Root Causes of Studying Weariness among Left-Behind Children in China

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to disclose the attitudes of Chinese left-behind children towards school. To this end, the academic wellbeing of left-behind students was compared with that of the other students in an elementary school of a rural, ethnic minority area. Through a questionnaire survey, the learning attitudes and academic performance of the target students were assessed against Du Ningjuan’s Studying Weariness Scale of Young Children. The results show that the left-behind children had significantly higher scores in terms of negative attitude, external attribution and low study efficacy, and held a more negative view of learning performance than the other students. The survey results were also examined relative to gender and grade. Though the discussion on the research results, several strategies were presented to ease the study weariness among the left-behind children. This research sheds new light on the education of left-behind children.

Key Words: Elementary School, Rural Ethnic Minority Areas, Left-behind Children, Studying Weariness

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Introduction
Since the late 20th century, the rapid urbanization in China has induced a massive migration of labour forces from rural areas to big cities. According to the 2016 Monitoring and Survey Report on Rural Migrant Workers issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the number of rural migrant workers reached 273.95 million in 2016, up by 31.72 million from the level in 2012 (Wu & Li, 2015). Around half of them (53%) were aged between 21 and 40, a perfect age range for marriage and childbearing. 90% of these migrant workers worked in urban areas alone, leaving their families behind. Their children are generally referred to as the left-behind children.

The left-behind children, living with the absence of one or both parents, have attracted the attention of many researchers. The Status Report of China’s Rural Left-behind Children and Migrant Children (All-China Women’s Federation, 2013) reveals that the number of left-behind children stood at 61.03 million in 2013, making up 38% of all children in rural areas, and 22% of the total number of children in China (Orubu, 2016). Among them, 39% were pre-schoolers (0~5 years old), 32% were elementary school students, and 16% were secondary school students. With the deepening of urbanization, the number of left-behind children is on the rise (Zhan & Chen, 2013). When both parents leave to work in urban areas, some children are taken care of by grandparents or family friends, some live by themselves, and some are boarded and lodged at the school. The unstable living conditions are bound to have an impact on the academic wellbeing of these children.

Previous research has shown that the left-behind children are less adaptive than other students. For instance, Lee and Allaway (2002) depicted left-behind children as self-abased,
depressed and hostile toward parents, and noted the indifference, depression and self-enclosure of them in elementary school, especially girls. Browne and Cudeck (1992) discovered that the rate of problematic behaviours is much higher among left-behind children than other children. However, there is no report on the attitude of left-behind children towards school.

To make up for the gap, this paper attempts to compare the academic wellbeing of left-behind and other elementary school students in a rural, ethnic minority area of China. Considering the previous research, the left-behind children are assumed to perceive their learning performance less positively than other children, as evidenced by their negative attitude, external attribution and low study efficacy. These evidences were also examined relative to gender and grade. Besides, an open-ended questionnaire survey was performed to understand the perspectives of the left-behind children on elementary education.

**Methods**

**Participants**

This research targets 225 students in grades 2~4 from an elementary school in rural Hunan, China. As the only elementary school in the region, this school is almost exclusively attended by children of the Hmong group. During the research period, there were 690 students in 15 classes across the school, of whom 400 were boarders. Of all students, 52.5% (362) were left-behind children. The school had 48 faculty members, of whom 11 were over 50, 12 were in their 40s, 21 in their 30s and 5 in their 20s. The majority of teachers (69%) were males. The original intention of our research was to focus on the students in grades 1~4, because the scale, Du Ningjuan’s Studying Weariness Scale of Young Children, was designed for children younger than 10. However, the field research revealed that grade 1 students had difficulty completing the questionnaire. For the robustness of results, the target range was adjusted to the students in grades 2~4.

The responses to the questionnaires survey were inspected. Seven participants with invalid responses were excluded from the sample, leaving 218 valid participants, including 62 in grade 2, 63 in grade 3 and 93 in grade 4. The valid participants were aged between 7 and 9. 124 (57%) of them were girls. The final sample includes 135 left-behind students and 83 other students.

