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# Study on Psychological Capital and School Adaptation of Urban Left-behind Children in China

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**Abstract:** Objective: This study explores the current status and relationship between psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children. Methods: The Adolescent Psychological Capital Questionnaire and the School Adaptation Questionnaire were used to investigate students in 10 primary and secondary schools in Hubei Province, China. Results: Urban left-behind children's psychological capital and the average score of each dimension, school adaptation and the average score of each dimension were significantly higher than the median value. The psychological capital and school adaptation level of urban left-behind children are significantly lower than those of urban non-left-behind children, and at the same time significantly higher than those of rural left-behind children. There is a significant positive correlation between psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children. The psychological capital of urban left-behind children has a predictive effect on school adaptation and can explain 49% of the variation in school adaptation. Conclusion: The overall level of psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children is good. The school adaptation of urban left-behind children can be improved by raising the level of their psychological capital.

**Keywords:** Urban Left-behind Children; Psychological Capital; School Adaptation.

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of urban-rural integration in China and the influx of a large number of rural labourers to the cities, the issue of left-behind children in rural areas has been widely concerned by people from all walks of life. Left-behind children refer to children who are left at home to be raised, educated and managed by other elders because one or both parents work outside the home for a long time (usually more than half a year). Since their parents work outside the home, the needs and emotions of most left-behind children often cannot receive timely attention from their parents, which will inevitably affect their physical and mental development. However, with the increase in population mobility, left-behind children are not limited to rural areas, but also appear in urban areas. Parents of children in urban areas may also work in other places or go out to work, leaving their children alone in towns or in the care of others; or some parents may send their children to study in other places in order for them to have access to better educational resources and achieve better grades, resulting in the prolonged separation of parents from their children and the absence of affection.

According to statistics, in 2020, there were 41.77 million rural left-behind children and 25.16 million urban left-behind children in China [1]. At present, rural left-behind children have been paid attention to by schools, government and society in general. However, the relatively small number of urban left-behind children has not yet attracted more attention. Throughout the few existing studies on urban left-behind children in China, these studies have mainly focused on emotional, educational, and guardianship issues, but there is a lack of research on the mental health of urban left-behind children, for example, there are very few studies investigating the current state of the group's mental health, psychological resilience, subjective well-being, loneliness and other psychological characteristics.

At the end of the 20th century, some campus behavioral researchers, including Seligman, organized a positive psychology movement. They believed that positive psychology could effectively help people find and make reasonable use of their inner resources, so as to effectively improve their personal quality. Psychological capital is a kind of positive mental state that an individual shows in the process of growth and development, and it is a positive mental resource that an individual has. Psychological capital of left-behind children is the positive psychological state that children show when they successfully adapt to learning, emotion, behavior and interpersonal relationship in left-behind situations. Left-behind children with higher psychological capital may be better adapted to school.

In 2007, Luthans et al. [2] proposed that psychological capital is a positive psychological resource or state in the development of an individual, including four dimensions of confidence, hope, optimism and resilience. In the psychological capital studies of rural left-behind children, most studies show that the psychological capital of rural left-behind children is lower than that of rural non-left-behind children, and the psychological capital of them is related to their happiness, self-esteem and social anxiety, etc. [3][4][5]

When external stimuli occur, individuals will adjust their mental state and behavioral activities to meet the requirements of the changed environment, and this process is called adaptation. There are various adaptations throughout life, and for children under the age of 18, who spend most of their time in school, school adaptations can affect their physical and mental health development. Adolescents' school adjustment can be assessed in terms of their Academic adaptation, attitude towards school, peer relationships, teacher-student relationships and routine adjustment [6]. in

the studies involving left-behind children in rural areas, most of the results show that non-left-behind children have better school adjustment than left-behind children. The factors that affect left-behind children's school adaptation include teacher-student relationship, self-concept, mental health and learning engagement, etc. [7] [8].

Although many studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between psychological capital and school adaptation [9]-[14]. However, these studies usually take ordinary children as subjects. At present, there are almost no studies on psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children.

For urban left-behind children, the lack of parental companionship causes them to face many difficulties on their own, and in this process the level of their psychological capital will affect the resolution of their difficulties. In the growing process of urban left-behind children, they spend most of their time in school, and they need to adapt to school life. Therefore, on the basis of previous studies, this study intends to take urban left-behind children as subjects to explore the current situation of psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children and the correlation between them, so as to provide reference for the mental health counseling of urban left-behind children in China.

