



# Research on Social Support of Rural Left-behind Children in Dafang County

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## Abstract

Children left behind in rural areas are an 'adjunct' to China's contemporary social transformation. This group is not only numerous but will continue to exist for a long time to come. The lack of social support is one of the major problems encountered by children left behind in rural areas of Dafang County during their growth. The researcher investigated the Y Primary School in Dafang County to explore ways of addressing the social support issues of rural children left behind in the area through a social work approach. The case study method and the interview method were adopted for this study. The researcher will interview a representative sample of three rural left-behind children who lack social support in their lives, studies, and psychology. The findings of this study offer solutions for improving the external support system for children left behind in rural areas. The researcher emphasizes the vigorous application of social work methods to mobilize multiple external social forces to help left-behind children.

## Keywords

Left Behind Children, Social Support, Charities, Social Work, Community Work

## 1. Introduction

Dafang County, Guizhou Province, China, is a county that typically relies on agriculture for its development. The county has a sizeable rural population but little arable land, which is very poor and yields low harvests. Many local farmers have gone to work in the developed eastern part of China as they have no land to cultivate. Most farmers leave their children behind in the local area in the care of other guardians, and these children become left-behind children. In 2021, the number of students in compulsory education in Dafang County was 122,403, including 25,378 left-behind children in rural areas, accounting for 20.7% of the total number of schools (Wang, 2021), which is a considerable number.

The lack of social support for left-behind children in rural areas and the absence of a social network support system make the level of care for left-behind children far from adequate. At school, some left-behind children are not cared for by their teachers because of their poor academic performance, and their peers discriminate against them. When left-behind children are at home, their guardians are either grandparents, who have limited energy and can only take care of the children's food. The guardians are relatives who are often unwilling to care for the children too much. The guardians' attention to the left-behind children is inadequate, resulting in some left-behind children showing a strong sense of loneliness and insecurity. There are also some rural children left behind whose families are poor and living in hardship, resulting in the physical development of the children left behind being seriously affected. These left-behind children lack adequate support from external forces and are in a difficult situation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Wen (2019) argues that social support is a selective social behavior in which specific social networks use specific material and spiritual means to provide unpaid help to socially disadvantaged people.

The researcher believes a social work approach should be fully employed to solve the problem. Specifically, a community work model is established to respond. The researcher will establish a social network support map through community work to help them increase social support from five areas: charities, volunteers, schools, social workers, and relatives, and expand social resources so that rural left-behind children can receive more help.

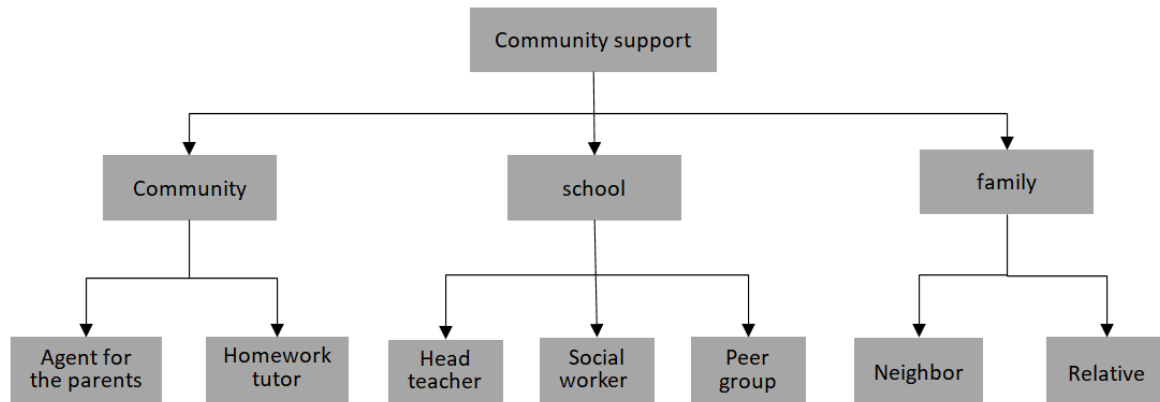


Figure 1. Building a social support network system for left-behind children.

## 3. Methods and Sample

The researcher studied the social support situation of rural left-behind children at Y Primary School. The researcher worked as a social worker at Y Primary School for six months. Respondents were first recommended by the classroom teachers who better understood the students' situation. The researcher revisited respondents recommended by class teachers to confirm that they met the researcher's requirements and criteria. After the survey, the researcher finally identified three left-behind children as interviewees. They all lacked support from external social forces and were mainly faced with poor academic performance, family poverty, and psychological isolation. The researcher will conduct one-to-one in-depth interviews. The basic information about the three left-behind children is as follows:

Table 1. Participant Information

|    |           |      |    |             |                  |                |
|----|-----------|------|----|-------------|------------------|----------------|
| P1 | Student 1 | boy  | 12 | Sixth grade | Y Primary school | Social support |
| P2 | Student 2 | boy  | 13 | Sixth grade | Y Primary school | Social support |
| P3 | Student 3 | girl | 12 | Sixth grade | Y Primary school | Social support |

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Difficulties encountered

Paulson & Berg (2019) consider social support as the sum of behaviors of specific social networks that help socially disadvantaged groups with specific material and spiritual means without compensation. As a specific vulnerable group, rural left-behind children need reliable and unpaid help from social forces, which helps to build a social network support system. Specifically, children need support from external systems for academic and spiritual purposes. However, in interviews with three interviewees, the researcher found that this network support was weak and that local rural left-behind children did not have access to solid external support.

