

A Study on the Subtle Emotional Needs Signals of Left-Behind Children and Teachers' Compensation Strategies in Rural Kindergartens in Chinese Mainland: An Exploration Based on Interviews and Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This research adopts the interview survey method and grounded theory, focusing on 100 teachers in Chinese Mainland's rural kindergartens, and systematically explores the subtle emotional needs signals and characteristics of rural left-behind children in the daily situation of kindergartens, as well as the compensation strategies spontaneously formed by teachers in practice. Through in-depth interviews and three-level coding analysis, four typical forms of emotional needs signals for left-behind children were identified, and the triggering mechanism of teachers' "unique caregiving alertness" and their self-created compensation strategy system were revealed. Research has found that in the context of parents' absence for work and the influence of traditional Chinese educational concepts on the grandparents, left-behind children face suppressed emotional expression, and their emotional needs signals exhibit characteristics of attenuation and alienation; The compensatory care developed by rural kindergarten teachers based on their educational intuition and accumulated experience has to some extent alleviated the emotional deprivation of left-behind children, but its sustainability faces practical challenges such as emotional labor overload and lack of professional support. This research provides a scientific basis for the practice of kindergarten education and teacher training under the background of family absence in Chinese Mainland, and also provides unique case references for the preschool education field in other countries.

Keywords

Left-Behind Children, Subtle Emotional Needs Signals, Rural Kindergarten Teachers, Compensation Strategies, Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

Left-behind children are a relatively common group in rural areas of Chinese Mainland. In order to improve family income, some parents of rural children choose to work in urban areas and live their children in the care of grandparents living in rural areas. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, kindergarten children aged 3 - 6 are in the pre-operational stage, and their thinking has characteristics such as self-centeredness and intuitive imagery. They have not yet developed mature logical reasoning and viewpoint taking abilities (Piaget, 1970). Children at this stage are in great need of adult supportive responses to help with their emotional development. However, for left-behind children at this stage, their parents' absence weakens emotional support in the family, and their grandparents are usually influenced by traditional Chinese educational concepts (such as "a strong boy cannot cry" and "setbacks are a good thing"), which tend to suppress children's emotional expression. This makes left-behind children at this stage face more complex emotional needs and expression problems. The process of releasing their emotional needs becomes subtle or alienated, which may manifest as repeated drawing of a certain thing or sudden aggressive behavior, rather than using more direct language to express emotional needs like children with long-term parental companionship. However, in daily kindergarten life, their interaction with teachers constitutes an extremely important and even core component of their emotional support system. Rural kindergarten teachers have been interacting with these children for a long time, relying on theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom, gradually forming a unique set of identification and response strategies, which to some extent compensate for the emotional deficiencies caused by parental absence and intergenerational education. This study aims to explore the following core questions: (1) What are the typical forms of subtle emotional needs signals emitted by left-behind children in rural kindergartens in Chinese Mainland? What are the differences in signal expression among children of different age groups? (2) How do rural kindergarten teachers recognize these signals? What compensation strategies have been formed? What impact do these strategies have on children? What are the challenges faced by teachers' compensation behavior? The basis for proposing the research question is that, firstly, although existing research has paid attention to the psychological health and education issues of left behind children, it pays insufficient attention to the subtle manifestations and recognition mechanisms of emotional needs of left-behind children in kindergartens; Secondly, there is a lack of systematic literature exploring how traditional Chinese cultural concepts affect the emotional expression of left-behind children through the interme-

diary mechanism of intergenerational care; Finally, although teachers play a crucial role in responding to the emotional needs of left behind children, there is a lack of in-depth theoretical construction on their spontaneously formed compensation strategies and the systemic challenges they face. Therefore, this study aims to systematically address the gaps in theory and practice through in-depth interviews and grounded theory methods. The innovation of this study lies in proposing important concepts such as “subtle emotional needs signals” and “unique caregiving alertness”, which enriches the research content in the field of early childhood education in theory and provides scientific basis for rural kindergarten teacher training in practice.

2. Literature Review

The issue of left-behind children and emotional education for young children is a topic of concern in many countries around the world, but there is still a lack of systematic and in-depth research on the subtle emotional needs signals of left-behind children in rural kindergartens and teacher compensation strategies. In recent years, research on such issues has mainly focused on three aspects: (1) research on left-behind children; (2) Research on intergenerational education; (3) Research on emotional education for young children. This literature review will sort out important literature from these three core aspects to determine the theoretical starting point and contribution space of this study.

