to a different extent by parent-child separation as children might have different understandings towards this situation and experience different stages of growth. The correlations between children's ages and their total scores obtained in self-reporting questionnaire are shown in Figure 1-3 (LBC group of Shui, LBC group of Bai and NLBC group in Guangzhou respectively). The negative correlations between ages and dispositional hope level score in both LBC groups of Bai (r=-0.524) and Shui (r=-0.350) were discovered and described in Figure 1-2, while there isn't the presence of correlation in NLBC group in Guangzhou.

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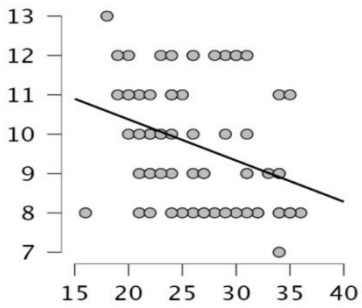

Figure 1: Correlation between ages and total scores in LBC group of Shui

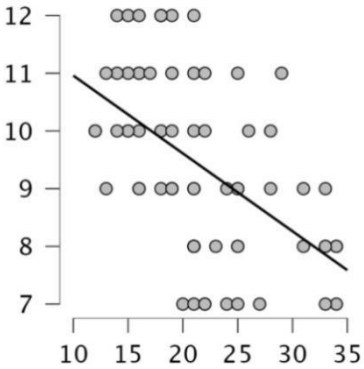

Figure 2: Correlation between ages and total scores in LBC group of Bai

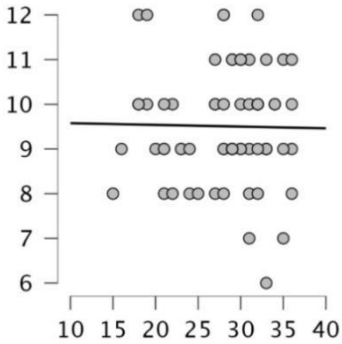

Figure 3: Correlation between ages and total scores in NLBC group in Guangzhou

4. Discussion

The previous study has revealed that left-behind children have significantly lower self-concept and self-confidence compared with children living with their parents [15-16]. Since individuals' dispositional hope level is highly relevant to their well-being situation and psychological adjustment (Espinoza, M., Molinari, G., Etchemendy, E. et al. 2017), it's expected to be a different dispositional hope level between LBC groups and NLBC group.

The data collected indicates that participants from both LBC groups Bai and Shui achieved relatively low overall points average on Children's Hope Scale (CHS), which might show that the

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parent-children separation does affect children's beliefs in their capacity, self-efficacy and motivation. Significantly, the average total score that left-behind participants in Guizhou Shui group achieved is close to the average total score of NLBC in Guangzhou. This might be because of the relatively lower proportion of children left behind by both parents in boarding schools. There are different strategies adopted in industries that affect the social development and poverty reduction in Yunnan and Guizhou correspondingly. Although Guizhou's relatively small-scale industries might not contribute significantly to its economic growth, it enables higher direct participation of local people, resulting in less floating population [17]. As a result, it's assumed that there will be a lower proportion of migrant population of both parents in a family. Fortunately, the averages of the overall scores in three groups are all in the scope of 17-24, indicating that the majority of children is highly hopeful [11]. The outliers are still present among three groups of data which inspires us that all left individuals in LBC groups should be paid close attention to.

The correlation study in children's ages and their dispositional hope level might reveal that the length of parent-children separation as well as the ages of children could affect their score in CHS. Children in different ages are likely to have different various experiences and difficulties, such as more complex interpersonal relationships and academic problems in order ages, that result in the presence of needs for parents to varying degrees.

5. Limitation

The limitations of the study should be pointed out for future improvements. First, the limit amount of collected data might cause lack of representativeness. Only 198 of participants were recruited through opportunity sampling, which might be affected by participants' variables. Second, the self-reporting questionnaire CHS could also have certain limitations. The quantitative question does not allow the individualised answers that indicate children's personal thoughts to interpret the phenomenon. Significantly, since the contrast group of NLBC is chosen from a different region to the LBC groups, there might be other variables that affect the results. Participants from NLBC groups and LBC groups tend to have varying living environments and education environments due to the fact that Guangzhou is more developed than rural ethnic regions. Also, the ethnic identities and cultural backgrounds should also be considered as individuals' thoughts can be highly influenced by their ethnic identities. The further improvement could be the selection of participants. The contrast NLBC group could be selected from children in the same area and education environment as the LBC, reducing the participants variables and the impact of environment.

6. Conclusion

Despite the government intervention of imposing mental health education in schools in rural ethnic groups, LBC's dispositional hope level was still lower than that of the NLBC. The overall averages in three groups indicate a relatively satisfactory progress, as the majority of children in each group is concluded to be highly hopeful. The funding of negative correlation between children's ages and their total scores obtained implied that children may face different levels of problems according to their ages, providing a train of thought to improve the syllabus of current mental health education in LBC schools. What's more, the amount of NLBC students who gain lower points might indicate the pressures exerted on children by inappropriate parenting styles and huge competition in education.

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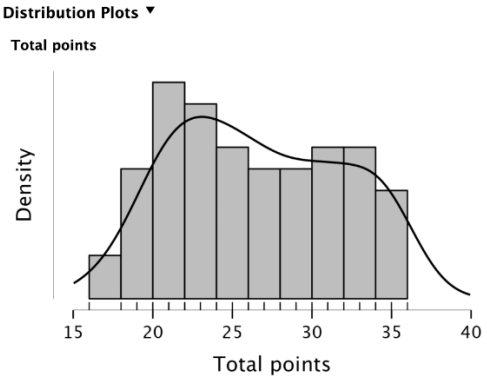
Appendix

Appendix 1: The distribution plots graph of the total points of each LBC in Sandong Primary School in Guizhou



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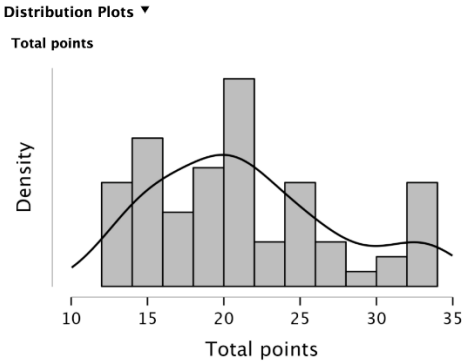
Appendix 2: The distribution plots graph of the total points of each LBC in Zhenxing Completed Primary School in Yunnan



Appendix 3: The distribution plots graph of the total points of each NLBC in Yuming Primary School in Guangzhou