

An Examination of the Language Situation of Left-behind Children in the National Rural Revitalisation Focused Help—Taking Youyang as an Example

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Abstract

Left-behind children, as the key object of rural revitalization, and their language status are crucial to the improvement of the quality of rural education and the overall revitalization strategy. Taking Youyang County as an example, this study analyses left-behind children's language ability, language use, and language attitudes to derive the factors influencing their development, as well as the conclusions and recommendations, using questionnaires, interviews, observations, and other methods with left-behind children as the objects of investigation. The results will provide strong support for improving language education for left-behind children and promoting rural revitalization.

Keywords

left-behind children; language status; rural revitalization; Youyang County; education quality improvement.

1. Introduction

As a key target of rural revitalization, the language status of left-behind children is crucial to improving the quality of rural education and promoting overall rural revitalization. Taking Youyang as an example, the language development of these children not only reflects the current situation of local education, but is also an area that needs urgent attention in rural revitalization. Their language ability has a direct impact on the quality of rural education, which in turn has a bearing on the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy. Therefore, we need to attach great importance to language education for left-behind children, and regard it as an important part of rural revitalization and education modernization.

General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of rural education, especially language education. To ensure that left-behind children enjoy fair and high-quality language education resources and to narrow the education gap between urban and rural areas, we must face the challenges of left-behind children in Youyang in terms of the language environment, education resources and teacher strength. These problems constrain the development of left-behind children's language ability, and also affect the overall improvement of rural education and the promotion of rural revitalization.

Language education for left-behind children involves multiple disciplinary fields. In the field of sociology, we explore the relationship between language status and social integration and emotional expression; in the field of pedagogy, we study how to optimize the language teaching environment in rural schools and improve teachers' language teaching ability; in the field of economics and management, we analyze the economic effect of language education on

rural revitalization.

In recent years, the number of left-behind children in Youyang County has risen due to the advancement of urbanization and the integration of educational resources. These children are forced to stay in the countryside because their parents go out to work, and their language development situation faces many challenges. Based on the field survey, this study defines left-behind children as those who are under 14 years old, living in rural areas for a long time, and separated from their parents or one of them for more than six months. To gain an in-depth understanding of the language living conditions of left-behind children in Youyang County, we chose a certain number of left-behind children in the area as our research samples, and through detailed investigations and analyses, we aimed to analyze the internal logic of the phenomenon of returning to poverty in rural areas from the perspective of the children's language ability, and to explore the mechanism of the influence of language in the process of blocking the return to poverty. Finally, we will put forward a series of targeted recommendations based on the real-life dilemma of left-behind children's language development, to make language a powerful tool to promote the cause of rural revitalization, and contribute wisdom and strength to rural revitalization in Youyang and the whole country.

2. Literature review

The language development of left-behind children has always attracted much attention in academic circles at home and abroad. By combing through the relevant literature, we can find that the language development of left-behind children is affected by a variety of factors and has a series of problems.

Left-behind children lack effective input from the family language environment due to long-term separation from their parents, which directly affects the development of their language ability. Studies at home and abroad have shown that the family is an important place for children's language acquisition, and the daily communication between parents and children is crucial to children's language development. However, left-behind children are often unable to obtain sufficient language stimulation and communication opportunities due to the special characteristics of their family environment, resulting in their obvious deficiencies in vocabulary accumulation, grammar mastery, and expressive ability. The socio-economic status and educational resources of left-behind children are also important factors affecting their language development. In both domestic and international studies, children with lower socioeconomic status tend to face more language development difficulties. Left-behind children mostly come from rural or economically underdeveloped areas, where educational resources are relatively scarce, teachers are weak and teaching quality is not high, all of which constrain the language development of left-behind children. Moreover, the psychological problems of left-behind children cannot be ignored. Due to the long-term lack of parental care and companionship, left-behind children often suffer from psychological problems such as loneliness and anxiety, which will further affect their language learning and development.