(1) Research on left-behind children

In recent years, research on left-behind children mainly includes: (1) Research on psychological problems of left-behind children. For example, left-behind children may have psychological health problems such as a lack of security (Carranza, 2022), a lack of happiness due to certain special circumstances (Bălăţescu, Strozik, Soo, Kutsar, Strozik, & Bacter, 2023), and may experience long-term hidden feelings of loneliness (Cui Chaonan, 2026); (2) Research on the educational difficulties of left-behind children. For example, left-behind children may experience academic difficulties due to family and other factors (Ba Nguyen & Van Nguyen, 2025), electronic product dependence (Zheng, 2022), and academic burnout (Xu, Chen, Ye, Wen, Zhen, & Zhou, 2025); (3) Research on methods for caring for left-behind children. For example, giving more attention to left-behind children (Jiang, 2022), providing better happiness support for left-behind children (Vikram, 2023), and giving more encouragement and warmth to left-behind children (Antia, Rodoreda, & Winkler, 2022). But these studies focus more on left-behind children in middle and primary schools, lacking comprehensive and in-depth research on left-behind children in kindergartens.

(2) Research on intergenerational education

In recent years, research on intergenerational education has mainly focused on: (1) the issue of intergenerational education. For example, intergenerational education often takes a single form (Wang, Lu, Wang, & Wang, 2025), and grandparents' indulgence in their grandchildren may have a negative impact (Quak, Tong,

Hong, Chong, Duggal, Amin, & Gao, 2025), inappropriate intergenerational education methods may lead to children lacking good study habits (He, Yang, & Xiang, 2025). (2) Research on the causes of problems in intergenerational education. For example, the education level of grandparents is usually not high (Zha, 2024), the assistance provided by schools or communities is not precise enough (Hu, 2022), and the existing education system should be improved (Zhao, 2020). (3) Research on Countermeasures for Intergenerational Education Issues. For example, grandparents need to actively learn scientific educational methods (Jin & Ding, 2022), schools need to pay more attention to left-behind students (Hao, 2022), and the government and society need to provide better support for left-behind children (Zhu, Wang, & Pan, 2023). But these studies often do not pay enough attention to the potential connection between unique traditional cultural backgrounds and intergenerational education.

(3) Research on Emotional Education for Young Children

In recent years, research on early childhood emotional education has mainly focused on: (1) Research on issues related to early childhood emotional education. For example, schools sometimes do not provide sufficient and appropriate support for emotional education in young children (Steed, Shapland, & Leech, 2022), emotional education in young children sometimes faces funding constraints (Kaspar & Massey, 2023), and there is a lack of good cooperation between families and schools (Zhang, 2022). (2) Practical research on emotional education for young children. For example, the application of smart toys in early childhood emotional education (Li, 2025), the application of picture books in early childhood emotional education (Horváthová, 2022), and the application of fun sports courses in early childhood emotional education (Liu, 2023). But these studies often do not pay enough attention to the specific issue of emotional needs signals of left-behind children.

From the literature review above, it can be concluded that current research lacks comprehensive and in-depth research on left-behind children in kindergartens, and does not pay enough attention to the potential connection between unique traditional cultural backgrounds and intergenerational education, as well as the subtle emotional needs signals of left-behind children. Therefore, through in-depth interviews and grounded theory methods, this study aims to explore the subtle emotional demand signals and teacher compensation strategies of left-behind children in rural kindergartens in Chinese Mainland in a more comprehensive and detailed way, which can provide more targeted theoretical and practical references for related research.

3. Research Methods

(1) Research design:

This research plans to adopt a qualitative research, and captures teachers' real experiences, specific behaviors, and potential psychological mechanisms in perceiving and dealing with children's subtle emotional demand signals through in-depth interviews. Grounded theory methods are used for data analysis and theo-

retical construction.

Research subjects: 100 rural kindergarten teachers in Chinese Mainland. There were a total of 67 female teachers and 33 male teachers in this study. Among them, 18 teachers have high school degrees, 79 teachers have college degrees, and 3 teachers have master's degrees. There are 72 teachers from public kindergartens and 28 teachers from private kindergartens. The proportion of left-behind children in the class is between 20% and 80%.

Sampling method: A strategy combining purposive sampling and maximum variation sampling is adopted. Teachers participating in this interview come from diverse geographical regions and different types of cities (first-tier, second-tier, third-tier and below), and various socioeconomic backgrounds in the Chinese mainland, in order to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample.

Inclusion criteria: (1) At least 1 year of front-line teaching experience in rural kindergartens in Chinese Mainland; (2) There are left-behind children in the class (both or one parent has been working in another area for more than 6 months); (3) Voluntarily participate in research and provide rich information. Finally, 100 teachers were included, aged 21 - 52 (average age 35), with a teaching experience of 2 - 28 years (average 9 years).