# 2. Methods

## 2.1. Participants

This study targeted students from grades four to nine in ten primary and secondary schools in Hubei Province, China. 4568 questionnaires were distributed in class units, and 4474 valid questionnaires were returned. Some students did not fill in some demographic variables. The specific distribution of students is as follows:

**Table 1.** Statistical table of demographic variables

| Category | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Urban Left-behind Children | 1004 | 22.5 |
| Urban non-left-behind children | 1848 | 41.3 |
| Rural left-behind children | 735 | 16.4 |
| Rural non-left-behind children | 887 | 19.8 |
| Total | 4474 | 100 |

## 2.2. Instruments

**The Adolescent Psychological Capital Questionnaire**

The questionnaire, compiled by Fang B. in 2012, includes four dimensions: hope, optimism, self-confidence and psychological resilience. The questionnaire has a total of 22 questions, using a 6-point scoring method, ranging from "completely inconsistent" to "completely consistent", with scores ranging from 1 to 6. According to the total average score of the questionnaire, the higher the score, the higher the level of psychological capital. The internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire ranged from 0.72 to 0.92, and the cumulative contribution rate of the variance of exploratory factor analysis was 61.32%, indicating that the questionnaire had good reliability and validity [15]. In this study, the Kronbach α coefficient of the samples ranged from 0.73 to 0.92, indicating that the questionnaire had good reliability.

**The School Adaptation Questionnaire**

This questionnaire was compiled by Na Cui in 2008[6], and studies have proved that this questionnaire is also applicable to primary school students [16]. There are 27 questions in the questionnaire, which are divided into five dimensions: academic adaptation, attitude towards school, peer relationships, teacher-student relationships and routine adaptation. The questionnaire adopts a 5-point score, and all questions are assigned from 1 (completely inconsistent) to 5 (completely consistent). The higher the total average score, the better the school adaptation. The internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire ranged from 0.78 to 0.95, indicating high reliability. Correlation analysis was used to test its structural validity, and the results showed that the correlation between all factors was above 0.7, and the correlation between all factors and the total questionnaire was also above 0.7, so the validity of the questionnaire was high. The Kronbach α coefficient of the samples in this study is between 0.68 and 0.83, indicating that the questionnaire has good reliability.

## 2.3. Data Analytic Strategy

In this study, spss25.0 was used to process and analyze the data. This study uses descriptive statistics on the psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children, uses independent sample t-test to compare the differences between urban left-behind children and urban non-left-behind children or rural left-behind children, and uses correlation analysis and regression analysis to explore the relationship between psychological capital and school adjustment of urban left-behind children.

# 3. Results

## 3.1. Analysis of Psychological Capital Results

### 3.1.1. The Current Situation of Psychological Capital of Urban Left-Behind Children

The descriptive statistics of the total mean and the mean of each dimension of psychological capital are as follows:

**Table 2.** Total mean of psychological capital and mean of each dimension

| | minimum value | maximum value | M | SD | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| hope | 1.00 | 6.00 | 4.37 | 1.09 | 25.54 | 0.00 |
| optimism | 1.00 | 6.00 | 4.78 | 1.16 | 35.91 | 0.00 |
| self-confidence | 1.00 | 6.00 | 4.10 | 1.18 | 16.67 | 0.00 |
| psychological resilience | 1.00 | 6.00 | 4.40 | 1.16 | 25.07 | 0.00 |
| Psychological capital | 1.45 | 6.00 | 4.41 | 0.89 | 31.80 | 0.00 |

With the median of 3.5 as the test variable, it can be seen from Table 2 that the total mean and the mean of each dimension of psychological capital of urban left-behind children are significantly higher than the median.

### 3.1.2. Comparison of the Differences of Psychological Capital between Urban Left-Behind Children and Non-Left-Behind Children

The differences between the two are shown in the following table:

**Table 3.** Differences in psychological capital between urban left-behind children and non-left-behind children

| | left-behind children | M | SD | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| hope | Yes | 4.37 | 1.09 | -3.79 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.53 | 1.08 | | |
| optimism | Yes | 4.78 | 1.16 | -3.61 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.94 | 1.16 | | |
| self-confidence | Yes | 4.10 | 1.18 | -3.71 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.28 | 1.23 | | |
| psychological resilience | Yes | 4.40 | 1.16 | -3.54 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.56 | 1.15 | | |
| Psychological capital | Yes | 4.41 | 0.89 | -4.53 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.57 | 0.88 | | |

It can be seen from Table 3 that there are significant statistical differences in the means of psychological capital and the means of various dimensions between urban left-behind children and urban non-left-behind children ($p<0.05$), and the mean of psychological capital and the means of four dimensions of hope, optimism, self-confidence and psychological resilience of urban left-behind children are all lower than those of non-left-behind children.