About the relationship between rural revitalization and children's language development, studies have shown that the rural revitalization policy has a positive impact on the language development of left-behind children. The implementation of the rural revitalization policy helps to improve the economic environment of rural areas and the quality and quantity of

educational resources, thus providing left-behind children with a better language environment and learning opportunities. At the same time, by strengthening the cultural construction of rural areas and improving the language literacy of farmers, a richer language learning environment can also be created for left-behind children. The language development of left-behind children is a complex and multidimensional issue, which needs to be studied and explored in depth from multiple perspectives. In future research, we can further focus on the language education of left-behind children and explore effective educational interventions to promote their language development. At the same time, we should also strengthen the research on rural revitalization policies and children's language development, to provide a scientific basis for policy formulation and practice.

2.1. Psychological characteristics

Taking into consideration the influence of age, the psychological state of the elderly also presents certain changes, including the following aspects. First is the safety needs. The elderly are longing for adequate security to prevent themselves from danger and injury. Second is the social needs. The elderly always hope to get noticed by others, otherwise they will feel lonely. Third is the need to be respected. The elderly crave respect from others, and to achieve respect, the premise is to accomplish certain things independently. Fourth is the self-actualization needs. As the highest pursuit of life, self-actualization also represents the level of self-value, which is of paramount importance for achieving goals in life.

2.2. Behavioral characteristics

After stepping into the old age stage, the aging of the body is expected to impose a direct impact on one's behavior characteristics. With prominent dull actions with a slow reaction speed, the elderly witness weaker coordination ability of the movement in comparison with before. In addition, the elderly are prone to get exhausted and generate the feeling of fatigue. Last but not least, given the sharp decline in the physical function of the elderly, their resistance will also gradually weaken. In such case, they have to attach great importance to seasonal changes and diseases brought by climate change, where the elderly will cast their eyes on and fully leverage preventive measures in advance.

3. Analysis of the Language Situation of Left-behind Children in Youyang County

We explicitly take left-behind children in Youyang County as the research object, including left-behind children of different ages, genders, and family backgrounds. Questionnaires, interviews, observations, and other methods were used to examine left-behind children's language ability, language use, and language attitudes comprehensively.

3.1. Survey design

In Chongqing Youyang Miao and Tujia Autonomous County (from now on referred to as "Youyang"), the language situation is complex, with a predominantly vernacular language, including local dialects and minority languages. The county has a population of more than 600,000, of which 97 percent are ethnic minorities and 3 percent are Han Chinese. There are about 40,000 children left behind in rural areas, accounting for about 0.06 percent of the total. Combining the local population distribution, the number of schools, and the number of left-behind children, a total of five townships, Longtan Township, Mawang Township,

Taohuayuan Township, Gongtan Township, and Heishui Township, were selected as sample areas for this survey.

The survey mainly used questionnaire analysis, in-depth interviews, and fieldwork, and the questionnaires were distributed several times from 3 to 15 April 2024, which included both paper and electronic questionnaires. The questionnaire targeting the language life of left-behind children involves 17 questions belonging to various aspects such as family situation, language preference, and language attitudes, and is designed to cover languages such as Putonghua, Chongqing, and ethnic languages. The questionnaire for primary and secondary school teachers' language teaching situation involves 17 questions in the areas of language of instruction, language preference, and assessment of students' language ability.

3.2. Object characteristics

The survey respondents of this project were mainly left-behind children, and a total of 514 paper and electronic questionnaires were distributed, with 483 valid questionnaires, a validity rate of about 94 percent; of these, 412 came from the children and 71 from the teachers. The composition of the children's sample is as follows:

Table 1: Composition of the children's sample

(a person's) age		Under 6 years	6-12 years	12-14 years	add up the total
quorum		50	238	124	412
Number of persons as a percentage of		12 percent	58 percent	30 percent	100%
distinguishing between the sexes Percentage share	schoolboy	219/53.2			
	schoolgirl	193/46.8			

We have classified the children's living status into three types according to the status of their family members: parents at home, grandparents in care, and other situations (one parent working outside the home, one at home or fostering other relatives). There are 256 children with both parents at home, accounting for 62.1 percent of the total; 111 children left behind in the care of their grandparents, accounting for 26.9 percent; and 45 children left behind in other situations, accounting for 10.9 percent. The situation in the five townships is shown in the table below:

