

The Influence of Parental Migration on Student Development

Huan Li*

Nanning College for Vocational Technology, Nanning, Guangxi, 530008, China

*Corresponding author: huanli072@utexas.edu

Abstract. In the globalised world nowadays, the phenomenon of parental migration has become increasingly prevalent. In China, internal migration has shown a notable surge, with the number of migrants rising from 221 million in 2010 to 376 million in 2020, marking a growth rate of 69.7%. In the meantime, parental migration has given rise to the appearance of Left-Behind Children (LBCs), a vulnerable group who are confronted with diverse challenges. Previous researchers have revealed that LBCs exhibit certain differences regarding academic performance and psychological well-being compared to non-Left-Behind Children (NLBCs). The paper seeks to offer a comprehensive overview of the influence of parental migration on the progress of these teenagers. Furthermore, it intends to examine the existing policies concerning this vulnerable group to identify potential areas for improvement. It is found that while some LBCs do experience relatively poorer academic performance, it is more critical to lay emphasis on the prominent psychological health issues faced by these children.

Keywords: parental migration, children left-behind, China, development.

1. Introduction

In 2020, data from the International Organisation for Migration illustrated that the global estimation for the total count of international migrants stood at 281 million [1]. Migration as a global phenomenon that occurs in various regions and countries worldwide can show up within the same country or involve crossing international borders. The reasons driving migration can vary and encompass the pursuit of improved employment prospects, economic betterment, family reunification, and fleeing from conflict or instability in one's homeland.

A substantial surge in internal migration has been observed in China. It is shown that there were a total of 221 million migrants in 2010, whereas in 2020, the number has increased to 376 million, making a significant rise of 69.7% [2]. The proportion of migrants in the overall population has reached 26.6%. Early in the late 1950s, China implemented the household registration system, also called hukou, which divided the population into two distinct and unequal groups: agricultural (rural) and non-agricultural (urban) [3]. This system has granted urban residents more favourable opportunities and privileges while limiting the freedom of rural villagers to migrate to urban areas [3]. Apart from this, the past three decades in China have witnessed significant growth and urbanisation, resulting in a considerable migration of rural inhabitants to urban centres in search of employment opportunities [4]. As a result, the primary motivation for Chinese migrants to undertake the journey to urban areas predominantly revolves around securing higher wages and improved living conditions to support their families and provide their children with better educational opportunities.

Nonetheless, migration inevitably brings challenges for both parents and children. To be specific, migrant parents are often compelled to leave their children behind in their hometowns owing to the lack of social service or the temporary nature of employment opportunities in urban areas [5]. Left-behind children (LBCs) encounter distinctive difficulties, for instance, emotional turmoil, limited parental support, disrupted family dynamics, and restricted availability of crucial resources like education and healthcare. As demonstrated in data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2020, there existed approximately 67 million LBCs in China [2]. The number of LBCs is expected to rise continuously given the ongoing increase in rural-to-urban migration in recent years. This highlights the necessity to probe into the way how parental migration affects the development of LBCs.

The author initiates the paper by delving into an extensive examination of prior research conducted on LBCs, striving to provide a holistic overview of the multifaceted challenges facing this vulnerable group. By synthesising existing literature, the study endeavours to shed light on the complexities faced by LBCs, encompassing the psychological and educational realms of their lives. Furthermore, the research endeavours to measure the effectiveness of the current policies implemented to address the difficulties experienced by these children. By critically assessing the strengths and limitations of existing measures, the paper aims to clarify the specific areas for improvement. Policymakers and stakeholders can benefit from this assessment, gaining valuable insights that can inform evidence-based decisions and targeted interventions to support LBCs effectively.

Concerning the substantial proportion of LBCs in China, this research is of great significance for facilitating the understanding of their present situation [2]. By providing an in-depth analysis of their challenges and vulnerabilities, the study serves as a vital resource for researchers and policymakers. Clarifying the unique circumstances faced by LBCs can inform the design of more tailored and effective policies, making these children have better results and improved well-being and prospects.

2. The Influence of Parental Migration

2.1. Academic Performance

The average age of children left behind was 7.7 years in 2020, which also corresponds to the compulsory education stage [2]. In this way, numerous researchers have probed into parental migration's influences on the educational outcomes of children in schools. For one thing, one of the studies has discovered that parental migration is positively correlated with the academic performance of LBCs [6]. The data used in Chen et al.'s study were acquired based on a study implemented by researchers in the year of 2006 [6]. The study sample was derived from over 30 primary schools situated in 12 villages within the province called Shaanxi, which is recognised as one of the economically disadvantaged provinces in the country. After collecting students' math and Chinese test score and interviewing students, the research found no passive influence of migration on students' academic result. On the contrary, it has a positive impact to some extent. Researchers hold the view that this may be due to the economic growth brought about by migration, which improves students' educational conditions.