(2) Data collection and analysis

(a) Data collection:

Use a semi-structured in-depth interview outline. The core of the outline focuses on asking teachers to describe in detail typical left-behind children cases in their class, as well as teachers' own specific reactions throughout the process. The interview is conducted by a trained researcher in a one-on-one format in a quiet and private environment (with the option to choose offline or online). The average interview duration is about 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed.

(b) Data analysis:

This study used a systematic analysis program based on grounded theory to perform three-level coding on interview transcripts.

Open coding: At this stage, based on the original interview content of the teachers, carefully read and extract the core original information points, extract and organize the core words and phrases from the teacher interviews into initial codes, and lay the foundation for identifying and summarizing the overall categories and framework in the next step. The researcher carefully read the transcript of the interview word by word, breaking down, comparing, and conceptualizing the original data to capture all the original information points related to "emotional performance of left-behind children," "teacher observation process," "teacher response strategies," and "teacher reflection and confusion". For example, labeling phenomena such as "That child won't cry even if he fall down", "That kid always shares all the snacks with others", "That kid keeps drawing the same thing", "This little kid suddenly hit someone" as initial concepts.

Axial coding: At this stage, specific frameworks and categories are summarized

and categorized based on open coding. Classify, compare, and correlate the core initial information in the original interview content of teachers, identify and organize the core categories and framework content of this study. At this stage, it identified the four core types of subtle emotional needs signals of left-behind children, three unique caregiving alertness, three types of teachers' compensation strategies. For example, aggregating code such as "never cry in front of others" and "not defending when criticized" into the category of "emotional repression type". At this stage, some initial categories were formed.

Selective coding: On the basis of the first two encodings, this step identified and integrated a complete storyline, constructed a logical relationship model between the three, and determined the important writing order of the core findings of this article, namely: left-behind children emit attenuated or alienated emotional needs signals under the absence of parents and suppression of traditional educational concepts; Teachers develop caregiving vigilance in long-term coexistence with children to identify these subtle signals; On this basis, teachers spontaneously form a strategy system of "emotional compensation" to respond to children's emotional needs.

(3) Reliability and validity guarantee:

Peer debriefing: During the data analysis phase, another researcher was invited to independently code the interview transcripts. The coding results were then compared and discussed to reach a consensus. In this study, the coding performed by the author and the other researcher showed near-identical outcomes with a strong level of agreement, demonstrating a very high degree of reliability.

Member checking: Some of the respondents were asked to review the preliminary analytical findings or key interpretations in order to confirm whether these accurately represented their actual experiences and intentions, and they all indicated that the results aligned well with their own experiences, which suggests strong validity.

Saturation: When the researcher attempted to incorporate more extra data for analysis, it was found that the extra data could no longer generate new theories, indicating that the original research had reached theoretical saturation.

Rich citation of raw data: When reporting the research findings, many direct quotes from the interviews were used as supporting evidence, which strengthens the traceability and credibility of the analysis.

4. Key Findings

(1) The four core types of subtle emotional needs signals of left-behind children:

Through systematic coding and analysis, this study identified four typical forms of subtle emotional needs signals emitted by left-behind children in daily kindergarten situations. It is noticeable that there are significant differences in the signal expression of emotional needs among left-behind children in different grades (K1/K2/K3), which is highly consistent with the age characteristics of develop-

mental psychology.

(a) Adversarial behavior type

This kind of emotional needs signals of children are presented in a way that is disruptive to others or the environment, including attacking peers, damaging objects, violating rules, etc. These types of children are often seen as “naughty children” in the classroom, and the first reaction of some new teachers is usually behavior correction rather than exploring the emotional appeals behind their behavior. It is noticeable that this type of signal is more common in younger left-behind children (especially in small classes, 3 - 4 years old).

For example, a Grade K1 teacher described the behavior pattern of a 3-year-old left-behind boy in the class:

“Jack is three years old this year. His parents work in another city, and he lives in the countryside with his grandparents. During class breaks, Jack always takes the initiative to hit his classmates and even teachers. Many classmates in the class were beaten to tears by him. At first, I criticized him and told him to be friendly to everyone, but later I realized that he was not really mischievous, but wanted to attract the attention of teachers and classmates to play with him. He has an emotional need for companionship, but he cannot express it in words. A three-year-old child’s language ability is limited, and coupled with the influence of traditional Chinese educational concepts, his grandparents believe that children need to face and solve emotional problems independently. Therefore, his grandparents did not teach him the correct way to express emotional needs. He has many unspoken emotions in his heart, so he can only use this way he thinks can attract others’ attention to release emotional need signals.” (F31, 2 years of teaching experience, Grade K1)

From Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, children aged 3 - 4 from Grade K1 are in the early stage of pre-operational thinking, with strong self-centeredness in their thinking. They have not yet developed the mature ability to take advice, and their language expression ability is limited in this stage (Piaget, 1970). Especially for left-behind children, their grandparents may have been influenced by some traditional Chinese educational concepts, lacking high-quality language input and emotional dialogue in the family, leading to these children being more inclined to express emotions through subtle actions rather than language. Therefore, the aggressive behavior of left-behind children from Grade K1 is essentially a form of “language substitution”. They cannot say “I miss my mother” or “I need company”, so they use fists instead of language.

(b) Emotional repression type

The core characteristic of this type of signal is that young children exhibit “too calm,” “indifferent,” or “not crying or making noise” when facing conflicts or negative emotions. Teachers often need a relatively long time to realize that this behavior is not truly “sensible” or “emotionally stable”, but rather a defensive emotional withdrawal. These children also need emotional comfort and support. This type of emotional needs signal is more common among children from Grade K2

(4 - 5 years old) in kindergarten. Children from this grade usually neither attack others like children from Grade K2, nor please others like children from Grade K3. It is more of a hidden emotional needs signal.

For example, a rural kindergarten teacher with 8 years of teaching experience who is teaching the Grade K2 describes a left-behind boy in the class as follows:

“There is a 4-year-old student named Jason in my class. His parents do business in Southeast Asia, and he lives with his grandmother in the countryside. Once, he was pushed down by another child, and his knee was scraped and bleeding. I quickly comforted him and help him deal with the wound. If other children had encountered this situation, they would have cried or said they wanted to go home, but Jason behaved very ‘calmly’. I thought this child was really emotionally stable at the time, and later I gradually realized that his heart also longed for emotional comfort. However, his grandmother was influenced by traditional Chinese educational concepts and often told him ‘a strong boy cannot cry’, which led him to want to hide his tears when facing setbacks.” (M07, 8 years of teaching experience, Grade K2)

From the perspective of child psychology, 4 - 5 years old children will gradually become more receptive to advice from others (Chen Guomei, 2017). Left-behind children, due to the long-term lack of emotional comfort from their parents and the indoctrination of some traditional Chinese educational concepts by their grandparents, are more likely to form this emotional suppression pattern.

(c) Symbol seeking type

The core feature of this type of signal is that young children convey emotional needs through specific objects or repetitive actions. For example, excessive attachment to a certain object or repeatedly drawing the same object on paper. Teachers may sometimes misunderstand that children only like a certain object and ignore their potential emotional needs. This type of emotional need signal is also more commonly seen in children from Grade K2, and it is also a hidden emotional need signal.

For example, a rural kindergarten teacher with 12 years of teaching experience who is currently teaching the Grade K2 class describes a left-behind girl in her class as follows:

“There is a 5-year-old girl named Mary in my class. She is a left-behind child who lives with her grandparents. Every time we take a break, she draws a car on paper. Usually, my younger colleagues think that Mary just likes that kind of car, but through years of teaching experience, I think there may be other potential reasons. So I communicated with Mary and learned that this is because Mary’s parents drive this car home to accompany her every vacation. She sees this car as if she sees her own parents. In addition, her grandparents are influenced by traditional Chinese educational concepts and believe that girls should do quiet things like drawing, and cannot release their emotions by crying. Therefore, Mary only expresses her emotional needs signal in this way.” (F45, 12 years of teaching experience, Grade K2)

From the perspective of child psychology, 4 - 5 years old children from Grade K2 will gradually become better at controlling their emotions, and usually will not cry or lose their temper directly like children from Grade K1. However, they are not good enough to express their emotional needs through language (Chen, 2017), so they may indirectly express their emotional needs by relying on certain objects or drawing.

(d) Pleasing others type

The core characteristic of this type of signal is that young children exhibit “excessive friendliness” towards teachers and peers, frequently sharing snacks or always actively helping others, rarely refusing others’ requests, and displaying guilt and regret beyond normal when making mistakes. Some teachers may gradually realize in practice that this type of behavior is not rooted in genuine pro-social tendencies, but rather an emotional need expression strategy that attempts to gain a sense of security and control by pleasing others. This type of signal is common in Grade K3 (5 - 6 years old) classes, where children have better cognitive abilities than before and can perform more complex social strategy calculations.

