Impact of Changes in the Policy of Caring for Left-behind Children on the Educational Problems of Left-behind Children

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Abstract. To make it possible to construct a socialist nation-state and implement the plan for rural revitalisation, it is crucial to address the educational problems of rural children who are left-behind. In this regard, this article starts from a policy-making and implementation perspective and considers the impact of policy changes in caring for those children on the educational problems of them. The article uses literature analysis to analyse China's policies related to left-behind children from 2003 to 2023. Through the method of textual analysis, the article concludes that the policy system has gone through three stages: the stage of constructing authoritative tools, the stage of cultivating capacity-building tools, and the stage of developing endogenous incentive tools. Currently, China's policies on caring for left-behind children have already become a comprehensive and systematic system, with the characteristics of multi-agency collaborative nurturing and have a certain mitigating effect on the educational problems of this group. The policy's impact on the education of those children is certain. However, there are still shortcomings in the implementation and evaluation of the current policy system, and there is a need to continue to improve the safety management system and the evaluation system, and implement the responsibilities of the main bodies, so that China can encourage the policy system related to children who are left-behind to be implementation.

Keywords: Left-behind Children, Educational Policy, Rural Revitalization.

1. Introduction

Having established a society that is moderately prosperous in all aspects and achieving its first 100-year objective, China is embarking on a new journey to develop a socialist and modernized country in an all-around manner in recent years. In order to 'build a socialist modernized country in all respects, the most arduous and burdensome task still lies in the countryside' [1]. In this regard, China has implemented a rural revitalization strategy, emphasizing that 'education plays a fundamental and pioneering role in rural revitalization', and calling for the vigorous development of rural education [2]. As more than half of China's school-age children are in rural areas, and the China Rural Education Development Report 2020-2022 shows that 'in 2020, 12,896,700 children will be left behind in rural areas, including 8,541,900 in elementary school and 4,354,800 in junior high schools, taking up 8.25% of the total school student population, leaving behind 12,896,700 children in the countryside' [3]. The scale of the left-behind children group is still huge. Therefore, rural education development requires addressing the issue of education for children who are left-behind.

In order to care for those left-behind children, solve the social pain points and implement the plan for rural revitalization, this article starts from the perspective of policy construction and implementation, and focuses on the theme of the policy of caring for children who are left-behind and the education problems of them, reflecting on the questions below: How does the caring policy on children who are left-behind build up and affect the education of them? What are the shortcomings of this policy system? In relation to the plan for rural revitalization, in what ways should China continue to improve the policy and advocate for the solution to the problem of children who are left behind in education? By exploring the above questions, the article hopes to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the contemporary educational environment of those children who are left-behind and provide some suggestions and directions for adjustment.

2. Basic Situation of Left-behind Children

As defined in the relevant State Council policy documents, left-behind children are 'minors who are under sixteen years old and have parents working outside the home, or one of whom is working outside the home and the other is unable to serve as a guardian' [4]. The government has encouraged the remaining rural labor force to work in economically developed areas, thus promoting the process of rural urbanization and industrialization. Since the home registration system has limitations and the impact of the dual urban-rural structure, those rural stay-at-home children in China appeared on a large scale, while many laborers flocked to the cities. Problems of those children arose in various kinds of areas, including psychology, life and education.

In terms of education, the absence of a mainstay of care for left-behind children has led to a number of problems at the individual level of children. Previously, the State failed to attach importance to the group of children who were left-behind in a timely manner, resulting in inadequate laws and regulations on left-behind children. The government failed to provide certain resources and formulate a long-term, professional assistance policy for the group. Schools lacked perfect infrastructure and adequate teachers, which were unable to provide students with good compulsory education, let alone meet their diversified needs. The social body hasn't set up specialized agencies, and hasn't played the role of resource integration to provide professional talent guidance and abundant financial support for left-behind children. The family was always absent, and it was difficult to care for and educate left-behind children through intergenerational rearing or foster care which makes up for the absence of the family.

