Alone and 'left behind': a case study of 'left-behind children' in rural China

Article

Published Version

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

*Corresponding author: Yang Hong, Institute of Education, University of Reading, 4 Redlands Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG30 4LF, UK
E-mail: yangruiyinghong2017@163.com

STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Alone and "left behind": a case study of "left-behind children" in rural China

Yang Hong[1,2]* and Carol Fuller[1,2]

Abstract: China has been experiencing rapid economic growth over the past few decades accompanied by an overwhelmingly large number of rural habitants out-migrating to urban areas for work and better earnings. However, children of migrants are not entitled to free schooling provisions in these urban destinations and so millions of school-aged rural children have to be "left behind" by their migrating parent(s) in their home place. This study investigates the educational aspirations of Chinese "left-behind children". Via an ethnographic, qualitative case study approach it captures the impact of "left-behind-ness" on aspirations Findings indicate that whilst educational aspirations are embedded in left-behind children's disadvantaged social background, they are also shaped by the consequences of being "left-behind". By doing so, it seeks to highlight an important area as well as illustrating the value—or not—of using Western theories of social inequalities with an Eastern context.

Subjects: Educational Research; Education Studies; Sociology of Education

Keywords: Left-behind; China; migration; education; aspirations

1. Introduction

With China's economic and social development alongside its rapid industrialization and urbanization, much of the rural population are leaving their homes to work in the cities, in order to improve their family's economic situation. However, due to the instability of work and some institutional challenges, such as with housing and education, many of those migrating choose to leave their school-aged children behind, to be taken care of by others. A consequence of these phenomena is the emergence of a large number of rural "left-behind children" across China. The phenomenon of "left-behind children" is not limited to China however, but also exists in other regions in the world including Eastern Europe, the Caribbean region in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia (Yang & Zhu, 2013). Research in different national contexts has demonstrated that being "left behind" can have a profound impact on young people's educational attainment and their psychological development. Research also suggests that the experience of growing up as a "left-behind" child can not only have negative consequences on young

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Yang Hong is a lecturer in the School of Education at Shaanxi Normal University and Carol Fuller is a professor in the field of sociology of education at the University of Reading. Both Yang and Carol specialise in the area of social justice, focusing on issues of poverty, education and identity. This paper draws on all of these areas to focus specifically on young people in rural china

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Children who are left behind by migrating parents is a growing phenomenon across Asia, as parents leave their villages and go to cities for work. These children are therefore doubly disadvantaged, first by their poverty—which forces their parents to leave in search of work, and secondly, by the loss of their parents in their day to day life. This paper highlights the educational experiences of these children, focusing on the ways that being "left-behind" shapes aspirations and future ambitions.

people's physical well-being, it can also affect psychological stability and character development (Berker, 2009; He et al., 2012; Valtolina & Colombo, 2012; Zhou, Sun, Liu, & Zhou, 2005).

The issue of "left-behind children" is of international relevance. In China specifically, the number of these children had reached approximately 61 million in 2013 (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). Official statistics suggest instead that there are 9,200,000 "left-behind children" in China (XINHUANET, 2016). The significant disparity in these numbers is the result of a series of measures taken with respect to the care and protection of those children "left behind" in rural areas as well as the government's re-definition of what this term means. "Left-behind" is now defined as a young person under the age of 16 whose parents go out to work, or one parent goes out to work, and the other has no ability for guardianship (The State Council, 2016).

The new definition specifies the age limit and family condition of a child being categorized as "left behind". It emphasizes "parental guardianship" and excludes those who have at least one parent who can perform their duties as guardians. However, the definition only focuses on the status quo of a child and does not consider the history of being "left behind", for example, a child's parent(s) may have returned home when the data were counted, but the child had been "left behind" for many years. Thus, in studies which have "left-behind children" as the focus of research, there are more factors beyond the definition that should also be considered. However, regardless of the number of children left-behind or, the definitions used to capture this important group, the impact on being "left-behind" is profound. In this paper, we focus on some of these left-behind children, giving voice to how their experiences of being "left-behind" and explaining how being "left-behind" impacts on their future aspirations.

2. Background

China has been experiencing extraordinary economic and social progress since the 1970s. Urbanization in China for the last few decades has been unprecedented in scale and has seen many remarkable achievements; for example, more than 500 million estimated had been pulled out of poverty (Tisdell, 2009). As a result of China's booming economy, the rural-to-urban population movement, as a consequence of this boom, is seen as the major driver of the country's rapid urban growth (Zhang & Song, 2003). Rural-urban migrants have arguably made immense contributions to the destination cities through their contribution to the urban construction and development. Despite this contribution though, there is a staggering income gap between Chinese urban and rural households (Gao, 2013), which could be argued to have caused stark social inequality in terms of public services between Chinese rural and urban residents, including health care, housing and basic education (Sicular, Yue, Gustafsson, & Li, 2007).

Most of the inequality between urban and rural China in terms of income level as well as other social disparities is often attributed to policies and institutional systems that have led to the significant urban-rural division. This disparity is most importantly connected to the household registration, or "hukou" system, which was established in the 1950s and has served since then as a national regulatory strategy to restrict population mobility and redefine city-countryside and state–society relationships in terms of the support programme offered. The long-lasting and highly peculiar Chinese institution is the major hurdle impacting labour mobility as it strictly confines people's entitlement to basic social benefits such as health care and free education to their home places only, that is; these services are available only in your place of birth, not where you move for work. It is therefore under this context that the "left-behind children" phenomenon has emerged in China. Migrant parents leave their children behind in their registered places of residence to ensure they can receive an education and the other citizenship rights they are entitled to. Given the overwhelming number of "left-behind children" in China, and given that these children are primarily from the rural areas of China (areas most often experiencing the greatest levels of poverty) this young population is potentially one of the most highly marginalized and disadvantaged groups in Chinese society. Understanding the

experience of being "left behind" is, therefore, key to identifying and addressing the needs of this group.