#### 3.1.3. Comparison of the Differences in Psychological Capital between Urban Left-Behind Children and Rural Left-Behind Children

The differences between the two are shown in the following table:

**Table 4.** Differences in psychological capital between urban and rural left-behind children

| | Area | M | SD | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| hope | urban | 4.37 | 1.08 | 11.44 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 3.75 | 1.10 | | |
| optimism | urban | 4.78 | 1.15 | 5.50 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 4.45 | 1.36 | | |
| self-confidence | urban | 4.10 | 1.17 | 6.31 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 3.70 | 1.37 | | |
| psychological resilience | urban | 4.42 | 1.15 | 4.62 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 4.15 | 1.19 | | |
| Psychological capital | urban | 4.42 | 0.88 | 10.40 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 3.94 | 0.90 | | |

As can be seen from Table 4, there are significant statistical differences in the mean of psychological capital and the mean of each dimension between urban left-behind children and rural left-behind children ($p<0.05$), and the scores of psychological capitals and four dimensions of urban left-behind children are higher than those of rural left-behind children.

## 3.2. Analysis of School Adaptation Results

### 3.2.1. The Current Situation of School Adaptation for Urban Left-Behind Children

The descriptive statistics of the total mean and the mean of each dimension of school adaptation are as follows:

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics of school adaptation and its dimensions

| | minimum value | maximum value | M | SD | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Academic adaptation | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.75 | 0.85 | 28.55 | 0.00 |
| Attitude towards school | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.17 | 0.79 | 48.33 | 0.00 |
| Peer relationships | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.32 | 0.82 | 52.53 | 0.00 |
| Teacher-student relationships | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.89 | 0.93 | 30.85 | 0.00 |
| Routine adaptation | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.39 | 0.77 | 58.92 | 0.00 |
| School adaptation | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.12 | 0.65 | 53.22 | 0.00 |

With the median of 3 as the test variable, it can be seen from Table 5 that total mean and the mean of each dimension of school adaptation of urban left-behind children are significantly higher than the median.

### 3.2.2. Comparison of the Differences of School Adaptation between Urban Left-Behind Children and Non-Left-Behind Children

The differences between the two are shown in the following table:

**Table 6.** Differences in school adaptation between urban left-behind children and non-left-behind children

| | left-behind children | M | SD | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Academic adaptation | Yes | 3.75 | 0.85 | -3.84 | 0.00 |
| | No | 3.87 | 0.83 | | |
| Attitude towards school | Yes | 4.17 | 0.79 | -2.55 | 0.01 |
| | No | 4.25 | 0.80 | | |
| Peer relationships | Yes | 4.32 | 0.82 | -2.29 | 0.02 |
| | No | 4.40 | 0.82 | | |
| Teacher-student relationships | Yes | 3.89 | 0.93 | -4.52 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.04 | 0.89 | | |
| Routine adaptation | Yes | 4.39 | 0.77 | -3.16 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.48 | 0.70 | | |
| School adaptation | Yes | 4.12 | 0.65 | -4.24 | 0.00 |
| | No | 4.23 | 0.62 | | |

As can be seen from Table 6, the mean of school adaptation and the mean of each dimension of urban non-left-behind children are significantly higher than those of urban left-behind children ($p<0.05$).

### 3.2.3. Comparison of the Differences in School Adaptation between Urban Left-Behind Children and Rural Left-Behind Children

The differences between the two are shown in the following

table:

**Table 7.** Differences in school adaptation between urban and rural left-behind children

| | Area | M | SD | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Academic adaptation | urban | 3.75 | 0.85 | 10.38 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 3.31 | 0.88 | | |
| Attitude towards school | urban | 4.17 | 0.79 | 11.14 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 3.68 | 0.96 | | |
| Peer relationships | urban | 4.33 | 0.82 | 5.96 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 4.08 | 0.91 | | |
| Teacher-student relationships | urban | 3.89 | 0.93 | 8.69 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 3.45 | 1.07 | | |
| Routine adaptation | urban | 4.39 | 0.77 | 5.73 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 4.16 | 0.85 | | |
| School adaptation | urban | 4.13 | 0.65 | 10.89 | 0.00 |
| | rural | 3.73 | 0.73 | | |

As can be seen from Table 7, there are significant statistical differences in the mean of school adaptation and the mean of each dimension between urban left-behind children and rural left-behind children ($p<0.05$), and the scores of school adaptation and five dimensions of urban left-behind children are higher than those of rural left-behind children.