**Data analysis**

All data were imported to IBM SPSS Statistics V22.0 for analysis.

**Research Results**

**Comparison between left-behind students and other students**

Five independent samples t-tests were conducted to identify the differences between left-behind students and other students against the Studying Weariness Scale of Young Children (Table 1).

The first test reveals a significant difference in learning performance between left-behind students and other students (t=2.37, p=0.019), in that left-behind students (M=2.83, SD=1.87) scored higher on learning performance than the other students (M=2.23, SD=1.74).

The second test reveals a significant difference in negative attitude between left-behind students and other students (t=2.10, p=0.037), in that left-behind students (M=1.13, SD=1.48) scored higher on negative attitude than the other students (M=0.75, SD=1.17).

The third test reveals no significant difference in external attribution between left-behind students and other students (t=0.78, p=0.434).

The fourth test reveals a significant difference in low study efficacy between left-behind students and other students (t=2.80,
p=0.006) in that left-behind students (M=1.40, SD=1.17) scored higher on low study efficacy than the other students (M=0.94, SD=1.19).

The final test reveals a significant difference in overall studying weariness between left-behind students and other students (t=2.50, p=0.013) in that left-behind students (M=6.81, SD=4.62) scored higher on studying weariness than the other students (M=5.23, SD=4.39).

Table 1. Comparison of Studying Weariness Dimensions Between Left-Behind Students and Non-Left-Behind Students in Grades 2, 3, and 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Left-behind M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning performance</td>
<td>2.83 (1.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative attitude</td>
<td>1.13 (1.48)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External attribution</td>
<td>1.45 (1.21)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low study efficacy</td>
<td>1.40 (1.17)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score</td>
<td>6.81 (4.62)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 135. The learning performance score is interpreted in the reverse direction; higher scores indicate higher problems with learning performance.

Comparison between male and female students

Another five independent samples t-tests were carried out to pinpoint the differences between male and female students against the Studying Weariness Scale of Young Children (Table 2).

The first test discloses a significant difference in learning performance between male and female students (t=3.96, p<0.01) in that male students (M=7.63, SD=5.02) scored higher on studying weariness than female students (M=5.19, SD=3.95).

The second test discloses a significant difference in external attribution between male and female students (t=3.71, p<0.01) in that male students (M=1.79, SD=1.43) scored higher on external attribution than female students (M=1.12, SD=1.07).

The fourth test discloses a significant difference in low study efficacy between male and female students (t=2.82, p=0.005) in that male students (M=1.49, SD=1.26) scored higher on low study efficacy than female students (M=1.03, SD=1.12).

The fifth test discloses a significant difference in overall studying weariness between male and female students (t=3.81, p<0.01) in that male students (M=7.35, SD=5.02) scored higher on studying weariness than female students (M=5.23, SD=4.39).

Comparison of students in different grades

Next, five one-way analyses of variance (one-way ANOVA) were performed to locate the differences between students in different grades against the Studying Weariness Scale of Young Children (Table 3).
across the three grades (F=3.98, p=0.02). Post-hoc analysis finds that students in grade 2 (M=1.71, SD=1.09) scored higher on external attribution than those in grade 3 (M=1.08, SD=1.22).

The fourth one-way ANOVA shows a significant difference in low study efficacy across the three grades (F=5.70, p=.004). Post-hoc analysis finds that students in grade 4 (M=1.53, SD=1.16) scored higher on low study efficacy than those in grade 2 (M=0.92, SD=1.11) and grade 3 (M=1.08, SD=1.25).

The final one-way ANOVA shows no significant difference in overall studying weariness across the three grades (F=2.51, p=.084).

Other Results
Apart from the above results, other information was collected concerning the children’s attitudes toward school.

When asked about the reasons for them to love a particular subject, the students were most likely to choose "being fond of the teacher" (26.1%), followed by "having fun in class" (24.1%) and "interesting lecturing methods" (21.3%) (Table 4).