However, whilst the phenomenon of "left-behind" is well established, there remains a great deal of disparity in the definition of being "left-behind", in terms of what it actually means. Chinese academics tend to define "left-behind children" according to the specific purposes of their research, in relation to the local conditions where the research is conducted (Luo, Wang, & Gao, 2009). However, considering the extreme complexity of a country like China, for example, geographically, culturally and socially, providing a precise, unanimously accepted definition for the term "left-behind children" seems to be very difficult. However, Lin and Yuan (2007) usefully offered seven dimensions of "left-behind-ness". These dimensions are:

(1) The geographical distribution of children (urban or rural);
(2) The schooling status of children (in school or not);
(3) The age difference of children (below 14, 16 or 18);
(4) The family structure of children (only-child family, divorced family or not);
(5) The length of time children being "left-behind" (shorter or longer than half a year);
(6) Children "left-behind" by both parents or one of them;
(7) The main carer/guardian of the children (father/mother, grandparents, uncles/aunts, older siblings or themselves).

Whatever the definition used, large-scale quantitative research has demonstrated well that "being left-behind" has an impact on educational attainment as well on measures that explore sense of well-being and character development (Berker, 2009; He et al., 2012; Valtolina & Colombo, 2012; Zhou et al., 2005). This study aims to fill some of the gaps in existing "left-behind children" research by presenting data from a qualitative study. We give voice to some of these children by exploring in-depth the post-compulsory educational aspirations of a group of "left-behind children" who are in their last year of junior high school (Year 9). These ambitions are explored in relation to their educational experiences and within the context of being "left behind".

2.1. The importance of family

Research highlights the importance of the role of family in determining educational outcomes as well as the life course. Of particular concern in educational research is how poverty in association with other background disadvantages could adversely influence children and young people's educational prospects. The role of family in children and young people's educational life has always had a central place in the sociology of education. For Bourdieu, family serves as the first site of "cultural capital" attribution—important to educational success. His idea of "cultural capital" encompasses a wide range of linguistic and cultural competence, manners, preferences as well as orientations that are both personally embodied and institutionalized, as he states " ... *subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language* ... " (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 495); all of which is endowed by family and supported by the activities and resources that reinforce their importance and contribute to educational outcomes. This type of capital, with economics at its foundation, is central to Bourdieu's argument of social inequalities in educational outcomes as well as his much wide-ranging theory of social reproduction. Chinese "left-behind children" in this study therefore likely to be at a distinct disadvantage in academic achievement given that not only are they from poor family backgrounds and the education level of their parents is low; there is also little parental involvement in activities and resources that support their schooling as they are working away.

2.2. Habitus

Family also makes a significant contribution to the formation of one's habitus, another concept Bourdieu employs to explain differentials in educational aspirations. Habitus is understood as the collective attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of actors in their social world who share similar social

locations—i.e. socio-economic status (Bourdieu, 1977b) and one's habitus is believed to be a product of unconscious socialization in the family during early childhood (Dumais, 2002). Those deeply ingrained and internalized past experiences and values then define one's understandings and expectations of, for example, educational and occupational pursuits. Aspirations, in essence, are the product of one's habitus in the form of an internalization of objective chances and reflect an individual's subject hopes regarding his or her own chances for educational and occupational success (Macleod, 1995)

Whilst the concept of habitus has been found useful in making sense of how family- and class-based dispositions shape young people's aspirations (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011; Reay, 1998), research also shows disadvantaged backgrounds do not always restrict individuals' future choices to familiar patterns (Fuller, 2014; Pimlott-Wilson, 2011) and, family life and culture can generate "aspirational habitus" to which the significance of achieving high in education is attached (Baker & Brown, 2008). In particular, research indicates that students from poorer backgrounds do not lack aspirations (Croll, Attwood, & Fuller, 2010; Fuller, 2009), but they and their families' cultural capital and habitus, informed by their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and life-world experiences, largely hinder them from developing capacities required to realize their aspirations, which are just like being asked to "do a play without a script" (Bok, 2010). In this paper, we will show that this is also true for Chinese "left-behind children" included in the research, as well as their parents, who also do not all lack aspirations.

2.3. Family social capital

Alongside Bourdieu's well-known concepts of cultural capital and habitus—which have been used to explain the profound importance of family—another concept i.e. social capital, has been introduced into education by a number of scholars and is receiving increasing attention. Coleman for example, focused on the importance of the "social capital" of the family in a child's education and defined it as *"the relations between children and parents (and, when families include other members, relationships with them as well)"* (Coleman, 1988, p. S110). A family's social capital is understood as the relationships and interactions between a child and his parents as well as other family members, who play an important role in the child's life (e.g. grandparents as the child's main carer in the family). This notion of capital is seen as positive for educational achievement because of the ways that relationships between home and school help reinforce educational values and expectations (Coleman, 1987). The social capital within family that benefits a child's education is largely missing as a result of the physical absence of parents in the families of "left-behind" children. Implicit then, is the idea that this absence will have a negative impact, not just on educational outcomes in terms of attainment, but also on educational aspirations.

Clearly, family matters in terms of educational success. However, research by Fuller (2014) suggests that whilst family background is clearly important, educational success is also shaped by the aspirations of a student; which drive and motivate the behaviours needed to achieve. Therefore, even in circumstances of social disadvantage, a belief in an ability to succeed is fundamental to achieving those ambitions (Fuller, 2014, 2009). This paper seeks to explore the educational and career aspirations of a group of "left-behind" children in rural China and draws on Bourdieuian notions of social reproduction, as well as those associated with social capital, to frame the research. In this paper we seek to give voice to some of these Chinese left-behind children', focusing specifically on how and in what way being "left behind" could be considered as impacting on their future ambitions. In this paper, we incorporate Lin and Yuan (2007) conceptualisation of "left behind" children, but focuses on young people in the final year of junior high school (age 14–16) who have been separated from their parents for at least half a year.

