

Plight and Strategies of Family Education for Left-behind Children in Rural China: Interviews with Rural Teachers

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Abstract: Although interest in family education in rural areas has increased in recent years, most of the previous research adopted quantitative methods and only considered the perceptions of parents and children. In an attempt to offer a broader view of the issue, this paper considers the perspective of rural teachers. The paper aims to analyze the state of family education for left-behind children in rural areas of China and put forward strategies for improvement. Through in-depth online interviews with nine rural teachers, this study finds that there are four challenges to left-behind children's family education: absence of education subjects, weak education consciousness, unskillful education methods, and misleading education guidance. Based on the analysis of the interview results, this paper puts forward some feasible strategies for improving family education from three aspects: government, school, and family. This study has instructive significance for solving the difficulties of family education for left-behind children.

Keywords: rural education, left-behind children in China, family education

1. Introduction

To promote rural revitalization, priority should be given to education. Family education is the foundation of all forms of education, and directly and indirectly affects people's lives. Left-behind children are mostly concentrated in rural areas, places where family education problems are more serious. This study focuses on exploring how to improve family education in rural areas. Taking a qualitative approach will help to elucidate some of the issues crucial to addressing this problem. Firstly, family education is significant to a child's personality development, behavioral habits, and mental health. Children under 12 are easily influenced owing to their strong tendency to imitate, and their natural curiosity, and the fact that their self-awareness is gradually forming. Therefore, the actions and words of parents are fundamental in forming a child's behaviors and habits. Reports of problems with students' mental health have increased in recent years. One of the main reasons is that family education is not in place. Some children have psychological disorders but fail to receive help from their parents in time. The improvement of the family environment and clear and open parent-child communication is fundamental to maintaining a child's mental health. Additionally, family education is an important supplement to school education. Jin [9] shows that if parents who engage with their children to a greater degree are able to detect and correct their child's inappropriate behaviors. Education that schools provide must be carried out according to a uniform curriculum, which is difficult to address the specific needs of every child. In contrast, parents can

tailor education to their child and help them to develop their interests or talents to the fullest extent. Broadly speaking, school education focuses on imparting knowledge and cultivating ability, while family education mainly shapes a child's personality and behaviors. Moreover, as the basic unit, family education greatly affects social development. Deng [2] argues that the stability of the family is essential to social harmony. Accordingly, in recent years, the Chinese government has implemented specialized legislation to regulate and guarantee family education. This can be seen as the legislator's attempt to promote social development by improving family education. Despite the fact that within Chinese law, it is difficult to identify the definition of correct family education, or indeed the way parents should deliver this education, the legislation does urge parents to take responsibility for educating their children.

2. Literature Review

Taking a view of the definition of family education by previous research, the researcher defines family education as parents teaching children by personal example as well as verbal instruction in direct and indirect ways, in this way family members influence each other for life. Gao [7] mentions that in addition to the traditional nuclear family, single-parent families, intergenerational families, and homosexual families have emerged in modern society. Different family structures determine different family education patterns. Furthermore, parents differ greatly in other aspects such as age, economic status, educational level, and educational ability, so it is important for families to explore family education models appropriate to them.

Based on existing literature, this study analyzes the current situation of family education of left-behind children in rural areas from the perspectives of parents, schools, communities, and instructors.

Firstly, rural parents have little awareness of family education. Liang and Li [14] show that parents' mobility leads to changes in family structure and influences their investment in children's family education (parents' economic expenditures for children's education), educational participation (parents' time and energy devoted to children's education) and educational supervision (parents' supervision of children's extracurricular activities, peer interaction, and the learning progress, etc.). The two scholars collected a large amount of valid data in Shaanxi province through multi-stage stratified sampling and conducted an empirical study. They found that the family education investment pattern of left-behind children is "low education expenditure + low education participation + inadequate educational supervision", which indicates that the absence of parents in the growth of children leads to unfavorable family education.

Generally, when parents must work away from the home, the responsibility of children's family education is transferred to their grandparents. Li [13] argues that the older generation cannot provide children with adequate contemporary educational knowledge. Most grandparents do not know the concept of family education at all. Even if some do, they are often limited, by necessity, to the tasks of keeping children well-fed, clothed, and healthy. Even worse, children from intergenerational parenting families are more vulnerable to personality defects. Duan and Li [5] argue that some of them suffer from hysteria, suspected illness, paranoia, and splitting.