For another, alternative studies have established a correlation between the migration of parents and adverse effects on the academic achievements of LBCs [4,7,8]. Li's research group utilised a panel constituted of 7148 students enrolled in middle school to carry out an analysis of differences between groups over time [4]. Their findings reveal a significant and negative influence of parental absence on the academic achievements of students in middle schools. Owing to the lack of parental presence, school-age children are forced to shoulder the burden of living independently, which is likely to adversely affect their academic performance. Similar findings can be obtained in Mao et al.'s research [7]. Their research uses two nationally representative datasets from China to figure out how migration affects the immediate academic performance and future educational accomplishments of LBCs. It is indicated that the migration of parents is not conducive to LBCs' progress, leading to lower cognitive and academic test scores, and declined college attendance rates. Parental absence may lead to poorer mental well-being and reduced classroom engagement in children, which eventually results in lower academic outcomes for LBCs [7].

Another study compared the academic outcomes of rural LBCs with non-left-behind children (NLBCs), pointing out that the influence of parental migration on the education of LBCs varies across different learning phases [8]. LBCs in primary school do not perform worse than NLBCs in mathematics and the Chinese language, and surprisingly, their rankings are even higher than those of NLBCs. Despite this, in middle school, no dramatic disparity is detected in the rankings of LBCs and NLBCs in mathematics, but LBCs lag behind significantly in Chinese language rankings. Concerning long-term effects, LBCs have a significantly lower probability of advancing to high school compared to NLBCs, which results in a dramatic drop in their overall educational attainment [8]. In this way,

in the early stages of education, parental migration does not significantly affect children's education, but during the middle school years and the transition to high school, it does have a negative impact with LBCs exhibiting disadvantaged performance. Although the reason behind this finding requires further exploration, this result suggests that when examining the education of LBCs, it is not sufficient to only analyse the temporary effects of parental absence during the survey period. Instead, further analysis of the long-term impacts is also necessary.

2.2. Mental Health

Even in papers discussing the effect of migration on students' academic accomplishment, some of the researchers point out that the migration of parents leads to a lack of parental care and attention for the students [8,9]. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that owing to the absence of parental love, students' mental well-being is compromised as well.

In Chang et al.'s study, they used data covering 7495 students to figure out how parental migration affects children's academic performance and mental health [9]. They noted that there is no relationship between migration and educational outcomes. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that female LBCs whose parents migrate are inclined to have poorer mental health outcomes. Researchers reckon that this can be attributed to the heightened expectations placed on female LBCs in assuming household responsibilities when one parent migrates, potentially giving rise to heavier pressure. It is plausible that female LBCs whose fathers are the sole migrants might experience more adverse mental health problems compared to those with mothers as the sole migrants [9]. This point is also supported by Jin et al.'s research, which demonstrated that the physical health of LBCs is notably inferior to that of NLBCs [10]. Being an LBC reduces the likelihood of being in good health by 51%. However, there is no discernible disparity between LBCs and NLBCs when it comes to school performance and delinquent behaviour. What's more, using the meta-analysis to compare the mental health of LBCs and NLBCs, Zhao and Yu also proved that LBCs suffer more issues in this aspect [11]. In particular, girls who are left behind experience a greater incidence of mental health issues compared to boys in the same situation. Zhao and Yu mentioned that their results are in line with early research that left-behind girls are less happy and satisfied than left-behind boys, along with more emotional problems [11].

Family functioning, which involves the interactions among family members, plays a crucial role in strengthening emotional connections within the family and promoting the physical, mental, and social development of its members [12]. However, parental migration not only cuts down family communication but also easily causes parents to neglect the physical and emotional needs of their children [11]. These ultimately make migration of parents a significant risk aspect affecting students' mental well-being. More importantly, disparities are also present in mental health issues based on gender. In view of this, while highlighting the psychological well-being of LBCs, it is essential to take into gender factors as well.

3. Policy Discussion

After recognising the challenges faced by LBCs, the national government has implemented a series of policy measures to address the potential issues that LBCs may experience. The state council issued policy guidelines on improving the care and protection of rural LBCs in 2016 [13]. It clearly defines the responsibilities of the government, society, school and family. At the societal level, the policy outlines the need to build a comprehensive care and service system, while at the school level, it emphasises the significance of enhancing care and protection efforts. Additionally, at the governmental level, the policy facilitates the establishment of a robust mechanism to assist LBCs. In the meantime, parents should fulfil their legal obligations and prioritise the best interests of their children. With better supervision and guidance on family guardianship and entrusted guardianship, it can be guaranteed that rural LBCs receive proper guardianship, care, affection, and a warm family environment [13]. The state level of policy emphasizes that the specific implementation of policies

in each province should be tailored to local conditions, and concrete implementation plans should be formulated accordingly.