The specific question this paper seeks to addresses is:

How does being "left behind" impact on the future aspiration decision making of a small group of young people in rural China?

3. Methods

The research reported here was collected via an in-depth, ethnographic case study of a comprehensive school in a rural region in southwest China. Data were collected from 17 "left-behind children". Through this deeply qualitative research, different methods were used to gain first hand insights into the day to day experiences of "left-behind children". By living with the children for 4 months; eating, sleeping and spending academic and leisure time together, a rich and detailed understanding of what it meant to be "left behind" for the children in this paper were possible.

Data were collection via participant observation, questionnaire, interviews and school documents.

4. Sample

4.1. The region

The broad region in which the study was carried out is in the southwest of China. It is a county[1] in terms of the level of local government in China. The specific region where the school is situated is called "Riverside *xiang*[2]" (Xiang' is a specific Chinese administrative unit which subordinates the level of township). "Riverside *xiang*" has 10 villages which includes 2621 households and a population of 9961. Among the 2621 households, 2376 are agricultural, with a population of 9719. This makes Riverside a typical agricultural region.

4.2. The school

The school in this paper is called "Riverside Comprehensive School". Because of a catastrophic earthquake in 2008[3], the campus of "Riverside Central Elementary School" was demolished. "Riverside Comprehensive" is, therefore, a new school with a brand-new campus, the result of a merger of the previous "Riverside Central Elementary School" and "Riverside Junior High School". From 2008, the two schools started to move toward combination by firstly sharing the same campus but still functioning in different systems. It is located in the central area of "Riverside *xiang*" and is the only school in the region.

"Riverside" is a state-owned boarding school. There were 39 in-service teachers and 455 students in the school at the time of the research. "Riverside" enrols students in the catchment area from kindergarten to grade 9 (the last year of junior high school). In the primary school sector, there are 6 grades, as with most primary schools in China, but it only has one class in each grade. There are 3 grades in the junior high school sector; with only one class in each grade. Therefore, in total, there are 6 classes in the primary school sector and 3 classes in the junior high school sector. With this size and this number of students, "Riverside" is considered a rather small school. The overall attainment of "Riverside" within the province is low: the ranking of the average final exam score of each term is most of time at the back, and the number of students who go to key high schools each year is very small.

"Boarding schools" in China are different from those usually associated with the independent, fee-paying schools sectors in the West. They were introduced by the Chinese State Council in 2001 to support the educational provision during compulsory education among rural Chinese areas (Human Rights in China, 2013). The construction of boarding schools in China has supported the educational enrolment and completion rates among children of school age in the central and western regions of China (Baidu Baike, 2017). In practice, students who stay in a boarding school spend all of their time following a strict timetable, except for the holidays. As one of these schools, 95% of Riverside's students and staff board at the school, as most of them live far away.

In general, students who board at school cannot leave the campus during the school days without permission from teachers. Except for the specific carer role for kindergarten, as well as grade 1 and 2 students, "Riverside" is not staffed with a particular person in charge of students' daily lives in the dormitories. Either "the teacher in charge of the week" or the homeroom teacher of each class is responsible for dealing with potential issues that emerge There is no doctor, nurse

Table 1. Information on students	
Number of students	**17**
Gender	11 girls, 6 boys
Age range	14–16 years
Attainment level in the class	High attainers: 4 (grades range from 710 to 555) Medium attainers: 7 (grades range from 519 to 422) Low attainers: 6 (grades range from 401 to 278)

or other medical personnel in the dormitories. If students are ill or, there is any sort of an emergency, they are taken to the local hospital to see a doctor.

There are two dormitory buildings on the campus. Each of them has three floors with a combination of rooms designed separately for the staff and students. The difference is that there is toilet and washbasin in each of the staff room but not in the student room. There are neither heating or cooling devices nor hot water supply in any of the rooms. Inside each student room, there is space for 6 bunk beds. A room has 6 bunk beds inside usually accommodates 12 students, but as a result of the school's insufficient provision for students' basic living facilities, one bunk bed most of the time accommodates 3–4 students as 2 students have to share one bed. There are no facilities like wardrobes in the room for students to keep their belongings; there are only several wooden desks provided in the room so that students can put their personal belongings on top or under it, like tooth brushes, cups, towels and washbowls.

There is no place on campus for students to get showers or do laundry during school days. Apart from sports such as basketball or table tennis, students have very limited leisure time and have no access to radio, television or other forms of entertainment at school. Many students have mobile phones, but they are not allowed to bring phones to the school. Students do their homework in the evening classes (usually from 6pm to 8.20pm); some of them also do homework on their beds during the lunch break when they are supposed to take a nap. Students discuss about homework and ask questions during the evening classes either with teachers or classmates.

4.3. The students

The students included in this research were in Grade 9 (age 14–16). There were a total 34 in this year group and from these, 17 students took part in the research. Students who took part were those who had expressed and interest and willingness to do so, following an introduction about the research. In total, 11 of those who took part were girls and 6 were boys. Based on the school setting for academic attainment, gfour of these students were high attainers, seven were average attainers and six were below average. Students' attainment level was divided according to the class ranking for the final examination grade (from a total score of 8 subjects) of the previous academic year. The grade ranges of the high, medium and low attainers were 710–555, 519–422, 401–278, respectively. However, grades were not always directly linked to aspirations among the students in this research as some with medium or low grades had high aspirations, yet some high attainers had low aspirations.

5. Data collection

With the school's permission, observations were carried out of students' behaviours and activities in various situations within their school to gain some initial understanding of the students and the school. An initial questionnaire and school documents provided information regarding student family situations and attainment levels and were used to identify potential participants for face-to-face in-depth interviews. Initially, 19 students were invited to participate in the interview session—with both girls and boys included, with different educational intentions, with various family situations, and with different attainment levels. This was in order to increase the possibility of disclosing diverse perspectives and experiences. The students chosen were also the ones with whom the most time had been spent enabling relationships of trust to be developed, to be seen not just a researcher but also as someone who is interested on hearing their voice.