Most rural Chinese parents have problems with educational goals and content. In terms of the goal, Du and Jia [4] note that when investing in their children's education, parents in China's rural areas expect their children's future academic success to bring economic benefits to the family. In terms of content, Wang [17] shows that they value children's intellectual education rather than their overall development; they value children's material demand rather than their spiritual needs, and they value their own authority rather than their child's individuality.

Secondly, schools in rural China ignore family education guidance work. Li [11] points out that rural primary and secondary schools and kindergartens do not attach importance to family education

guidance, and there are few items on family education guidance in the annual school work plan. In addition, most schools do not incorporate the results of family education guidance into the teachers' assessment system, which leads to low working motivation for teachers and directly decreases the effectiveness of family education guidance work.

Thirdly, the role of rural communities in promoting family education is ignored. Communities are comprised of many families, but the promotion of family education relies on their communication. Within rural China, communities are unwilling to organize activities and families seldom communicate about their children's education. In contrast, communities in western countries assist family education. Celli [1] points out, that although each family faces different challenges when approaching family education, they will share the successes they've had in delivering this education with other families in the community. The community also creates a friendly environment for parents and encourages honest and transparent communication. More importantly, different communities will cooperate to support the healthy development of children.

Finally, guidance on family education started late in China, and the training family education instructors takes a long time. Gao [6] argues that most family education instructors in China lack experience in guidance work. While the increase of instructors is conducive to promoting family education guidance's professionalization in rural areas, tendency to use jargon terms has been noted. Li and Lu [12] argue that overly professional words are difficult to understand for parents of left-behind children in rural areas.

3. Methodology

The researcher conducted online one-to-one semi-structured interviews with nine teachers in rural areas of China. The content of the interviews revolved around students' family education and then the recordings were coded and transcribed. The length of each interview varied from 30 minutes to 50 minutes. The sample structure is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample structure.

Number	Professionals	Born in rural areas (Yes/No)
A	Headmaster of a primary school	Yes
B	Secondary school teacher	Yes
C	Primary school teacher	Yes
D	Primary school teacher	Yes
E	Secondary school teacher & Mental-health counselor	Yes
F	Headmaster of a primary school	Yes
G	Director of Student Affairs Office in a primary school	Yes
H	Headmistress of a primary school	Yes
I	Primary school teacher	Yes

4. Result analysis

4.1. Absence of the Family Education Subjects

According to nine respondents, some parents ignore home-school communication, key indications of which include a low level of participation in teacher-parents' meetings and the difficulty for teachers to contact them. Another issue faced by some parents is the inability to educate their children because of congenital factors such as disabilities. Other parents are simply absent from their home and are therefore unable to deliver family education. The stand-in of generational education is unlikely to be effective due to its own limitations.

The absence of the family education subjects has two adverse impacts. Firstly, it is not beneficial to the cultivation of a child who excels academically. Sapungan and Sapungan [16] argue that parents play a key role in children's academic performance. Respondent C indicated that the absence of the family education subject affects the students' learning motivation. Respondent I believes that children who possess higher parental involvement tend to have a stronger sense of competition in study, while the academic performance of children who lack family education can be unsatisfactory.

More worryingly, a lack of family education puts children at risk of psychological problems. Respondent D mentioned a child's parents both with low Intelligence Quotient, which lead to the child's low self-esteem. Respondent H said that less parental involvement is more likely to cause children to fall in love prematurely or form antisocial habits.

4.2. Weak Awareness of Family Education

Many parents in rural areas expect their children to leave school as soon as possible and begin earning money. Respondent A suggested that some parents prefer their children to work rather than go to vocational school for further education, even if the vocational schools promise to provide financial aids to students. It is hard for these parents to educate their children at home as they value wealth over education.

4.3. Education Methods Lacking Skills

Some parents like to encourage children to work hard by criticizing their ability in comparison to others, which often can actually damage a child's self-esteem. Respondent E believes that this approach by parents puts children under immense pressure. Parents hoped to use examples of those who are highly academic to set models for their children, but often it harms their child's psychological development, and plays no educational role. This approach is not only a family education problem in rural areas, but is also widespread in cities.

Outdated educational concepts can easily lead to a breakdown in parent-child communication. Respondent F stated that when parents attempt to educate their children with archaic ideas, children may challenge their parents. Parents respond with anger when their authority is challenged. Because today's children have a stronger sense of individual personality and they are not as quick to simply obey their parents. However, their lack of life experience and inability to contribute to the family finances is often seen by parents, as reason enough to warrant their obedience. As a result, conflict often ensues. Therefore, the educational concepts need to be updated urgently. However, there are still many psychological barriers that need to be overcome for Chinese parents to change their minds and communicate with their children on an equal level.