In 2019, the Ministry of Civil Affairs released guidelines aimed at enhancing the welfare and assistance framework for LBCs and disadvantaged children in rural areas [14]. These opinions require underage rescue and protection institutions and child welfare organisations to clarify their roles and reinforce their service capabilities. Local government departments are also urged to strengthen the construction of grassroots child welfare teams, designate personnel responsible for child care and protection services, provide training, and conduct periodic assessments. Furthermore, the policy encourages social forces to contribute. It supports and promotes the participation of social workers and psychological counsellors who can provide specialised services for LBCs, including psychological counselling, family care, and safeguarding their rights and interests, fully considering the specific needs of these children. The opinion not only clarifies the responsibilities of government departments in protecting LBCs but also calls for the participation of various sectors of society. This allows LBCs to receive assistance from multiple levels and perspectives. Undoubtedly, with the implementation of the policies, the increase in both the absolute number and the proportion of rural LBCs has been relatively small [2]. Notwithstanding, over ten years, the number of LBCs has only risen by 2.07 million, suggesting a growth rate of just 5.2% [2]. However, compared to a significant 28.6% decline in the entire population of rural children countrywide since 2010, the upward trend demonstrated in the population of rural LBCs cannot be ignored [2]. Their proportion within the rural child population has drastically increased, highlighting the exacerbation of the issue of rural LBCs with the deepening of urbanisation. The current policy may need to address the issue at its root, such as by improving the household registration system since parents actually have become aware that their children lack love and a sense of security when left behind in their hometowns, which eventually generates mental issues [15].

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the article first discusses the impact of migration on the educational achievements of children left behind. Results reveal that the migration of parents does not always have a negative influence on the academic achievements of students. Migration often increases household income, ensuring a certain level of financial support for the educational expenses of LBCs, which positively affects their academic performance. As a result, their academic outcomes show little difference compared to NLBCs. Despite this, it is noteworthy that some studies still find the absence of parents at home to guide the students' learning might lead to potential academic setbacks for LBCs compared to their peers. Students' academic performance may still be negatively affected from the long-term perspective. Secondly, LBCs face more serious challenges related to their mental health. Previous research has manifested that due to a lack of communication with their parents, LBCs may experience heightened feelings of loneliness and vulnerability. Their emotions might not be as stable as those of their peers, leading to a diminished sense of security and happiness. More importantly, when studying the psychological well-being of LBCs, researchers have noticed that female LBCs tend to experience more severe psychological issues compared to male LBCs. The research findings imply the necessity for future studies to further explore the psychological well-being issues faced by female LBCs and delve into the underlying reasons behind these challenges. The analysis above manifests the impact of migration on students' academic accomplishment and mental well-being. Despite varying effects on academic performance, it is unquestionable that migration can cause students to be more prone to mental health issues. LBCs, as a vulnerable student group, are in need of policy support as well as attention and assistance from the social level.

References

- [1] International Organisation of Migration. World Migration Report 2022. Retrieved on July 20, 2023. Retrieved from <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/> December 1, 2021.

- [2] National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC). What the 2020 Census Can Tell Us About Children in China: Facts and Figure. 2020.
- [3] Hu, Y., & Szente, J. Education of Young Chinese Migrant Children: Challenges and prospects. *Early Childhood Educ J*, 2010, 37, 477-482.
- [4] Li, L., Wang, L., & Nie, J. Effect of parental migration on the academic performance of left-behind middle school students in Rural China. *China & World Economy*, 2017, 25(2), 45-59.
- [5] Duan, C. R. & Zhou, F. L. Guan Yu Liu Shou Er Tong De Yan Jiu [A Study on Left-Behind Children]. *Population Research*, 2005, 29(1), 29–36.
- [6] Chen, X. X., Huang, Q. Q., Scott Rozelle, Shi, Y. J. & Zhang, L. X. Effect of migration on children's educational performance in rural China. *Comparative Economic Studies*, 2009, 51, 323-343.
- [7] Mao, M., Zang, L., & Zhang, H. The effects of parental absence on children development: evidence from left-behind children in China. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 2020, 17(18), 6770.
- [8] Yao, J., Zhang, H., & Yao, X. Parental Care Absence and Educational Development of Left-behind Children. *Res. Educ. Dev*, 2016, 36, 51-58.
- [9] Chang, F., Jiang, Y., Loyalka, P., Chu, J., Shi, Y., Osborn, A., & Rozelle, S. Parental migration, educational achievement, and mental health of junior high school students in rural China. *China Economic Review*, 2019, 54, 337-349.
- [10] Jin, X., Chen, W., Sun, I. Y., & Liu, L. Physical health, school performance and delinquency: A comparative study of left-behind and non-left-behind children in rural China. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 2020, 109, 104707.
- [11] Zhao, F. Q. & Yu, G. L. Parental Migration and Rural Left-Behind Children's Mental Health in China: A Meta-Analysis Based on Mental Health Test. *J Child Fam Stud*. 2016, 25, 3462–3472.
- [12] Lanigan, J. D. A sociotechnological model for family research and intervention: How information and communication technologies affect family life. *Marriage & Family Review*, 2009, 45(6-8), 587–609.
- [13] State Council. Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas. February 4, 2016. Retrieved on July 20, 2023. Retrieved from: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/201602/t20160215_229575.html
- [14] The Ministry of Civil Affairs. opinions on further improving the care and support system for LBCs and disadvantaged children in rural areas. April 30, 2020. Retrieved on July 20, 2023. Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2019-10/16/content_5440604.htm
- [15] Chang, F., Shi, Y., Shen, A., Kohrman, A., Li, K., Wan, Q., ... & Rozelle, S. Understanding the situation of China's left-behind children: A mixed-methods analysis. *The Developing Economies*, 2019, 57(1), 3-35.