As a result, left-behind children suffer from an extremely serious lack of education. In terms of learning, left-behind children aren't motivated to learn and lack good study habits, who are even leave school early or drop out. Taking a samples of 1,327 children in one of the cities of Guangdong Province as an example, researchers Zhao Yuhan and others have investigated the educational situation of children who were left-behind in the countryside from the point of view of comparison with children non-left-behind, finding that the former's academic achievement in language, mathematics and foreign languages was generally lower than the latter. It meant that there was a large gap between the two groups [5]. Psychologically, children lack targeted teaching and care, and are prone to lack of security and value judgment, resulting in psychological conditions such as low self-esteem, selfishness, indifference, and moral anomie. Scholar Gao Bancheng and his team assessed the mental health status of 20,898 rural children aged 3-6 in six provinces and cities, and found that 'rear children had higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, depressive tendencies and aggressive behavior than those of non-rear children' [6]. In addition, the absence of comprehensiveness and universal education is the reason. Children's own health and safety awareness are insufficient, and they may be undernourished and vulnerable to abuse or accidents.

3. Construction and Development of the Policy System for Caring for Left-behind Children

For the purpose of solve problems of children who are left-behind, China has enacted various policies related to those children at the national level, and has established a comprehensive policy system over the past two decades. Table 1 is a list of policies to help left-behind children.

Table 1. List of Policies to Help Left-behind Children (2003-2023)

Stage	Year	Department	File Name
Constructing Authoritative Tools	2003	State Council	Opinions on Further Improving Compulsory Education for Children of Farmers Moving to Cities for Labour and Employment
	2004	Ministry of Civil Affairs	Regulations on the Protection of Low-income Urban Families and Children Who Are Left-behind in Rural Areas
	2005	State Council	Several Opinions on Promoting the Construction of New Socialist Countryside
	2006	State Council	Several Opinions on Solving the Problem of Migrant Workers
	2007	Central Organization Department and other seven ministries	Notice on lmplementing the Spirit of the Central Govemment's Instruction on Actively Supporting for Rural Left-behind Migrant Children
Cultivating Capacity-building Tools	2010	State Council	Outline of the National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)
	2014	State Council	National Development Plan for Children in Poor Areas (2014-2020)
	2016	State Council	Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas
	2016	State Council	Views on Improving the Protection of Children in Need
	2016	State Council	Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Poverty Alleviation
	2017	Ministry of Civil Affairs and other five departments	Guiding Opinions on the Function of Social Workers in Rural Communities in the Protection and Care of Children Who Are Left-Behind
	2017	Nineteenth Congress	The Great Victory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era by Winning the Comprehensive Construction of a Well-off Society
	2018	Ministry of Civil Affairs	Notice of National Demonstration Activities for Care and Protection of Rural Left-behind Children and Protection of Children in Distress
	2019	Ministry of Civil Affairs and other ten departments	Opinions on How to Improve the System of Care and Services for Left-behind Children in Rural Areas and Children in Hardships
	2019	Ministry of Civil Affairs and other six departments	Guiding Opinions on Labor-intensive Enterprises to Further Strengthen Care Services for Children Left Behind in Rural Areas and Children in Difficult Situations
Developing Endogenous Incentive Tools	2020	Ministry of Civil Affairs	Notice on Organizing the National Activities of 'Policy Propaganda into Villages Dwellings' for the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas and Children in Difficult Situations
	2021	State Council	Opinions on Accelerating Agricultural and Rural Modernization by Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization
	2021	State Council	Opinions of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee and the State Council on the Effective Integration of Poverty Alleviation and Rural Revitalization Achievements
	2021	Ministry of Education and other four departments	Opinions on Consolidating and Expanding the Achievements of Education in Poverty Aleviation and Rural Revitalization
	2021	Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China	Outline of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan of the National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Vision 2035
	2022	State Council	Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on the Key Efforts to Comprehensively Promote Rural Revitalization in 2022
	2023	State Council	Opinions on the Key Efforts to Comprehensively Promote Rural Revitalization in 2023

The article analyses the text of China's left-behind children's care policy through the classification theory of policy tools, summarizing the formation process and characteristics of the policy system. 'A policy tool is the connecting mechanism between policy goals and policy actions' [7]. It has a variety of theoretical schools such as instrumentalism, processualism, consequentialism, constructivism and so on, which have different types of tools proposed by different scholars. Among them, Schneider and Ingram assumed that public policy allows people to try to do something that

they would not otherwise do. In this process, policy tools are the ones that lead people to overcome barriers to policy-related action. To this end, they proposed a classification of five types of tools. The first is known as authority, the second is incentives, the third is capacity-building, and the remaining two are symbolic and hortatory and learning respectively [8]. Combined with their classification, taking into account the influence of the special historical events in the building of the child care system, and the introduction of landmark policies, the changes in the policy tools for caring for rural rear children can be divided into the stage of constructing authoritative tools, the stage of cultivating capacity-building tools, and the stage of developing endogenous incentive tools [9].

