Research Article

The Challenges in Autonomous Literacy Learning Faced by Left-Behind Children in Hebei Province

Meiying Ni [1], Zaida Binti Mustafa [2*]

[1] *Faculty of Social Science and Liberal Arts, UCSI University, Malaysia*
[2] *Faculty of Social Science and Liberal Arts, UCSI University, Malaysia*
Corresponding Author Email: Zaida@ucsiuniversity.edu.my

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Left-behind children in rural China face significant challenges in autonomous literacy learning due to parental absence, limited educational resources, and socio-emotional difficulties, this study explores these challenges in the context of Hebei Province using a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, the findings indicate that left-behind children struggle with insufficient parental guidance, restricted access to learning materials, low self-motivation, language barriers, and emotional distress, all of which hinder their literacy development, the study further reveals that the lack of structured support systems exacerbates these difficulties, making it harder for these children to engage in independent literacy activities, to address these issues, the research proposes several recommendations, including strengthening school-based literacy programs, enhancing parental and guardian involvement, increasing access to educational resources, incorporating bilingual literacy strategies, and providing socio-emotional support, additionally, policy interventions and community-based initiatives are suggested to create a more inclusive learning environment for left-behind children. This study contributes to the understanding of the literacy development of left-behind children and highlights the urgent need for targeted educational interventions. **Keywords:** Left-behind children, autonomous literacy learning, educational challenges, rural China.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a fundamental skill that plays a crucial role in a child's academic success and overall cognitive development, according to UNESCO (2023), literacy is not merely the ability to read and write but also the foundation for lifelong learning, critical thinking, and personal empowerment, however, for left-behind children, those who remain in rural areas under the care of relatives while their parents migrate to cities for work, the process of developing literacy skills autonomously is particularly challenging. Studies have shown that these children often struggle with educational engagement due to limited parental supervision, a lack of learning resources, and emotional distress caused by family separation (Wang & Chen, 2021). In Hebei Province, where the phenomenon of left-behind children is prevalent, autonomous literacy learning is hindered by social, emotional, and educational barriers that require deeper investigation.

Autonomous literacy learning depends on several critical factors, including motivation, self-regulation, access to educational materials, and emotional well-being. However, research suggests that left-behind children often experience disruptions in these areas. Parental involvement plays a key role in literacy development, yet many left-behind children receive little to no direct academic support from their caregivers (Luo, Zhang, & Huang, 2020). This lack of guidance can negatively affect their motivation to engage with reading and writing activities, leading to poor literacy outcomes. Furthermore, the absence of a structured home learning environment makes it difficult for these children to develop consistent literacy habits (Sun & Li, 2022). Emotional distress caused by parental separation has also been linked to decreased concentration and reduced enthusiasm for learning (Zhou & Wang, 2020). Moreover, left-behind children in rural China often have limited access to books, digital learning tools, and qualified teachers,

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which further exacerbates their struggles with literacy (Liu, 2019). Despite these challenges, there remains a lack of qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of left-behind children in relation to autonomous literacy learning. Understanding their perspectives is essential for developing targeted interventions that can help them overcome these obstacles.

This study aims to explore the challenges that left-behind children in Hebei Province face in autonomous literacy learning through a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, the research seeks to examine the primary difficulties these children encounter, analyze the role of caregivers and teachers in supporting literacy development, and investigate the emotional and motivational factors that influence their engagement with literacy. As Vygotsky (1978) emphasized in his sociocultural theory of learning, children's cognitive development is heavily influenced by social interactions and the presence of supportive learning environments, therefore, understanding the extent to which left-behind children receive such support in their literacy development is crucial, by identifying the barriers to autonomous literacy learning, this study aims to provide recommendations that can enhance literacy support systems for left-behind children in rural China.

A qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews, has been selected as the most appropriate method for this study, semi-structured interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions, providing nuanced insights that quantitative surveys may overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study will conduct interviews with left-behind children and teachers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face in literacy learning and the support structures available to them, by capturing first-hand accounts, this method will provide a richer understanding of the socio-emotional and educational dimensions of autonomous literacy learning.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge gaps in existing literature by offering qualitative insights into the specific struggles left-behind children face in autonomous literacy learning, while previous studies have focused on the educational disadvantages of left-behind children in general, few have explored their literacy development from a qualitative perspective (Xie, 2021), by highlighting the barriers to literacy acquisition, this study can inform policymakers, educators, and caregivers about effective strategies to support these children. Moreover, the findings can contribute to the improvement of literacy policies and interventions tailored to the unique needs of left-behind children in rural China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autonomous literacy learning refers to a child's ability to develop reading and writing skills independently, without continuous external guidance. Scholars argue that literacy autonomy is influenced by cognitive, motivational, and environmental factors (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Self-determination theory emphasizes that intrinsic motivation plays a key role in independent learning, as students who feel competent and self-driven are more likely to engage in literacy activities (Deci & Ryan, 2017). However, for left-behind children in rural China, developing literacy skills autonomously is challenging due to limited educational resources and a lack of parental support (Luo et al., 2020). Given the socio-emotional difficulties these children face, it is essential to examine the factors that influence their literacy learning process.

Left-behind children in China experience significant disadvantages in their education, particularly in literacy acquisition. Studies show that parental absence negatively impacts children's academic performance, with literacy being one of the most affected areas (Zhou & Wang, 2020). Without parental involvement, left-behind children struggle to establish effective study habits, leading to lower levels of reading comprehension and writing proficiency (Liu, 2019). According to Xie (2021), literacy acquisition requires consistent practice and reinforcement, which is often lacking in left-behind children's home environments. Another critical challenge is the emotional distress caused by family separation, psychological studies indicate that children who experience prolonged parental absence are more likely to develop anxiety and depression, both of which hinder cognitive development and academic engagement (Sun & Li, 2022). Emotional instability can significantly impact a child's ability to concentrate, reducing their motivation to engage in literacy-related activities (Wang & Chen, 2021). Additionally, left-behind children often

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lack access to books, digital learning resources, and trained educators, further limiting their literacy development opportunities (Luo et al., 2020).

Caregivers and teachers play crucial roles in fostering literacy skills among left-behind children, research suggests that grandparents, who are often the primary caregivers, struggle to provide adequate educational support due to their own limited literacy levels (Liu, 2019). Without sufficient academic guidance, left-behind children are left to navigate literacy learning independently, which can lead to slow progress and frustration. Teachers, on the other hand, can provide structured literacy instruction, but studies indicate that rural schools often face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of trained teachers, and outdated curricula (Zhou & Wang, 2020). According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, children learn best through social interaction, meaning that the absence of parental and teacher involvement can significantly hinder literacy development. To address this issue, some schools have implemented after-school reading programs and peer tutoring initiatives, which have shown promising results in improving literacy among left-behind children (Xie, 2021).

The Chinese government has recognized the challenges faced by left-behind children and has implemented various policies to support their education. Programs such as the "Compulsory Education Guarantee Plan" aim to improve rural school conditions and provide additional resources for disadvantaged children (Ministry of Education of China, 2022). However, research indicates that these policies have not fully addressed the unique literacy challenges faced by left-behind children, as many interventions focus on general academic support rather than targeted literacy programs (Luo et al., 2020). Some studies have explored the potential of digital learning tools in enhancing autonomous literacy learning among left-behind children, for instance, mobile literacy applications and online reading programs have been introduced in rural areas to provide children with access to educational content (Sun & Li, 2022). While these initiatives show promise, they require stable internet access and digital literacy skills, both of which are often lacking in rural households (Wang & Chen, 2021).