## 3.3. The Relationship between Psychological Capital and School Adaptation of Urban Left-Behind Children

### 3.3.1. Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis results between the psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children are as follows:

**Table 8.** Correlation analysis of psychological capital and school adaptation

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| hope | 0.74** | 0.48** | 0.29** | 0.49** | 0.40** | 0.62** |
| optimism | 0.39** | 0.45** | 0.37** | 0.36** | 0.23** | 0.47** |
| self-confidence | 0.42** | 0.38** | 0.34** | 0.40** | 0.27** | 0.48** |
| psychological resilience | 0.39** | 0.35** | 0.29** | 0.32** | 0.19** | 0.42** |
| Psychological capital | 0.70** | 0.56** | 0.40** | 0.54** | 0.39** | 0.68** |

1.Academic adaptation, 2. Attitude towards school, 3. Peer relationships, 4. Teacher-student relationships, 5. Routine adaptation, 6. School adaptation; **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

### 3.3.2. Regression Analysis

In order to further understand the extent to which the psychological capital of urban left-behind children can predict the variation of school adaptation, regression analysis was conducted with psychological capital as the predictor variable and school adaptation as the dependent variable, and the results are shown in Table 3.14, indicate that three dimensions of psychological capital have a significant impact on school adaptation, namely, "hope", "optimism" and "self-confidence", which together explain 49% of the overall variance.

**Table 9.** Regression analysis of psychological capital and school adaptation

| Dependent variable | predictor variable | B | β | t | **R** | **$R^2$** | **F** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School adaptation | hope | 0.66 | 0.41 | 13.34** | 0.70 | 0.49 | 203.54 |
| | optimism | 0.76 | 0.20 | 6.58** | | | |
| | self-confidence | 1.01 | 0.28 | 10.37** | | | |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

# 4. Discussion

## 4.1. Analysis of the Characteristics of Psychological Capital of Urban Left-Behind Children

Regarding the analysis of the current state of psychological capital, previous studies have compared mean of psychological capital and mean of the dimensions with the median of the scale [15] [17] [18]. The results of this study show that the total mean score and the mean scores of each dimension of the psychological capital of urban left-behind children are significantly higher than the median, indicating that the overall level of psychological capital of urban left-behind children is good. Perhaps because their parents are away from them for a long time, they have to face difficulties on their own, which makes them more resilient after experiencing trials and tribulations [19]. Therefore, the psychological capital of urban left-behind children is generally at a high level.

Comparing the differences in psychological capital between urban left-behind children and rural left-behind children, it was found that the total mean score and the scores of each dimension of psychological capital of urban left-behind children were significantly higher than those of rural left-behind children. Zhou et al. found that the low level of psychological capital of rural left-behind children may be related to their living environment [20]. In this study, the living environment of urban left-behind children is better than that of rural left-behind children, and most urban children do not need to worry about food, clothing, housing and transport, and the quality of education in urban areas is much better than that in rural areas, which had a positive impact on children's growth process. As a result, the level of psychological capital of urban left-behind children is higher than that of rural left-behind children.

Comparing the differences in psychological capital between urban left-behind children and urban non-left-behind children, it was found that the scores of psychological capitals and each dimension of urban left-behind children were significantly lower than those of urban non-left-behind children, which is similar to the findings of Keng Li [21]. In the process of children's growth, they will be influenced by multiple factors such as family, school, and society, and the family is the most initial and important environment for every child's growth. When parents are at home, children can seek help from their parents in time if they encounter difficulties outside, and parents can also guide children's thinking and give them care from different aspects. Dongxia Wei's [22] study shows that parents going out will increase the depression level of left-behind children and reduce their self-

confidence. When left-behind children encounter setbacks outside, their emotions tend to become unstable, and their inner strength is undermined by the lack of parental companionship and support [23]. All of these factors may lead to lower level of psychological capital in urban left-behind children than in non-left-behind children.

## 4.2. Analysis of Characteristics of School Adaptation of Urban Left-Behind Children

Regarding the analysis of the current situation of school adaptation, previous studies have compared the total mean of school adaptation and the mean of each dimension with the median of the scale [24][6][25]. In this study, the total mean score and the mean scores of each dimension of school adaptation of urban left-behind children were significantly higher than the median, indicating that their overall level of school adjustment was good. Yuanyuan Zhao's [26] study found that the absence of parents resulted in the left-behind children not being able to receive timely feedback on certain aspects of their needs, and in order to compensate for this, the children would increase their energy investment in school, study hard, work hard to adapt to school life, and establish good interpersonal relationships with their classmates and teachers and so on. So as a whole, urban left-behind children have a high level of school adaptability.