Sixty-five interviews were carried out over 4 months. Interviews focused on students' plans for the future (education and occupation), their attitudes to education, their opinions about the society, their family, family life and personal history of being a "left behind" child, their feelings about school and school life, and how they consider being "left behind" has an impact on them. In addition, one of the researchers lived at the school for the same time period, following the routine and processes of the school to enable a much deeper understanding of the experiences of these children who are the focus of this paper.

6. Data analysis

Information about the sample can be seen in Table 1. The data analysis process followed for the data reported here adopted the central steps of qualitative research analysis, that is: organizing the data, coding the data, aggregating codes into themes, and displaying and comparing (Cresell, 2013). Despite the availability of software programmes that support qualitative data analysis, for example, NVivo, the analysis was carried out "long hand".

First, interview transcripts were reviewed line by line and marked manually with initial descriptive codes categorized under four general conceptual categories: "plans, choices and intentions", "family factor", "school factor", and "individual or cultural factor". Coding at this stage was used to organize data into manageable units as well as help identify key themes and patterns of interest (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). After segmenting and condensing the data in this way, data were then explored in each of the four general categories with more inferential codes to understand different but interwoven elements of the data. A thematic analysis was carried out to identify and describe key themes emerging from the content of the data. Then, by displaying and comparing, the goal was to extract patterns, associations and explanations from the emergent themes. A key analytical category of this paper is educational aspirations, especially differences in educational aspirations. A summary was given for every participating student by revisiting each participant's narratives, with all the themes identified and relationships examined among the themes. Students studied were categorized as "university aspirers", "university non-aspirers", and "the undecided". To compare for similarity and difference within coding, transcripts were explored and discussed with my research fellow.

Eventually, six key categories and sub-themes within these categories were identified and these can be seen in Table 2. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on "Family"

Table 2. The key themes	
Key categories	**Sub-themes within categories**
Future ambitions	Education Work
Attitudes to education	Higher education Further Education School
Family	Practical support Emotional support Educational involvement Ambitions
Community	School Home
Sense of self	Ability—education Ability—to achieve ambitions
Friends	Practical support Emotional support Educational support Educational decision making

7. Ethics

All University ethical guidelines were complied with in carrying out this research. In particular, all those taking part gave informed consent and were assured of anonymity. Quotes that follow in the results section use pseudonyms. In addition, processes were in place to ensure that the well-being of the children was at the heart of the research; with a line of report for highlighting any safe-guarding issues that may—but were not—disclosed.

8. Findings

In this section, we present the findings from the analysis that focused on educational and career aspirations and considered these in relation to the role of family in influencing these. It is organised in two parts; the first part focusing on the aspirations of those that do not desire or plan for a higher education or, are undecided. The second part focuses on those that want to pursue a higher education.

9. University non-aspirers and "The undecided"

"University non-aspirers" are students who explicitly expressed that they had no intention to attend university and were eager to commence work as soon as finishing senior high school or even junior high school. "The undecided" were those who were not yet certain about whether going to university was something they would want to do or, be able to do when they finished senior high school. These two groups of students were distinct from their university aspiring classmates in that they do not believe that higher education was fundamentally linked with future employment or other life chances, and moreover, school education was generally questioned and considered by some as being of no use for future life.

Many of these students showed a strong desire to make contact with the "real world" and believed social interactions and experiences were not only important, but that they were even more important than higher education. Students considered themselves to be lacked in knowledge and experience about the adult "real" world and so felt they should concentrate their efforts on developing the social skills and experiences they considered necessary in order to get on in society. These students considered social abilities as more important than academic skills in contributing to their future development.

> 'Education is not 100% important because there are many people who have got a good career and a good life but not via high education; the most important thing is to become a capable person, like with excellent work abilities and social skills. For example, one should be good at handling problems, or one should have a certain talent, or one should have experiences and skills that enable them to work well with people in their workplace apart from their expertise. Once you have working abilities and social skills, you will be successful no matter what job you do. But I lack all these abilities and I have no social experience; having a high academic achievement doesn't guarantee me to become such a capable person.' (Shilin)

Non-aspirers and "the undecided" were unanimous that poor academic performance was the primary reason for not aspiring to higher education. However, for these students, a sense of low academic ability did not appear relation to aspiring for higher education. Many students believed that they were not academically capable of getting into a general high school, let alone getting into a university[4]. Students, therefore, expressed a preference for attending a vocational high school because it required lower academic abilities. It also appeared that for individuals like Yunyun and Ah Dong, not being good enough for a high-ranking university meant that they would rather give up university as a choice altogether:

> I can't make it to university, my academic performance is not good enough, and this is the ultimate reason ... I'll go to a vocational high school; my grades are too low to get into a general high school. (Jingjing)

> I don't think my academic performance enables me to be admitted into a good general high school, so I can't make it to a top university. I believe going to an average university is not useful, must be a top one, so I'd rather not go to university at all. (Ah Dong)

For students like Jingjing, poor academic performance appears to have seriously undermined her self-confidence and as a result, she appeared to have developed a negative self-identity. This meant that Jingjing did not consider further or higher education university as an option.

> I hope I will study well in high school and I can find a good job after graduation … but I'm not confident in myself because I have already become a low-achieving student, so I will always be. Things like going to university is only an unreachable dream … In the deep inside of my heart, I have no wish to stay in education any more. Because I know it'll be very difficult to improve my academic performance to the same level as before … Now, I only want to learn a skill then I can start working. Studying is too difficult for me now, I won't succeed, so why bother to pursue? You know, like an escaping and giving up sort of mind. (Jingjing)

What seems to be significant in understanding students' educational aspirations was exploring their perceptions of university education as well as school education in general. A common theme among these students was they did not consider higher education as valuable, worthwhile or necessary for their futures. They believed that knowledge, skills and experience acquired in the real world mattered more to their future development. An extrinsic need of these students to was to secure a good future.