Table 2: Group characteristics of children left behind in Youyang (N=412)

region	Parents at home	Grandma and Grandpa are home.	the rest	add up the total
Peach Blossom Garden Township percentage	88	13	4	105
	85.3 per cent	13.2 per cent	1.5 per cent	
Marwang township, Tibetan: Mawang	66	19	5	90
	73.3	21.1%	5.6 per cent	

county, in Shigatse prefecture, Tibet percentage				
Long Tan township, Hainan percentage	57	22	2	81
	70.4 per cent	24.7 per cent	4.9 per cent	
Heishui township, Heilongjiang province percentage	28	31	12	71
	39.4 per cent	43.7 per cent	16.9 per cent	
Gonzan town (place name) percentage	17	26	22	65
	27.0 per cent	39.7 per cent	33.3 per cent	
add up the total percentage	256	111	45	412
	62.1%	26.9 per cent	10.9 per cent	

The data show that:

The more remote and the less economically developed the township, the higher the proportion of children left behind, with 27.0 percent of the children in Gongtan Township, the furthest away from the city, having their parents at home, and the proportion of left-behind children being as high as 73.0 percent. Under such circumstances, it is more important to pay attention to the language situation of left-behind children in remote and backward areas to help revitalize the countryside.

3.3. Language skills

From the survey data, the language ability of local left-behind children in Youyang mainly shows the following characteristics:

The language of initiation for children in Youyang, Chongqing, was mostly Chongqing dialect, **accounting for 95.0 percent of the total; a small proportion, 5.0 percent, was Mandarin.**

Chongqing dialect is the most used language, mainly in ordinary life communication, accounting for 54.4.0 percent of the total; followed by Putonghua, which is mainly used in school classrooms or on important occasions, accounting for 42.0 percent of the total. A very small proportion of children use foreign languages, mainly in the English corner at school.

Local children in Youyang are able to use Putonghua flexibly, although they are affected by the dialect in terms of pronunciation, and their pronunciation may be slightly off when speaking Putonghua.

Very few children use ethnic languages, and most of them find them inconvenient for daily communication and difficult to learn and master. It is understood that because of the phenomenon of Sinicisation, the only people who know the national languages are the elderly in remote areas. These very few children are influenced by the older members of their families and speak only simple everyday language.

Table 3: Distribution of various indicators of language proficiency of left-behind children in Youyang (N=412)

name (of a thing)	quorum	per cent
Language of Enlightenment:		
Mandarin (common language)	21	5.0 per cent
Chongqing dialect	319	95.0 per cent
national language	-	-
foreign languages	-	-
The most commonly spoken language:		
Mandarin (common language)	173	42.0 per cent
Chongqing dialect	224	54.4 per cent
national language	-	-
foreign languages	15	3.6 per cent
Putonghua level		
(of an unmarried couple) be close	152	36.9 per cent
rather or relatively good	185	44.9 per cent
usual	73	17.7 per cent
mediocre	2	0.04 per cent
differ from	-	-
Chongqing dialect level		
(of an unmarried couple) be close	371	
rather or relatively good	38	90.0 per cent
usual	3	9.2 per cent
mediocre	-	0.08 per cent
differ from	-	
level of national language		
(of an unmarried couple) be close	-	-
rather or relatively good	-	-
usual	-	-
mediocre	5	1.2 per cent
differ from	407	98.8 per cent

3.4. Use of language

The language use of "Youyang left-behind children" as a whole shows the following characteristics and the specific data are shown in Table 4:

First, the first language they learn is usually the national language. About 30 percent of the children learn the Chongqing dialect first, but the national language is still the first language learned by most of the children, with a proportion of 74.8 percent.

Secondly, they mainly use the national language in their daily communication with their families. 86.9 percent of the children prefer the national language, while 8.7 percent use the Chongqing dialect, and very few use Mandarin.