While existing studies have examined the general educational challenges faced by left-behind children, there is a lack of research focusing specifically on their autonomous literacy learning experiences. Most studies have taken a quantitative approach, using large-scale surveys to measure literacy performance, but few have explored the lived experiences of left-behind children through qualitative methods (Xie, 2021). Given the complexity of literacy learning, a deeper understanding of children's personal challenges, emotional states, and coping strategies is necessary. This study aims to fill this gap by using a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, to explore the autonomous literacy learning experiences of left-behind children in Hebei Province, by capturing their perspectives, this research will contribute valuable insights into the barriers they face and the support systems that can enhance their literacy development.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically using semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges in autonomous literacy learning faced by left-behind children in Hebei Province. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research as it enables an in-depth examination of the lived experiences, perceptions, and difficulties encountered by these children (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Literacy learning is a multifaceted process influenced by social, emotional, and environmental factors, and a qualitative design provides the flexibility to capture these complexities, an exploratory research design is adopted to gain insights into the barriers these children face in their independent literacy development, given the limited research focusing on autonomous literacy learning within this specific demographic, this approach allows for the discovery of patterns and themes that may not have been previously explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To ensure a meaningful exploration of the research topic, purposive sampling is used to select participants who meet specific criteria. The study focuses on children aged 8 to 12 years old who have been identified as left-behind children, meaning that one or both of their parents have migrated for work, leaving them under the care of relatives or guardians. Participants must also be currently enrolled in primary schools in rural Hebei Province and engage in some level of autonomous literacy learning, such as reading or writing without direct parental assistance, a total of

15 left-behind children will be selected, as qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, and this sample size is expected to provide rich, detailed narratives of their experiences (Patton, 2015).

Data collection will be conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allow for a guided yet flexible conversation, ensuring that children can express their thoughts openly (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview questions will explore their daily reading and writing habits, the difficulties they encounter in learning independently, the type of support they receive from caregivers, teachers, or peers, their motivation and interest in literacy learning, and the resources available to them. Since the participants are children, the interviews will be conducted in a child-friendly manner, using simple language and interactive techniques to create a comfortable environment, each interview is expected to last approximately 20 to 30 minutes and will be audio-recorded with consent to ensure accurate data transcription and analysis.

Thematic analysis will be used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, this process includes familiarizing with the data through transcription and repeated reading, generating initial codes by identifying recurring words and patterns, searching for broader themes, reviewing and refining themes for consistency, defining and naming themes to articulate key findings, and synthesizing the results into a comprehensive narrative supported by direct participant quotes. NVivo software may be employed to assist in organizing and coding the data systematically.

Ethical considerations are central to this study, particularly because it involves children. The research adheres to the ethical guidelines established for studies involving minors, as outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). Informed consent will be obtained from both the children and their guardians before participation, and anonymity and confidentiality will be strictly maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants. Participation in the study will be entirely voluntary, with children given the option to withdraw at any stage without any repercussions. Furthermore, child-friendly interview techniques will be employed to create a safe and supportive setting for the participants. The researcher will also collaborate with local educators to ensure that the study aligns with ethical standards for working with vulnerable populations.

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, several strategies will be implemented. Triangulation will be used to compare responses from different participants, ensuring consistency in emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking will involve sharing preliminary findings with participants or their guardians to confirm accuracy and representation of their experiences. Peer debriefing will be conducted with fellow researchers to ensure objectivity in data analysis, while thick description will be employed to provide detailed contextual information, allowing for transferability of findings to similar settings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal multiple challenges that left-behind children in Hebei Province face in their autonomous literacy learning. Through thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews, several key themes emerged, including limited parental support, inadequate learning resources, low motivation and self-regulation, language barriers, and socio-emotional challenges. These findings align with existing literature on literacy development among marginalized children and provide insights into the specific struggles of left-behind children in rural China.

One of the most significant challenges reported by participants is the lack of parental guidance in literacy learning. Many children expressed difficulties in understanding new words, forming sentences, and comprehending texts due to the absence of parental involvement, since their parents work in distant cities, these children rely heavily on grandparents or other guardians, who often lack the literacy skills or educational background necessary to assist them. This finding supports previous research by Wang and Mao (2021), who highlighted that left-behind children often experience a learning gap due to inadequate home-based literacy support, the absence of parental engagement also affects children's motivation and confidence in their literacy abilities, making autonomous learning even more challenging.