> I don't think academic performance has an important impact on one's future. A good school performance doesn't guarantee a good life in the future … it's not worth staying in education just for a good job … I don't think education is that important to my future because I don't depend on education to build my future, I depend on my hard work and learning from others in the real world … (Xiaohua)

> It's not guaranteed those who received higher education than me will for sure have a better future than me … many other things also matter, like social contacts, social networks, and your own efforts to learn in the real world … (Kang)

9.1. Negative experiences

Some students also expressed negative feelings and unpleasant schooling experience. For example, for university non-aspirers like Xiaohua and Kang, school was perceived as a very oppressive place where studying was considered to be stressful and overwhelming. Xiaohua explicitly discussed her desire to escape completely from the schooling environment; to gain freedom, and freedom for her was very important. Xiaohua believed university would be the same experience as school:

> I don't want to go to university, the ultimate reason is I want to escape from schools because there is no freedom in schools; I don't like being restrained when I want to do something … I think I'd still be restrained in university, just like in the junior and senior high school. (Xiaohua)

Kang too was very negative feeling about school and felt great pressure from school work.

Whilst many of these students viewed that education as not crucial for their futures, some did express a sense a lack of knowledge and understanding about how higher education could help and impact on future careers and pathways. Isolation from support and guidance for developing future plans was very clear. Such uncertainty and isolation seemed an important barrier in enabling students to make informed educational choices.

> Going to university may help me find a decent job and be better prepared for the society, but still I don't have the wish to attend because I don't even know what university or what high education is all about … (Fengfeng)

10. The role of family on educational decision-making

Family is fundamental to understanding these students' either low or uncertain aspirations for higher education. For some family economic concerns, for example, as Fengfeng explained, were a very explicit consideration in future learning and decisions making:

I don't know if I'll attend university because I'm too old. I'm 17 already and I'm the oldest in my class … if I went to university after senior high school, I'll be about 25 when graduated, hell no, can't wait that long to make money … my parents expect me to go to university, but if so, I'll be a burden for them. I know now they are working hard to make money for me to go to university, but I don't want to be their burden anymore. (Fengfeng)

For the large part, students' educational choices linked significantly with their family relationships. Students commonly reported a poor relationship with either their parent(s) or grandparent(s) who played the role as the main carer when the parents were working away. Many students reported that their, educational choices and other life plans had been powerfully imposed on them by authoritarian parent(s) or grandparent(s).

Students often commented on the fact that their parents knew very little about them. Although most of these parents had high expectations for their child's education, students felt that these did not match their actual academic abilities. Moreover, most parents were reported as being rarely involved in their child's education or everyday life in general so had a very limited understanding of their lives and schooling experience. As a result, there had been many misunderstandings, arguments and sometimes conflicts between students and their parents, meaning that students found it difficult to communicate with their parents and were often reluctant to try.

They (parents) all the time ask me to study hard, but they don't seem to really care about my study. Except telling me to study hard, they never ask about detailed information about me … they have high expectations for my education, they want me to study in a general high school, but I know my grades are too low for that, but they just don't believe this is my actual academic level, so they don't believe when I told them I can't make it to a general high school and don't agree with me choosing a vocational high school. (Jingjing)

… because I used to perform well in study, then I had a boyfriend and my grades dropped very fast ever since … but my parents don't know what happened to me and how much I have changed, they still live in the past and think I am the same as before, and they never tried to understand, though they probably knew I was involved in a relationship, they never helped me get out of there … they don't know this is the main reason why I now perform badly in study, I also don't want to tell them the truth because they'd only blame me. (Jingjing)

They only expect me to get into a general high school and then university, but they never guided me or provided me with advice for the future, neither were they willing to listen to my opinions. I tried to communicate and share my real thoughts … but t it's very difficult to communicate with them. (Jingjing)

10.1. Family relationships
Students also seem to have experienced difficult relationship with their grandparents, who most often take on the role as carer and guardian. As being "left behind", the carer/guardian–child relationship is relevant and important in understanding these young people's educational aspirations.

… my grandpa sets too many restrictions for me … He talks too much as if I didn't know anything, and he doesn't let me go out. I have no freedom to go outside during weekends or holidays … I don't want to obey my grandpa because I don't like the way he disciplines me. (Bohai)

Because I don't do well in study, then he lost confidence in me. But what he doesn't understand is grades don't always tell how much I have learnt; grades don't represent my capability … in exams of some subjects like Chinese language and History, I deliberately leave exam questions unfinished because they are so boring, I feel like wasting time, but in fact I know all the answers. My grandpa however doesn't know at all about my thoughts like this, he just thinks I made him lose face and I'm useless. He even embarrassed me in front of other relatives, that made me really upset, and there have been constant conflicts between us. Sometimes, I deliberately do poorly in my exams to disappoint him; as a revenge. (Bohai)

I want to show my grandpa my real academic aptitude and let him know what he thought about me was wrong … even though I can't get into a general high school, I'll choose to go on education in a vocational high school, because I want to prove myself to my grandpa, because he always thinks I can't achieve anything, I feel continuing in education could in some extent change how he thinks about me. (Bohai)

I think applying for a general high school is quite risky to me because my exam performance is very unstable … my exam results are tightly linked to my moods, and my moods are strongly affected by my relationship with my grandpa. Very often, after I have a fight with grandpa at home, I feel extremely upset and low, and if at this time there are exams at school, I get very bad results because I have no mood for exams. I think grandpa and I just can't get along with each other because we have arguments and fights very often … If not because of my bad mood, my real academic level should be average in my class, but sometimes I could drop to nearly the bottom. (Ah Fu)

For some students in particular, they felt they were given no autonomy by their family to make choices for their own futures and felt it was extremely difficult to make their voices heard and felt they had no one who could provide understanding and support. However unwillingly, they nonetheless accept their families' educational and career wishes as they simply do not know what else to do.