Thirdly, they mainly use Putonghua to communicate with teachers at school. Nearly 60 percent of children use Mandarin, while more than 40 percent use ethnic languages.

Fourthly, they use the national dialect more often in playing with their peers and in daily communication: 86.7 percent use the national dialect, while 12.4 percent use the Chongqing

dialect, and a very small number use Putonghua.

Table 4: Language use and assignments of left-behind children in Youyang (N=412)

name (of a thing)	assign a value to something	quorum	Percentage (%)
first language			
national language	1	308	74.8
Chongqing dialect	2	76	18.2
Mandarin (common language)	3	28	6.8
Language of daily communication with family members			
national language	1	358	86.9
Chongqing dialect	2	36	8.7
Mandarin (common language)	3	18	4.3
Language of communication with teachers at school			
national language	1	180	43.7
Chongqing dialect	2	32	7.8
Mandarin (common language)	3	200	48.5
Language of daily communication with peers			
national language	1	357	86.7
Chongqing dialect	2	51	12.4
Mandarin (common language)	3	4	0.9

The language use of the "left-behind children in Youyang" mainly shows the characteristics of "co-existence of many languages, strong dialect and weak Putonghua", with the national language maintaining a higher usage rate in all kinds of occasions; in the family environment, the dialect still plays an important role; and in the teaching environment of the school, the use of Putonghua is much higher than that in the life and family environment. In the teaching environment of schools, Mandarin is used far more than in the living and family environment.

3.5. Language attitudes

Language attitude is directly related to the learning, use, and transmission of a certain language or dialect. It is found that children show different emotional attitudes towards their native language and Putonghua. The language attitudes of the "left-behind children in Youyang" are mainly related to the national language, Chongqing dialect, and Putonghua, showing the following characteristics, and the specific data are shown in Table 5:

Table 5: Language evaluation scores of "Youyang left-behind children" (N=412)

Evaluation projects	Percentage of national language evaluations (%)	Percentage of evaluations in Chongqing (%)	Percentage of Mandarin evaluations (%)
It's not smooth, it's not comfortable	18.2	43.2	31.2
Flexible and comfortable	81.8	56.8	68.8

Table 6 shows that ethnic languages have a lower percentage of "not fluent, not comfortable" than Chongqing dialect and Putonghua, with a percentage of 18.2%; Chongqing dialect has the lowest percentage of "flexible, comfortable", with 56.8%; Putonghua has the second highest percentage of "flexible, comfortable", with 68.8%; and Mandarin has the second highest percentage of "flexible, comfortable", with 68.8%. Mandarin has the second highest percentage of "flexible and comfortable" ratings, at 68.8 percent.

Table 6: Evaluation scores of language barriers of "Youyang left-behind children" (N=412)

Evaluation projects	Mean value of ethnolinguistic evaluations	Mean value of Chongqing dialect evaluation	The mean value of Mandarin evaluation
Difficult to understand when others speak faster	2.33	1.24	2.25
poor pronunciation	1.47	2.38	4.54
Mastery of linguistic singularity	1.36	2.98	1.20
Usually said too little, not used often	0.13	1.82	2.41
the rest	-	0.05	-

Table 6 shows that Mandarin has higher scores in the dimensions of "poor pronunciation" and "speaking too little and not often" than ethnic languages and Chongqing, with 4.54 and 2.41 respectively; ethnic languages have higher scores than Chongqing and Mandarin in the dimension of "difficult to understand when others speak fast", with 2.33; Chongqing has the lowest score in the five dimensions overall. The ethnic language scored higher than Chongqing dialect and Putonghua in the dimension of "difficult to understand when others speak faster", with a score of 2.33; the Chongqing dialect had the lowest score in all five dimensions.

The mean values of the evaluation scores of Putonghua, Chongqing dialect, and ethnic languages were further subjected to two-pair t-tests. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the attitudes towards "single language mastery" between Mandarin and ethnic languages ($p=0.461 > 0.05$), except that there was no significant difference in the attitudes towards "single language mastery" between Mandarin and Chongqing ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), Mandarin and ethnic languages ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), Mandarin and ethnic languages ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), and Mandarin and ethnic languages ($p=0.000 < 0.05$). There are significant differences in the dimensions of Mandarin versus Chongqing ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), Mandarin versus ethnic language ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), and Chongqing versus ethnic language ($p=0.000 < 0.05$).