Another critical finding is the lack of access to sufficient literacy materials such as books, writing tools, and digital learning platforms. Many participants reported that their schools have limited library resources, and at home, they have few books or literacy-related activities available to them. This scarcity of learning materials significantly hinders their ability to develop strong literacy skills, reinforcing the digital divide that exists between rural and urban areas (Liu et al., 2020). Moreover, some children mentioned that even when books are available, they struggle to find content that interests them, further discouraging their independent reading habits.

Motivation plays a crucial role in autonomous literacy learning, yet many participants reported struggling with self-discipline and sustaining interest in reading and writing. Several children stated that they found reading "boring" or "too difficult," leading them to avoid literacy-related tasks when not required by their teachers. This finding is consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes that children require intrinsic motivation and a sense of autonomy to actively engage in learning. However, left-behind children often lack the necessary encouragement and structured learning routines at home, making it difficult for them to develop self-regulated learning habits. Some children also reported procrastination and difficulty concentrating, which further hinders their literacy development.

A notable challenge among the participants was their struggle with understanding complex texts, particularly those containing unfamiliar vocabulary and abstract concepts. Some children found it difficult to transition from spoken dialects used at home to Standard Mandarin, which is used in school instruction and literacy materials, this linguistic gap creates additional barriers to reading comprehension, as reported by Chen et al. (2019), who found that children from rural backgrounds often face difficulties in academic literacy due to differences in home and school language use. Furthermore, several participants mentioned challenges in writing Chinese characters correctly, leading to frustration and decreased confidence in their literacy skills.

Beyond academic struggles, the findings also highlight the emotional and psychological barriers affecting autonomous literacy learning, many children expressed feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, often linked to their parents' prolonged absence. The lack of emotional support negatively influences their ability to focus on literacy tasks, as also noted in the work of Zhang and Luo (2022), who found that left-behind children frequently experience emotional distress, impacting their cognitive and academic development. Some participants mentioned that they feel reluctant to ask for help from teachers or peers, further isolating them in their learning process. These socio-emotional challenges suggest the need for a more holistic approach to literacy education that considers the psychological well-being of left-behind children.

The findings indicate that autonomous literacy learning among left-behind children is shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including family circumstances, resource availability, personal motivation, and socio-emotional well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-level intervention that involves schools, families, and policymakers. One potential solution is to enhance school-based literacy support programs, such as after-school reading clubs and peer mentoring initiatives. Schools can also integrate digital learning tools to provide engaging and interactive literacy activities for children with limited home resources. Additionally, local governments can play a role in expanding library access in rural areas and implementing mobile reading programs to distribute books and learning materials to children in need.

Parental involvement, even from a distance, should be encouraged through remote communication strategies. Parents working in urban areas can be guided on how to support their children's literacy development through voice messages, video calls. Schools and community organizations can provide training for grandparents or other caregivers to help them assist children with basic literacy activities. Furthermore, teachers should adopt a culturally and linguistically responsive approach to literacy education. Recognizing the linguistic challenges faced by these children, educators can implement bilingual teaching strategies, incorporating local dialects alongside Mandarin to facilitate comprehension. More engaging literacy instruction, such as project-based learning or storytelling workshops, can also help increase children's motivation and interest in reading and writing.

Lastly, given the socio-emotional difficulties faced by left-behind children, a greater emphasis on mental health support within schools is necessary. Schools can introduce social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that help children develop resilience, self-regulation, and coping strategies. Building strong teacher-student relationships and

fostering a supportive classroom environment can further mitigate the negative effects of parental absence on literacy learning. The findings of this study shed light on the significant challenges that left-behind children in Hebei Province encounter in their autonomous literacy learning. Limited parental support, inadequate resources, low motivation, language barriers, and socio-emotional difficulties all contribute to the obstacles these children face. However, through targeted interventions, such as school-based literacy programs, improved parental engagement strategies, and mental health support, these barriers can be gradually addressed.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the challenges in autonomous literacy learning faced by left-behind children in Hebei Province through semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal that these children encounter significant barriers, including limited parental support, inadequate access to learning resources, low motivation and self-regulation, language difficulties, and socio-emotional challenges. These obstacles not only hinder their ability to develop literacy skills independently but also contribute to a broader gap in educational attainment between left-behind children and their peers.