10.2. Educational aspirations

"University aspirers" are those who explicitly stated that going to university was something they definitely wanted to do when they finished the senior high school study. They valued higher education highly and considered university education crucial for securing future employment. The majority of them had a clearly defined career path and saw higher education as the route to fulfil their career goals. Clearly, for these students, higher education was viewed instrumentally, as a means to an end.

I need a university degree to be able to realize my dream. I've got several dreaming occupations in mind, such as doctor or lawyer, and they both require at least a university degree, so I'll definitely go to university. (Luli)

I want to be a paediatrician in the future; this is my dream … So, I should study well. I should finish all the education until university. (Huifang)

More specifically, university aspirers viewed higher education as offering enhanced job prospects and security because it was seen as providing qualities and advantages that would enable them to be more competitive in the future job market.

Having more education means, you have more knowledge and skills, and that will make you better. For example, if you are looking for a job, and people ask you what diploma you have, you say you only finished primary school or junior high school, that won't work, people won't want you. (Changying)

Higher education was also seen as a more direct route to achieving a higher social status through securing professional, degree-level work. They felt it would help during social interactions and would offer many more opportunities to make a living, other than that of a farmer. Achieving a sense of social respect was important.

People with a higher educational level can get a better job, you know, the kind that you sit in the office and don't need to do manual work; but people with a lower educational level can only make money by doing manual work … more education gives you more knowledge, and when you speak, you show you are at a higher level, for example, primary school teachers and junior high school teachers, they show they are at different levels when they speak, if you have less education, when you talk to people, you wouldn't understand the vocabulary or the topic. (Fangfang)

University education was also considered by some to have the potential for offering a different experience; one that was marked as being stress-free. This would be in stark contrast to their current experiences in the secondary school. Higher education was also considered to be able to provide an opportunity for self-development and improvement. Freedom was also a strong theme that emerged in discussions of university education.

> *I imagine it (university) is a place where I would feel very free ... I have a cousin, though she herself didn't make it to university, some of her old classmates did, she said those old classmates all became very different, and she said 'it seems true that people change when they go to university' ... I also want to see how I could be changed in the university (Changying)*

The primary reason for students aspiring for university was secure future employment. Higher education was seen as instrumental in making a good income and social status because it ensured non-manual work. In this sense, a hope of attaining economic improvement and upward social mobility appears to be the extrinsic motivation for these students' educational aspiration as they all have poor family background and low social status.

10.3. Educational decision-making

The parents of university aspirers all had high expectations for their child in terms of education. These were expressed to their child ensuring that the young people understood why receiving a higher education was important. Most of the parents used themselves and their own life as an example to show the importance of doing well in education. It seems that parents' expectation and their experience of working outside gave students the motivation to want to study hard for a better future.

> *They told me there were many people living together in their workplace, and the living condition was not good ... The reason why my parents told me this is to encourage me to study well, then I won't have this kind of life in the future ... When I don't feel motivated in studying, then I think of my parents, then I said to myself that I must study hard. (Luli)*

> *They all have high expectation for me, they all expect me to study well and get into a top senior high school and a top university ... because they think their life is not good, and it's all because they didn't study well, and they want me to have a better life so I won't lead a hard life like them. My mom always says to me: 'you must study hard, look at me, because my educational level is so low that I couldn't spell one single English word when working in a factory outside'. When I hear this, I swear I must study hard ... (Fangfang)*

Whilst having high expectations for their child, parents of these university aspirers in general were not able to offer academic help as their overall educational level was low. Nevertheless, most parents showed great concern about their child's study and asked frequently on the phone about their exam results, offering simple advice such as reminding them to seek help when having difficulties in study or to be more careful in exams. Parents provided encouragement which was a great source of motivation for these students to study better. They appreciated their parents' advice and encouragement very much:

> *They often tell me on the phone to 'study hard' or 'put more efforts'. My dad especially asks me things like 'How's your exam?' 'Do you have difficulties with those exam questions? If you do, ask someone to help you. If they are not too difficult, try hard by yourself and work them out, don't be careless in exams. I find it's helpful because it's advice and also like a reminder. (Mingwei)*

Grandparents were also caring for university aspirers while their parents were working away. For these students, grandparents took care of their daily life when they were younger but as they grew older most assumed the responsibilities to care for themselves as well as some of the house and farm work. The grandparents were not able to offer academic help as most of them were illiterate. Most of the students were given full autonomy in time management and school task completion at home.

10.4. Information on careers and education

Although attending university was strongly desired and most had clear career goals, it was also clear that these university aspirers were also isolated from sources of knowledge and information to help inform their educational and occupational choices. Within the family, the priority was seen as securing a good income. However, there was little knowledge of how best to do this. Rather, they did not engage at all and left their child to make plans and decisions on their own:

> All the plans I have made so far are my own ideas, my parents never involved in or helped me with plan-making … they'd say it's all up to me, whatever I'll choose, they have no opinion. I hope they could provide some opinions or suggestions, not just leaving me to rely on myself completely … they never collect relevant information by themselves, they only heard from other people occasionally, a bit of this, a bit of that. (Huifang)

11. Discussion

This paper set out to explore the impact of being "left-behind" on the future educational aspiration decision-making of a group of young people in rural China. As a plethora of research has previously shown, poverty has a profound impact on the ways that young people think about the future so, in this research we were less interested in the role of poverty per se, and more interested in the role of family in shaping the ambitions young people have for themselves. As discussed earlier, for writers such as Bourdieu, families are structured socially and are also very important in shaping the "frames of reference" that shape preferences that impact on the choices young people make. In many ways, the importance of poverty in determining future pathways for the young people we report here is the same as for other children living in poverty around the world; where a desire for security via regular employment is a key goal for many. This finding adds strength to our theoretical understandings of the universal importance of the role of structure and culture in educational experiences. However, 'left-behind' children are arguably at a double disadvantage in that not only are they poor, they are also without their parents. If, as we discussed in the earlier part of this paper, parents are fundamental to shaping the values, dispositions and aspirations of young people (Bok, 2010; Baker & Brown, 2008), then what is the impact of growing up without a responsible adult to shape and support the goals and plans of these young people?