Table 7: Number and value of language mastery of "Youyang left-behind children" (N=412)

Mastery	assign a value to something	(of an unmarried couple) be close	rather or relatively good	usual	mediocre	differ from
1. classifier for cans of beverages, such as	1	228	108	51	18	7

soda or beer	2	216	67	97	20	12
national language	3	24	59	13	200	116
Chongqing dialect						
Mandarin (common language)						
2. persuade						
national language	1	217	110	65	15	5
Chongqing dialect	2	237	47	76	21	12
Mandarin (common language)	3	16	48	133	147	68
3. phrase marked by pause						
national language	1	-	-	-	-	-
Chongqing dialect	2	-	-	-	-	-
Mandarin (common language)	3	55	45	207	81	24
4. write						
national language	1	-	-	-	-	-
Chongqing dialect	2	-	-	-	-	-
Mandarin (common language)	3	137	209	32	11	23

Table 7 shows that the national language is the language in which "Youyang left-behind children" are most confident in "listening" and "speaking", with the numbers of 228 and 217 respectively, and more than 50% of them are confident in Mandarin in "writing". More than 50% of the children were confident in Mandarin in "writing". About 50 percent of the children in Chongqing were generally confident in "reading", and about 40 percent were least confident in "listening" and "speaking".

"Youyang left-behind children maintain a strong emotional identification with the national language and high recognition of Putonghua as a whole, and there is a mismatch between language use and emotional identification with the language, i.e., although the national dialect dominates the language life, they still maintain a strong desire to learn and use Putonghua.

4. Analysis of factors affecting the language development of left-behind children

In the present situation, with the development of society and the dissemination of information, the importance of Putonghua is constantly being highlighted. In the process of urbanization and modernization, Putonghua, as the unified official language of the country, has become one of the main languages of communication in all walks of life. Therefore, the promotion of Putonghua is of great practical significance in the local area. The phenomenon that left-behind children in the Youyang area of Chongqing are more likely to use ethnic dialects in their daily lives and more inclined to use Putonghua in school may be influenced by a variety of factors:

Family environment: Left-behind children, in their family environment, mainly use the national dialect in their daily communication with their families, and this language environment makes them naturally accustomed to using this language. The formation of this

habit is a reflection of the importance of the family language environment in language acquisition. The family is the initial place of language learning for children, and the frequent use of ethnic dialects not only enables children to master language skills through exposure but also makes them develop a deep emotional identity with the language.

Peer influence: In their daily lives, left-behind children tend to socialize more with their peers and other residents in the village due to the prolonged absence of their parents. In such a social environment, the national dialect, as their common language, becomes the main tool of communication. Peer interactions and the everyday language of the villagers made the left-behind children more inclined to use the ethnic dialect. Thus, peer influence and the social environment make left-behind children more inclined to use ethnic dialects, which further reflects the important role of the home language environment in language acquisition.

School environment: Schools, as important institutions for nurturing and educating the next generation, commonly use Putonghua as the standardized language of instruction. This standardized language environment requires students to use Putonghua for communication and learning in school. For left-behind children, although they are used to using ethnic dialects at home, they naturally begin to adapt to and learn to use Putonghua when they enter school and are faced with a unified teaching requirement and language environment. Therefore, the requirement of using Putonghua at school plays a positive role in promoting the language acquisition of left-behind children.

Social Identity: As the official language of the country, Putonghua not only carries the important responsibility of cultural transmission but is also an important symbol of national unity and modern development. In school education, the popularisation and use of Putonghua helps to cultivate students' language skills and promote their all-round development. For left-behind children, the school and social environments may guide them more to use Putonghua to adapt to the needs of modern society and better integrate into the social family. Therefore, school education and guidance from the social environment have a positive significance for left-behind children to better use Putonghua.

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