The absence of parental guidance emerged as a major factor affecting literacy development, as many left-behind children lack the necessary home-based support to reinforce reading and writing skills. Additionally, the scarcity of educational resources in rural areas, such as books, digital learning tools, and structured literacy programs, further limits their opportunities for autonomous learning. Motivation and self-regulation also play a crucial role, with many children struggling to sustain interest in reading and writing tasks without external encouragement. Moreover, linguistic barriers, particularly the transition from local dialects to Standard Mandarin, create additional challenges in literacy comprehension and fluency. Finally, socio-emotional difficulties, including loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, significantly impact their learning engagement and overall academic performance.

The study highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing these challenges, emphasizing the importance of school-based interventions, parental engagement, and community support. Without targeted efforts, left-behind children remain at risk of falling behind in literacy skills, which are critical for their future academic success and personal development. Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to support the autonomous literacy learning of left-behind children, these recommendations target educators, policymakers, parents, and community organizations to create a more supportive learning environment.

Since schools serve as the primary learning environment for left-behind children, educational institutions should implement structured literacy programs that foster independent learning. Teachers can introduce after-school reading clubs, peer-assisted learning strategies, and storytelling workshops to make literacy learning more engaging. Schools should also integrate digital literacy tools to provide children with interactive and accessible learning materials, reducing the resource gap between urban and rural areas. Despite the physical absence of parents, remote parental engagement can be encouraged through communication technologies. Parents working in urban areas can participate in their children's literacy development by sending voice messages or engaging in video calls to support their reading activities. Additionally, caregivers such as grandparents should receive basic literacy training to help them assist children with reading and writing tasks at home.

To address the lack of books and educational materials, mobile libraries and community reading centers should be established in rural areas. Local governments, and private sectors can collaborate to provide free books, audiobooks, and digital reading applications tailored to children's literacy levels. Schools can also develop book-sharing programs, allowing students to borrow and exchange books regularly. Since many left-behind children face difficulties transitioning from local dialects to Standard Mandarin, bilingual literacy strategies should be incorporated into early education. Additionally, literacy materials should include visual aids, phonetic support (Pinyin), and interactive storytelling techniques to make reading more accessible for children who struggle with written Chinese.

Educators should integrate project-based and game-based learning approaches to make literacy learning more engaging. Gamification techniques, such as literacy challenges, reading competitions, and storytelling projects, can enhance children's intrinsic motivation. Teachers can also introduce goal-setting strategies, where students set personal reading goals and track their progress using literacy journals or digital applications. Given the emotional

challenges faced by left-behind children, schools should implement Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to help students develop resilience, self-confidence, and coping strategies. Teachers should receive training in psychosocial support techniques to provide guidance and encouragement to students facing literacy difficulties. Moreover, peer support systems, such as buddy reading programs, can foster a sense of community and reduce feelings of isolation among left-behind children. Policymakers should prioritize educational equity for left-behind children by increasing funding for rural education and expanding teacher training programs. Initiatives such as rural teacher incentives, digital learning subsidies, and targeted literacy interventions should be implemented to ensure that left-behind children receive quality education. Additionally, community-based organizations should collaborate with schools to provide volunteer tutoring, literacy workshops, and mentorship programs to support children's autonomous learning efforts.

Autonomous literacy learning is essential for the academic and personal growth of left-behind children, yet numerous barriers hinder their progress, by enhancing educational support, increasing resource accessibility, promoting parental involvement, and addressing socio-emotional challenges, these children can develop stronger literacy skills and achieve greater academic success. Through collective efforts from educators, policymakers, families, and community organizations, a more inclusive and supportive learning environment can be created, ensuring that left-behind children are not left behind in their literacy development.

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