Table 2. List of Key Left-behind Children Care Policies

Documents	Contents
Regulations on the Protection of Low-income Urban Families and Children Who Are Left-behind in Rural Areas	The concept of children who are left-behind and safeguards are introduced for the first time.
Notice on Implementing the Spirit of the Central Government's Instruction on Actively Supporting for Rural Left-behind Migrant Children	Macro-level directives to address various aspects of the problem of children who are left-behind
Outline of the National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)	From the perspective of education, it is proposed to improve the care and service system for left-behind children with a main body.
National Development Plan for Children in Poor Areas (2014-2020)	A macro perspective on the construction of a caring policy system for children who are left-behind
Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas	It is the first time that systematic consideration and institutional arrangements are made for children who are left-behind at the level of national governance. The guiding ideology and basic principles are put forward which is a major institutional innovation in the protection of minors, and specifies a system of care and services under the leadership of the govemnment, led by the civil administration and other multiple bodies.
Guiding Opinions on the Function of Social Workers in Rural Communities in the Protection and Care of Children Who Are Left-behind	Proposing support measures for left-behind children from the viewpoint of social organizations.
Notice of National Demonstration Activities for Care and Protection of Rural Left-behind Children and Protection of Children in Distress	Conducting domestic demonstration activities to help children who are left-behind and providing basic elements of care and protection services for local govemments and networked architecture.
Opinions on How to Improve the System of Care and Services for Left-behind Children in Rural Areas and Children in Hardships	Further improving the policy on care for left-behind children.
Guiding Opinions on Labor-intensive Enterprises to Further Strengthen Care Services for Children Left Behind in Rural Areas and Children in Difficult Situations	Calling on enterprises to assume social responsibility and further improve care services for children who are left-behind from a corporate perspective.
Notice on Organizing the National Activities of 'Policy Propaganda into Villages Dwellings' for the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas and Children in Difficult Situations	lmproving the situation of left-behind children through awareness-raising activities.
Opinions on Consolidating and Expanding the Achievements of Education in Poverty Aleviation and Rural Revitalization	Further proposals to strengthen education and care for rural children.
Outline of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan of the National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Vision 2035	Macro-level emphasis on building a care system for left-behind children
Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on the Key Efforts to Comprehensively Promote Rural Revitalization in 2022	Macro emphasis on caring for left-behind children

As Table 2 shows, the stage of constructing authoritative tools was held from 2003 to 2009, in which the state relied on the mandatory legal provisions to clarify the tasks of different subjects, but overall the policies were fragmented without forming a system. From 2010 to 2015, it was the

cultivation stage of capacity-building tools, in which the state began to provide a variety of resources and thought about measures for multiple subjects to collaborate in nurturing children, constructing the prototype of care policy system related to those children. Since the publication of the 'Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas' in 2016, the policy system has entered the stage of developing endogenous incentive tools, and the content of the policy has begun to be systematized, formally becoming a care and service system led by the government, civil affairs and other subjects in a concerted manner.

Today, China's policy system for caring for left-behind children tends to be systematic, comprehensive, and scientific. It has the characteristics of emphasizing government dominance, attaching importance to key participation in the school field, showing active support of community subjects, and complementing key shortcomings of family support. The government has taken the lead in building a policy system, starting with institutional reform, tilting of resources, policy orientation and publicity, working to reform the household registration system, establishing an inter-departmental coordinated mechanism, providing local teachers with counterpart support and financial assistance, so as to provide more institutional and resource support for the education of left-behind children. Schools play a key role in this process, starting with the upgrading of hardware and equipment, the improvement of teacher training requirements and the modification of curriculum. In this way, schools improved their conditions of themselves, promoting the construction of information technology, striving to build up the high quality of rural primary and middle school teaching staff, and trying to increase the teaching content of children's mental health education and safety education. Communities are actively supporting the care system, starting with the establishment of specialized institutions, the construction of talent teams, and an increase in support measures. They are clarifying the functions of rescue and protection agencies for minors and child welfare agencies, introducing social work professionals and volunteers and adopting the methods of pairing up to help or charitable assistance to left-behind children. Families are making up for their original absence by re-enforcing the main responsibilities of the family, including the main responsibility for guardianship and education.