An unfortunate reality is that some parents are oblivious to their child's mental health, and it is difficult for them to empathize with their child. Respondent E noted that strenuous work is a debilitating factor when delivering family education. Physical and mental exhaustion makes it hard to provide patient guidance to address a child's psychological needs and often the child's self-persuasion is unable to solve the problem. Telling of this breakdown in communication is Respondent B's observation that most rural children were more willing to open up to their classmates, teachers, and volunteers than their parents.

4.4. Misleading Education Guidance

Education guidance in some families misleads children, and even runs counter to the school's positive education. This can damage a child's value judgments. Respondent I indicated that despite school teachers always asking children to dispose of their rubbish properly, she once witnessed a

grandma who refused to allow a child to keep empty wrapper in his hand and forced him to throw it on the ground. Therefore, children become conflicted between the values taught in school education and those taught in family education. The appropriate decision can therefore become unclear.

5. Discussion

Given the points elucidated in this qualitative survey, there's a grave need for the government to perfect family education safeguard mechanisms. The family education guidance system needs to be improved to help parents master appropriate education methods. The method of family education is sometimes related to the parents' education level. Most rural parents are undereducated, so providing family education guidance is necessary for them. Furthermore, the government should invest in resources for rural households. Luo, Zhang, Liu, Zhao, Deng and Shi [15] believe that compared with children in urban areas, most children from impoverished, rural areas lack development in many aspects, namely, social skills, cognitive ability, self-care ability, and language ability. The inequality in family education between urban and rural regions begins as early as the preschool stage.

Schools try to make up for the lack of family education as much as possible. Ding [3] states that the absence of family education can be filled by the school, which means the family transfers some responsibility for the education of their children to the school. This is called the "school education compensation system". As aforementioned by Respondent D, some children's parents are born with intellectual defects and have no ability to educate. In this case, greater level of assistance needs to be provided.

The approach for families with greater capability is twofold. First, home-school communication needs to be valued, and teachers can conduct parent-teacher meetings and home visits. Home visiting enhances interaction between teachers and parents. Teachers can learn about students' family and provide appropriate suggestions based on the particularities of each family. In kind parents can learn about their children's academic performance. Li [10] finds that teacher home visits are an educational activity unique to Chinese culture, while Western schools adopt an alternative strategy, namely inviting parents to attend the school to discuss their child's progress. Both methods promote closer cooperation between home and school, and help reduce negative factors in a child's growth. Second, programs that support left-behind children's well-being need to be established, as they not only improve a child's health and aesthetic tastes, but also have a positive influence on their psychological development. These activities provide an outlet for negative emotions that arise in an improper family environment and as a result of misguided family education. Respondent H recalled a child who was showing suicidal tendencies. The child found meaning and purpose in the school's badminton team, resulting in the alleviation of these suicidal feelings. Respondent G mentioned that applying for the "Companionship Program" and building "Home for the Left-behind" may enrich the children's afterschool life and enhance their confidence. Additionally, various parent-child activities can be organized. Respondent G proposes setting up a parent-child phone booth, and Respondent I suggests encouraging parent-child reading. These measures can improve family relationships and enhance parental involvement in education.

Finally, parents need try to overcome the challenges of family education. Ideally, parents would be able to work close to their home and family. Respondent C reported that when working in different villages, she always took her children with her to supervise their behavior. Huang [8] points out that if the government supports the local industries in rural areas and increases the employment, they will be more inclined to choose the workplace closest to their children and assume the responsibility of family education. This greatly reduces the number of left-behind children and fundamentally solves the constraints on the development of family education. Second, parents must take the initiative to learn family education methods. Yang [18] believes that parents

should use online platforms to stay informed on relevant knowledge, master the characteristics of children at different growth stages, and explore education methods that meet their child's social, educational and psychological needs. Indeed, if parents understand their children better and skillfully influence them, as opposed to making demands of them, it will greatly reduce unnecessary conflict in parent-child communication and ultimately improve family education.

6. Conclusion

This paper aims to analyze the current situation of left-behind children's family education in rural areas and propose three strategies: 1) the government improves the family education guarantee mechanism; 2) schools try their best to make up for the lack of family education; 3) parents strive to overcome the challenges in family education. In order to alleviate the predicament rural education in China finds itself in, parents, schools and the government need to work together. Based on understanding and respecting children, this research offers insight into the ways in which improvements can be made to the quality of family education. Importantly, this research addresses a group that suffers the most from family education and yet continues to be overlooked.

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