The rationale offered to frame the aspirations of the low aspiring young people included here mirror previous studies in the UK. For example, many of these "left-behind" students discussed ideas associated with low self-esteem and poor academic ability. Just as Fuller (2009) found, their identity was understood as a "reflected self", a self which had low status and low educational ability. This identity was used to justify the choice of leaving education to get on with work. It was also often used to deflect from other goals they might have had but they considered unachievable due to their sense of self. They too desired to leave an educational system that they felt they did not fit, where they did not belong and where they believed they were not succeeding. They desired future pathways where gratification was more achievable and instant in terms of wages and reward.

Interestingly, just as Western theory noted earlier suggests, the young people discussed here expressed ideas that appear to suggest that they lacked cultural and social capital, as a direct result of their poverty. As research shows, families are important in endowing the skills and knowledge that are needed for success, so they are also equally important when that function is absent. However, whilst these theoretical ideas are very useful in understanding the impact of poverty on families and in particular, the educational successes of children, less clear is how the separation of children from their parents through this unique "left-behind" social phenomenon, is compounding the impact of poverty.

Some of this impact is clear in this research; however, where striking themes of loneliness and powerlessness were very evident amongst all the young people. A sense of being alone, with no advocate, no support and with no one looking out for them, someone to whom they felt emotionally connected to, were ideas that were very striking because of the number of young people who expressed them. Ideas that expressed an absence of "nurturing" and "care" were mentioned by

many of the young people who were keen to leave school and seek independence. Although not discussed in this paper, teachers—overstretched and working with limited resources—are not able to do more than "teach" so are not a meaningful substitute. For these low aspiring young people then, status was in freedom and so they desired it greatly.

For those young people who wanted to continue on it to further and higher education, status was also important but, arguably more the status associated with securing non-manual work. For these students, freedom was also key but "freedom from" (Fuller, 2018) their current environments and experiences. The parents of these young people were very keen that their children should experience a different kind of life to theirs and education was seen as a key route to securing a better future. Whilst they lacked the skills to support their ambitions and plans, that they were supportive was significant.

Whether aspiring to leave education or to remain, this paper highlights the strong desire for autonomy and freedom that was evident. A desire to "escape from" an environment which reinforced a negative "failing" identity or, to "escape to" a "hoped for" better life, the impact of poverty was very evident. Whether in the ways that poverty impacts on the way family support education; in terms of the lifestyles, skills and knowledge associated with poverty—money clearly does matter. In this sense, the impact of poverty can, therefore, be argued as being the same wherever you are in the world. However, the usefulness of applying the Western lens (Bourdieu, 1977a and Coleman, 1988) we used to frame this paper to a specifically Asian issue—as in "left-behind-ness"- is less helpful. Cultural nuances associated with the rural-urban migration phenomenon cannot be captured so easily. Theories of cultural and social capital focus on cultural and social resources that have economics at their foundation. Our research highlights the importance of nurturing, which is absent in these ideas (Reay, 1998). In addition, whilst ideas of social capital are particularly relevant in explaining the importance of family and their networks on a whole range of outcomes, including education; what happens when these networks are extremely tenuous to the point of being almost absent? The importance of the nature of these parental links is also often missing in theory. Our research shows that it is not just the benefits that result from family networks and ties that are important. The nature and strength of the ties between close family members are also key. Thus, Western theory has much to commend it but it does not tell us the significance of economic-enforced parent–child separation and its impact on perceptions of the strength and quality of familial bonds.

12. Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, this ethnographic research is the first such study. However, whilst this small-scale qualitative research is specific to the context in which the research was carried out and therefore cannot claim any degree of generalisability, what it is able to show is that the impact of being "left-behind" on educational aspirations is particularly profound. Not only are the families of rural-urban migrating parents impacted by the high levels of poverty that underpins their search for work, the consequences on the familial bonds of these families are far reaching. Prolonged separation has led the children in this paper to feel powerless, and alone and to yearn for a life different from the one they have. Whilst poverty impacts on access to resources associated with quality of life, these need not influence perceptions of the value of that life. However, in this research, loneliness was a stark reality of their lived experiences as "left-behind" children. The students in this research are thus doubly disadvantaged; first by consequence of their poverty and secondly, by the isolation that is a direct result of their "left-behind-ness". It is therefore crucial that the Chinese government address the impact of this phenomenon on children immediately.

In attempting to come up with an understanding of the experiences of "left-behind" children so as to make provision to support their needs, what this paper clearly shows is that using Western theory is very useful when addressing poverty in a broad, generic, sense and for making direct comparisons of the role of family in education. However, controlling for cultural nuances must also be accounted for when trying to explore the impact of social disadvantage in different cultural contexts. When comparing the immediate impact of social disadvantage, one size of theory "does appear to fit all". However, it is important that the consequences of poverty at the micro level are

not ignored. This paper has therefore made a clear contribution to our theoretical understanding of the continuing importance of structure on family through an exploration within a different cultural context. It has also contributed an important extension to this understanding by highlighting the significance of structure on the role of "nurture" in the function of families; heard very clearly within the voices of these "left-behind" children. It is clear that failing to account for the context and experiences under which the phenomena of "left-behind-ness" have emerged would run the risk of offering a focus that fails to address the additional and profound consequences of poverty on the lived experiences of those effected, and so further disadvantaging an already profoundly disadvantaged group.

Author details

Yang Hong[1,2]

E-mail: yangruiyinghong2017@163.com

Carol Fuller[1,2]

E-mail: c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

[1] School of Education, Shaanxi Normal University, NO.199, South Chang'an Road, Yanta District, Xi'an, 710062, China (中国西安市雁塔区长安南路199号 陕西师范大学教育学院）.

[2] Institute of Education, University of Reading, 4 Redlands Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG30 4LF UK.