Through the support of the policy system, China has eased the educational problems of the group of children left behind. In terms of system, China has built a four-in-one, three-level care system, and it has been continuously improved. In terms of infrastructure, there has been an increase in the number of boarding schools in rural areas, with school equipment being upgraded and care service positions being set up, allowing more left-behind children to stay in school to study. In terms of campus networks, for example, 'the proportion of elementary school with campus networks nationwide is 70.4%, of which 67.3% are in rural areas' and 'the proportion of junior middle schools with campus networks nationwide is 77.4%, of which 74.1% are in rural areas' [3]. In terms of the education and care team, the State's investment in education has continued to grow, the teachers in rural areas has been strengthened, the care teams have been increasingly enlarged, and the level of specialization in education and services has been raised. As a result, the overall educational problems of those children have been alleviated, and the number of children left behind has been reduced. According to statistics, '(the number of kids who are left-behind in 2020) has decreased by 7,295,700 compared to 2015, and the percentage of the school's overall enrollment of pupils has decreased by 6.18 percentage points compared to 2015, a reduction of 36.13%' [3].

4. Deficiencies and Optimization of the Care Policy System

Although the policy system of caring for children who are left-behind in China is relatively perfect now, there are still deficiencies in its implementation and evaluation of its effectiveness. Taking school education as an example, although the policy document emphasizes'aid primary and middle schools in enhancing mental health education and encouraging the psychology and personality of kids to develop in a healthy and pleasant way, identify and address psychological issues and undesirable behaviors as early as possible', or 'Residential schools should enhance the teacher service system,

take on the responsibility of managing student dormitories for safety, enrich campus cultural life' [4]. However, due to the limited resources, the schools themselves are not able to give such comprehensive and perfect care to the left-behind children. In daily teaching, rural education focuses more on the implementation of compulsory education itself, emphasizing the teaching of subject knowledge and test-taking education methods, without more opportunities to hold other rich and colorful activities. In this case, students can't develop their abilities in sports, art and other aspects, and lose the opportunity of the real shift to 'quality education'. At the same time, although the school may have the awareness of mental health education, it is difficult to provide left-behind children with more professional psychological advice and counseling because of the lack of teachers with professional qualities, which let the children lose the really spiritual care. The implementation of the caring policy system also has certain shortcomings in terms of school infrastructure, teachers' qualifications, funding and other aspects.

In this regard, China should take the rural revitalization strategy as an opportunity to continue to optimize its care policy system, so as to truly put the system in place and truly change the education dilemma of those children. In terms of policy implementation and evaluation, China should improve the management system and the evaluation system. In an effort to raise the bar for the education of children who are left-behind, the government needs to continue to strengthen its leading role. Local governments should refine the policy indicators within the framework of the national policy system and actively introduce systems that have practical benefits and are highly operational. It is only under the guidance of a detailed system that local governments will be able to press home the main responsibilities of themselves, schools, social organizations, families, and earnestly implement the policy of caring for left-behind children. In terms of schools, the local government should start from the actual development of rural schools, and develop a scientific evaluation system to make full use of the enthusiasm of all parties involved in education. It is necessary to incorporate the situation of rural teachers pairing up with those children, students' physical and mental health, and their level of cultural literacy into the school's evaluation system, so as to ultimately promote the education of those children with the help of a perfect education and teaching evaluation system [10]. On the family side, the government should continue to think about more support strategies, like providing parents of left-behind children with more opportunities for local employment, improving the guardianship capacity of guardians and facilitating their guardianship behaviors.

5. Conclusion

From a policy perspective, this article discusses the educational problems of children who are left-behind, comprehending the basic situation of those children and the policy system for caring for left-behind children. Then, the article explains that the current caring policy clearly defines the responsibilities of four main bodies: the government, the school, the society, and the family, which is systematic, comprehensive, and scientific, and has a certain positive impact on easing their educational problems. However, there are shortcomings in the implementation and evaluation of this policy system. Continuing to improve the management system and the evaluation system which can promote the implementation of the policy of caring for left-behind children are necessary.

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