*What bothered me most was that my family was impoverished. I rarely ate meat and was malnourished. I often get dizzy in class and cannot concentrate on my studies. At the same time, I feel weak, so I don't like to play sports with my classmates. I have not worn new clothes for two years. (Student 1)*

*My academic performance is so bad. I want to study well, but my mum and dad are not around to guide me. My*

*aunt and uncle also don't have time to show me my studies. Because of my poor academic foundation, my teachers ignore me, and other students don't want to explain topics to me. (Student 2)*

*I found life difficult. No one cared what was going on in my mind. I felt depressed because I had no one to talk to whenever I felt aggrieved or sad. I often feel dull and empty inside. (Student 3)*

## **4.2 Carrying out community work**

Karen and Jody (2018) believe that community work is a community organization and mobilization of the masses to participate in community activities and contribute to community development. The researcher believes that the community should mobilize the forces around the left-behind children to help them, with the relatives of the left-behind children being an excellent external support force. Social workers should work to encourage the relatives of left-behind children in their hometowns to lend a helping hand. At the same time, for families with children left behind in poverty, social workers should seek financial help from a wide range of outside sources through the community, especially charitable organizations, to obtain help from them.

### **4.2.1 Preparation phase**

The main task of this phase was to gather information about the clients, find those who needed help, and establish a professional relationship with them. Before the first interview, the researcher learned about student 1, student 2, and student 3 through various channels. The learning, living, and emotional problems encountered by the three rural left-behind children are typical and representative of those left behind. They need external support through community work. Through meetings with the three left-behind children, the social worker expressed that she would improve their current situation through community work actions. The three left-behind children were thrilled to accept and cooperate with the social worker's activities. Since then, the social worker has developed a professional relationship with the three left-behind children.

### **4.2.2 Community analysis**

Community analysis is a way for social workers to understand the internal and external resources that the community has through surveys and other means. Through community analysis, the researcher can identify deficiencies in the community agency's operation and adjust the agency's operation mechanism. Through interviews with government staff, the researcher found that resources within the community are very scarce. The lack of resources is reflected in the small amount of funding for vulnerable groups and the fact that more vulnerable groups need assistance, such as the elderly and the disabled. Therefore, a smaller proportion of the assistance financing goes to the children left behind. The situation outside the community shows that social forces have limited help for left-behind children. Due to the lack of awareness among community staff, they rarely use various media means to apply for assistance from external social forces, and fewer charitable groups or enterprises make donations to left-behind children. In addition, the researcher learned from community workers that there are currently no groups in government departments dedicated to serving left-behind children, and few volunteers come to carry out services.

### **4.2.3 Make a plan**

The researcher believed that Student 1 was having great difficulty in his studies. His family did not have the means to provide him with academic tutoring. This phenomenon exists in many families of children left behind. Although school teachers have to teach, they face many students and have limited energy. They can only teach according to the average level of the students in the class. They cannot develop unique lesson plans for the low achievers. It is, therefore, unrealistic for teachers to improve the performance of such students through regular teaching. The Social worker should work based on the community and mobilize other forces in a planned way to help these rural children left behind improve their academic performance.

The main problem faced by student 2 was his family's financial difficulties, which directly affected his studies and life. At Y Primary School, the researcher found that some families of rural left-behind children also suffer from family poverty. However, due to financial difficulties, community help is limited to the distribution of minimum assistance, which cannot change the face of family poverty and seriously affects the physical and mental development of rural left-behind children. Therefore, the researcher should base on the community and seek more external forces to support these poor rural left-behind children.

Some children left behind in rural areas live lonely and have low self-esteem due to the absence of their parents and lack of emotional support. Student 3 is a typical representative. For such a group of people, school teachers do

not have enough energy to pacify them due to their heavy teaching load, and therefore other groups are needed to give more care.

#### 4.2.4 Implementation Plan

(a) The social worker used the community as the main body to seek financial support from external forces. Firstly, the social worker sought help from several charities in the country in the community's name. The researcher concluded that the main reason for the lack of charitable donations the community received upfront was that the community workers neglected to publicize the situation. The outside world was unaware of the current situation of children left behind in the area. The researcher reworked the publicity materials for Student 1 and students in a similar situation to him, highlighting their poverty. The researcher sent these promotional materials to ten charities via the internet to gain their support. Within a week of the video's release, six charities responded to the social worker, offering financial support to the children left behind. Ultimately, the community received significant external financial support, effectively improving the financial situation of families like Student 1, and these left-behind children could study without fear.