Table 4. “Why Do You Like This Class?” Response Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being fond of teachers of this subject</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having fun in class</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ interesting methods of lecturing</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can play games</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having hands-on activities</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having no homework</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about their preferred type of homework, the students were most likely to choose "the homework involving hand operation" (52.8%) (Table 6).

Table 6. “What Kind of Homework Would You Prefer?” Response Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hand operation</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written work, worksheets</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for oral test</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about their most liked teacher, the students made choices that reflect the specific features of the school (Table 7).

Table 7. “What Kind of Teacher Do You Like?” Response Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has fun in class</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can speak Hmong dialect</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can get attention from the teacher</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot speak Hmong dialect</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common choice was "making fun in class" (34.1%) followed by "speaking Hmong dialect" (33.8%) and "paying attention to students" (25.1%).

When asked about the reasons for them to dislike a particular subject, the students were most likely to choose "not having fun in class" (50.4%) followed by "having a lot of homework" (36.6%) (Table 8).

Table 8. “Why Don’t You Like This Class?” Response Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can’t have fun in class</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a lot of homework</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t like the teacher</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion
Previous research has proved that left-behind students face more difficulties in learning than others, including low awareness, poor enthusiasm and the lack of initiative (Ren & Tang, 2014). This result agrees well with the findings in our research. The undesirable academic wellbeing of left-behind children is attributed to two factors. First, these students, lacking the company of parents, often suffer from spiritual fatigue and attention deficit; Second, the caretakers of these children are less educated...
and busy with housework and farm work. In weariness in learning because it is unlikely to get help from family members if they encounter learning difficulties.

Compared with left-behind girls, the left-behind boys were highly weary of learning. The poor performance of left-behind boys in learning, discipline and interpersonal relation has become a major concern among teachers and parents. These boys are even prone to committing juvenile crimes. The trend that boys are outperformed by girls is evident in elementary schools. The rules in Chinese elementary schools are extremely strict. It is easier for girls to adapt to these rules and become “good students” in the eyes often violate the disciplines and leave a bad impression on teachers. In return, the harsh treatment from teachers may dampen the confidence and enthusiasm of male students, leading to poor academic performance. In schools that rank students by test scores, the left-behind boys are more and more unpopular over time (Wang, 2011).

There is a possible connection between teachers’ behaviours and the studying weariness of rural left-behind children. Many rural teachers act as secondary caretakers of left-behind children, providing life guidance in addition to teaching (Qian, 2013). The learning attitude of a student directly hinges on his/her relationship with the teacher, the skills of the teacher, and his/her in-class experience. To ease the studying weariness of left-behind students, it is necessary to improve the teaching skills of the teacher, create a relax and attractive learning atmosphere, and forge a harmonious teacher-student relationship.

The complex language environment also bears on the academic performance of the left-behind children. During the class, the students communicated with their teachers in Hmong dialect, while the textbooks were written in Chinese (which should be read in mandarin). Statistics show that nearly all the students in the school use Hmong dialect as the first language and has low proficiency in mandarin. Therefore, the left-behind children are faced with the challenge of being Chinese as a second language (CLS) learners (Guo, 2012). That is why the school ranks at the bottom in the county-wide Chinese language competition.

Conclusions
To ease the studying weariness of left-behind students in the lower grades, the most urgent tasks include eliminating the language barrier, and improving educational services through the cooperation between family, school and government. Family education plays an irreplaceable role thanks to the intimacy between children and their caretakers. The family members taking care of left-behind children should work hard to promote the children’s attitudes toward school and their academic achievement. School is like a second home for left-behind children, especially for younger boarders. Besides imparting knowledge to students, the school should provide guidance to caretakers of left-behind children and evaluate their services to these students. In particular, the teachers should attend to the students’ emotional needs in addition to teaching knowledge. Finally, the government must supervise the use of educational resources and introduce new resources that can promote a healthy and harmonious environment for left-behind children.

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