Citation information

Cite this article as: Alone and "left behind": a case study of "left-behind children" in rural China, Yang Hong & Carol Fuller, *Cogent Education* (2019), 6: 1654236.

Notes

1. Counties are the basic administrative unit in China. There are currently five practical levels of local government: the provincial (province, autonomous region, municipality, and special administrative region), prefecture, county, township, and village (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_China, retrieved on 30 September 2015).

2. "Xiang" is a specific Chinese administrative unit which subordinates the level of township. Literally, it is translated as "county" in English as it seems that there is no such an administrative unit in western countries like the UK, but it refers to a specific level of administration in China. "Xiang" is a two-level-lower administrative unit than "county". A county usually comprises of several townships, and a township is composed of several Xiang. A "xiang" is then composed of several villages.

3. The "Wenchuan earthquake", which is also called "The big Sichuan earthquake", took place on May 12th, 2008. It is the most violent earthquake in China after the 1976 "Tangshan big earthquake".

4. In the Chinese education system, a general high school enrols students who do well in the senior high school entrance examination, and students who attend a general high school usually aim to go to university in 3 years.

References

All-China Women's Federation. (2013). *Research report on China's rural left-behind children and urban-rural migrant children*. Author. China.

Baidu Baike. (2017). Boading schools. Retrieved from http://baike.baidu.com/view/1239107.htm#reference-[1]-1239107-wrap

Baker, S., & Brown, B. J. (2008). Habitus and Homeland: Educational aspirations, family life and culture in autobiographical narratives of educational experience in rural wales. *Journal of the European Society for Rural Sociology*, 48(1), 57–72. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9523.2008.00449.x

Berker, A. (2009). The impact of internal migration on educational outcomes: Evidence from Turkey. *Economics of Education Review*, 28(6), 739–749. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2009.03.003

Bok, J. (2010). The capacity to aspire to higher education:'It's like making them do a play without a script'. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 163–178. doi:10.1080/17508481003731042

Bourdieu, P. (1977a). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education*(487–511). NewYork, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1977b). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.

Coleman, J. S. (1987). Families and schools. *Educational Researcher*, 16(6), 32–38. doi:10.3102/0013189X016006032

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95–S120. doi:10.1086/228943

Cresell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.

Croll, P., Attwood, G., & Fuller, C. (2010). *Children's futures: Early orientations to education and careers*. London: Continuum.

Dumais, S. A. (2002). Cultural capital, gender, and school success: The role of habitus. *Sociology of Education*, 75, 44–68. doi:10.2307/3090253

Fuller, C. (2009, February). *Sociology, gender and educational aspirations: Girl's and their ambitions*. London: Continuum.

Fuller, C. (2014). Social capital and the role educational aspirations. *Educational Review*, 66(2), 131–147. doi:10.1080/00131911.2013.768956

Fuller, C. (2018). The existential self: Challenging and renegotiating gender identity through higher education. *Gender and Education*, 30(1), 92–108.

Gao, H. (2013). China's left behind. Retrieved from http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/summer2013/chinas-left-behind

He, B., Fan, J., Liu, N., Li, H., Wang, Y., Williams, J., & Wong, K. (2012). Depression risk of 'left-behind children' in rural China. *Psychiatry Research*, 200(2–3), 306–312. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2012.04.001

Human Rights in China. (2013). UN treaty bodies and China. Retrieved from http://www.hrichina.org/en/un-treaty-bodies-and-china

Lin, P., & Yuan, A. (2007). 全国留守儿童究竟有多少 – '留守儿童' 的概念研究. [How many 'left-behind children' are there? – A study on the definition of 'left-behind children']. *The Modren Education Journal*, (4), 27–31.

Luo, J., Wang, W., & Gao, W. (2009). 中国留守儿童研究述评. [Review of the Studies on Rural Left-Behind Children in China]. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 17(5), 990–995.

cogent • education

Macleod, J. (1995). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CA: Westview Press.

Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2011). The role of familial habitus in shaping children's views of their future employment. *Children's Geographies, 9*(1), 111–118. doi:10.1080/14733285.2011.540443

Reay, D. (1998). 'Always knowing'and 'never being sure': Familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice. *Journal of Education Policy, 13*(4), 519–529. doi:10.1080/0268093980130405

Sicular, T., Yue, X., Gustafsson, B., & Li, S. (2007). The urban–rural income gap and inequality in China. *Review of Income and Wealth, 53*(1), 93–126. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4991.2007.00219.x

The State Council. (2016). 国务院关于加强农村留守儿童关爱保护工作的意见. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-02/14/content_5041066.htm

Tisdell, C. (2009). Economic reform and openness in China: China's development policies in the last 30 years. *Economic Analysis and Policy, 39*(2), 271–294. doi:10.1016/S0313-5926(09)50021-5

Valtolina, G. G., & Colombo, C. (2012). Psychological well-being, family relations, and developmental issues of children left behind. *Psychological Reports, 111*(3), 905–928. doi:10.2466/21.10.17.PR0.111.6.905-928

XINHUANET. (2016). 我国农村留守儿童数量刷新为９０２万人. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/gongyi/2016-11/14/c_129362952.htm

Yang, G., & Zhu, J. (2013). 国内外留守儿童问题研究述评与展望. [A Summary Review of the Studies on the Left-behind Children Both in China and in the World]. *Academic Journal of Yunnan Normal University (philosophy and Social Science Edition), 45*(5), 113–119.

Zhang, K. H., & Song, S. (2003). Rural–urban migration and urbanization in China: Evidence from time-series and cross-section analyses. *China Economic Review, 14*(4), 386–400. doi:10.1016/j.chieco.2003.09.018

Zhou, Z., Sun, X., Liu, Y., & Zhou, D. (2005). 农村留守儿童心理发展与教育问题. [Psychological Development and Education Problems of Children Left in Rural Areas]. *北京师范大学学报 (社会科学版) (Academic Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science Edition)), 1*(187), 71–79.

Cogent Education (ISSN: 2331-186X) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com