(b) Due to the lack of learning support for Student 2, the researcher believes it is not enough to rely on school teachers and families for education alone and that other groups should be involved in Student 2's learning and education. School social workers are a good option. As a school social worker, the researcher has been able to provide tutorials to these students after school from Monday to Friday at 4 pm, with good results. The left-behind children generally reported an improvement in their academic performance and an increased interest in learning. Therefore, the researcher believes schools should have social workers to provide learning support for left-behind children to receive continuous learning support.

The social worker also tapped deeper into internal resources. Using community radio and bulletin boards, the social worker recruited volunteers with knowledge and culture to offer love and services to children left behind in rural areas. They persuaded them to use their weekends off to tutor these children left behind in rural areas. After the social workers' persuasion, most residents with free time on weekends were willing to go to the rural areas to tutor the left-behind children.

(c) Regarding the lack of emotional support for students 3, the researcher believes that schools are the most critical place for rural left-behind children to receive an education. Schools should understand their mental health and care for their emotional needs. With the advice of the social worker, the school has set up a file on rural left-behind children to keep abreast of their physical and mental changes and to provide targeted education and management. Class teachers should give rural left-behind children encouragement and emotional care in their studies, praise their progress over time and strengthen their relationship with them.

The social worker can communicate with the left-behind children regularly to relieve their psychological stress and reduce their sense of emptiness and loneliness. Since commencing the community work, the social worker has communicated with Student 3 many times to answer her doubts. Gradually, Student 3 has developed trust in the social worker. When she encountered something unhappy, she was willing to share it with the social worker. In addition, the social worker has conducted regular home visits to strengthen contact with the children's guardians so that the social worker can keep abreast of the study, life, and psychological situation of the left-behind children.

In China, families in rural communities are relatively closely linked to each other. If one family is in trouble, other families will usually offer help. This mutual assistance is widespread among relatives. In rural areas of China, where blood ties are particularly valued, it is seen as a traditional moral custom for relatives to help each other. Many people take it for granted that they should help a distressed relative. The social worker visited some of Student 3's relatives in the community and spoke to them about the difficulties Student 3's family was currently facing and hoped that they would give more support to student 3. Many relatives expressed their willingness to help Student 3; some said they would visit Student 3 during their weekends off or invite her to their homes.

*The community has since given my family a lot of monthly allowances. Now I can eat meat and drink milk every day. I feel good physically and mentally, and I can concentrate on my studies at school. I feel no different from other students, and I feel good. (student1)*

*Every day during lunch break and in the afternoon after school, Mr. Zhang tutored several of our students. At weekends, there were volunteers in the community to guide me in my homework. In these few months, my academic performance has improved a lot. (Student 2)*

*Now at school, my class teacher and Mr. Zhang would sometimes approach me for a chat. After school, Mr. Zhang often pulls a group of friends to play games with me. I also had volunteers to talk to at the weekend. My*

*mood is much brighter. (Student 3)*

From the social worker's interviews with the three rural left-behind children, it is evident that the community work carried out by the social workers was practical. The external support situation of the three rural left-behind children has changed significantly. Their status was also developing in a positive direction.

## 5. Summary and recommendations

After the researcher initiated community work, some rural left-behind children were able to change their plight by receiving adequate external support. The help of school social workers and community volunteers improved the academic performance of the left-behind children and revived their interest in learning. The social worker has attracted the attention of some charities by re-creating materials for needy students to ask for help. The support of charities has been an important factor in changing the students' poverty situation, and Y Primary School has received donations from charities and several businesses and individuals to enrich the relief funds. Unfortunately, when the researcher visited other townships in Dafang County, he found that children left behind in these areas sought help and publicity like the previous pattern in the Township, receiving little help from charities. Therefore, one of the takeaways from this practical activity is creating promotional materials for left-behind children in rural areas with care and highlighting new ideas to gain support from charities. The researcher found that volunteers also played a significant role in the community work carried out in this instance. Therefore, the researcher suggests that in building a social support network for left-behind children at Y Primary School in the future, social workers and volunteers should be included in the network, as they can play a significant role in filling the gaps in community and school actions to help left-behind children. At the same time, this community work has encouraged the participation of the relatives of the children left behind, whose care has reduced the loneliness of the children left behind and made a big difference in the mentality of the children left behind. Therefore, when building social support networks, relatives of left-behind children should also be encouraged to get involved. In conclusion, rural left-behind children are a group in need of social care, and social workers can build a good social support network for them through community work to promote the healthy development of rural left-behind children.

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