Comparing the differences in school adaptation between urban left-behind children and rural left-behind children, it was found that the total mean of school adaptation and the scores of each dimension of urban left-behind children were significantly higher than those of rural left-behind children. Research by Qing Liu [27] found that the low school adaptation level of left-behind children in rural areas may be due to the following reasons. First, it may be because there are very few students in rural areas, with less than ten people in a class, and the circle of communication is relatively limited, while in urban schools, there are usually 40-50 students in a class. Left-behind children in cities have more opportunities to make friends to make up for the emptiness caused by their parents not being at home. Secondly, the educational environment in rural areas is relatively poor. When students encounter difficulties in learning, they may be too timid to ask the teacher. In addition, they have limited learning resources, so they will have more difficulties in adapting to their studies. Finally, life in rural schools is relatively monotonous, while urban schools often have colorful campus activities to help students adapt to school. As a result, urban left-behind children are better able to adapt to school than rural left-behind children.

Comparing the differences in school adaptation between urban left-behind children and non-left-behind children, it was found that the scores of school adaptation and various dimensions of urban left-behind children were lower than those of urban non-left-behind children. This is consistent with the results of Aipin Zhang [23]. The reason for this phenomenon may be that when parents are at home, students can turn to their parents for help or seek help from online resources when they encounter academic problems., whereas when parents are not at home and children are left in the hands of the older generation, the older people can only provide children with help with food, clothing, housing, and transport, and are unable to provide timely guidance for academic problems. In addition, when the non-left-behind children encounter peer relationship problems, their parents can provide guidance to them. Finally, if children grow up with their parents, then their parents may establish a sense of rules in their lives, and if the children's sense of rules is well established, then there will be no obvious difficulties in adapting to school rules and regulations [20]. Therefore, left-behind children's school adaptation ability is weaker than that of non-left-behind children.

The reason for this phenomenon may be that when parents are at home, students can turn to their parents for help or seek help from online resources when they encounter academic problems. However, when parents are not at home and the children are managed by the older generation, the old people can only provide the children with help in terms of food, clothing, housing and transportation, and cannot provide timely guidance for academic problems. In addition, when non-left-behind children encounter difficulties in peer relationships, parents can provide guidance to them. Finally, if children grow up with their parents, then their parents may establish a sense of rules for their children in life. If the child has a good sense of rules, then there will be no obvious difficulty in adapting to school rules and regulations [20]. It can be seen that non-left-behind children have a better family environment than left-behind children. They grow up under the guidance and companionship of their parents, which helps them better adapt to changes in the environment. Therefore, the overall school adaptation of urban non-left-behind children is better than that of urban left-behind children.

## 4.3. Analysis of the Relationship between Psychological Capital and School Adaptation

### 4.3.1. Related Analysis

This study shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the total mean score and the dimension scores of urban left-behind children's psychological capital and the total mean score and the dimension scores of school adaptation. In other words, the higher the level of psychological capital of urban left-behind children, the stronger their school adaptation ability. This result is similar to the results of Yushi He's study on junior high school students [28].

Children with high psychological capital will deal with negative events in their lives with an optimistic attitude. They have high resilience and are able to adapt quickly to a variety of school rules and difficult lessons, and they believe that they can integrate well into the school and develop good interpersonal relationships with their classmates and teachers. In order for children to better adapt to school life, their parents can provide more care and guidance to their children and actively communicate and co-operate with teachers to help them build positive psychological qualities such as self-confidence, optimism and resilience, so that they can be full of hope for their lives, and in this way enhance their psychological capital level, which will enable them to feel happy and contented in their school life, and thus enable them to better adapt to school.

### 4.3.2. Regression Analysis

Further regression analyses revealed that the three dimensions of "hope", "optimism" and "self-confidence" in the psychological capital of urban left-behind children can positively predict their school adaptation ability, and the three dimensions together explain 49% of the variation in school adaptation. This is similar to the findings of Chao Luan [29].

Hope is a positive motivation for children to accomplish tasks and face difficulties. If children show positive aspirations in learning, socializing, etc., it will contribute greatly to children's resilience. Optimism is a positive attribution that children have, optimistic children are able to think positively when they experience setbacks and are able to quickly adjust accordingly to improve school adaptation [10]. Self-confidence is children's prejudgment of their ability to perform a task, namely self-efficacy [29]. Children who are confident will not give up easily no matter what difficulties they encounter, and they will do their best even if it is beyond their ability, and these children are also more capable of school adaptation. Thus, it seems that school adaptation can be improved by increasing the psychological capital of urban left-behind children.

# 5. Conclusion

The overall level of psychological capital and school adaptation of urban left-behind children in China is good. School adaptation of urban left-behind children can be improved by enhancing their psychological capital.

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