For example, a rural kindergarten teacher who is teaching the Grade K3 told the story of a left-behind girl in the class:

“There is a six-year-old left-behind girl named Lily in my class. She is mainly taken care of by her grandmother. Every day when she has lunch at kindergarten, she takes the initiative to share her cakes with other children. Some new teachers may think that she just doesn’t like cakes, but through years of teaching experience, I think there may be other potential reasons. So I communicated with her grandmother and learned that her grandmother is influenced by traditional Chinese educational concepts and often tells Lily to share her favorite things with others in order to become more popular. Her grandmother also told Lily that many parents like children who are good at sharing. Only when Lily is good at sharing, her parents will come back to accompany her as soon as possible. I only understood after that communication why Lily wanted to share her favorite cake with other children, which was actually indirectly expressing her emotional needs.” (F21, with 10 years of teaching experience, Grade K3)

From the perspective of attachment theory, excessive pleasing behavior can be understood as a manifestation of “anxious attachment” (Bowlby, 1969). When parents do not accompany young children for a long time, they cannot form a safe internal work model and instead develop a cognitive schema of ‘I must maintain good relationships by pleasing others. At the age of 5 - 6 in the Grade K3 stage, children’s cognitive abilities have become more developed than before, and left-behind children are mainly taken care of by grandparents who have been influenced by traditional Chinese educational concepts. Therefore, these left-behind children may release emotional needs signals by pleasing others, but this “forward thinking” emotional need expression strategy is precisely the manifestation of their insecurity.

(2) Unique caregiving alertness: cognitive mechanism for teachers to recog-

nize signals

If the emotional needs signals emitted by left-behind children are subtle, then the process of teachers recognizing these signals is an enhanced cognitive activity. This study conceptualizes this process as “unique caregiving alertness”—a special sensitivity developed by teachers during long-term interactions with young children, enabling them to capture subtle clues that are easily overlooked by ordinary people and interpret them as potential emotional need signals. And the unique caregiving alertness is not a continuously activated state, but is awakened by certain specific cues. According to coding analysis, the clues that trigger teacher alertness can be divided into three categories:

Category 1: Deviation from the group benchmark. Teachers have established implicit cognitive templates for “typical” behaviors of young children during long-term class management, and are able to adjust reference standards according to age groups. When a child’s behavior continues to deviate significantly from this template, teachers’ unique caregiving alertness will be triggered. This type of deviation includes both high-frequency behaviors such as crying too much and low-frequency behaviors such as never crying.

Category 2: Unreasonable repetition of behavior. If the repetitive behavior of young children exceeds the normal range of interests or exhibits certain persistent characteristics, it is easy to attract the attention of teachers, the teacher’s unique caregiving alertness will be triggered. Such as the thing “repeatedly drawing a car” mentioned in this article.

Category 3: Mismatch between context and behavior. When a child’s reaction is clearly inconsistent with the emotional tone of the current situation (such as showing indifference in situations that should be sad or extreme emotions in the face of serious setbacks), the teacher’s unique caregiving alertness will be triggered.

(3) Emotional compensation outside the system: teachers’ compensation strategies

Faced with the emotional deprivation and social signal attenuation of left-behind children, rural kindergarten teachers have spontaneously formed a compensation strategy system in the absence of systematic policy guidance and professional training. This study conceptualizes it as “emotional compensation outside the system”, referring to compensatory caregiving behaviors created by teachers in blank areas where the education system is not clearly defined, relying on individual initiative and professional conscience.

(a) Daily penetrating attention: additional support embedded in routine activities

The characteristic of this strategy is that it does not set a specific time and form, but embeds emotional support into daily kindergarten routine activities. Teachers provide additional emotional resources within the framework of regular activities by increasing the frequency of individualized interactions with specific children or assigning them special “responsibilities”. For example:

“There is a 3-year-old left-behind child in my class who used to use hitting

classmates during the break time to express emotional needs. So I gave that little boy a small sandbag and told him that if he felt unhappy, he could use pinching the sandbag instead of hitting others. If he wanted to play with other children, he didn't have to hit anyone, just invited other children to play sandbags with him. Since then, he hasn't hit classmates anymore and has started to have his own good friends." (M44, 9 years of teaching experience, Grade K1)

"There is a 6-year-old left-behind girl in my class who often helps the teacher clean the classroom after lunch, while other children usually go to play. So I awarded her the title of 'Cleaning Leader' and gave her a certificate. She was very happy to be praised by the teacher and became more outgoing, willing to share some ideas and secrets with the teachers." (F51, 14 years of teaching experience, Grade K3)

(b) Symbolic connection building: replacing the missing parent-child bond with objects and rituals

When the physical connection between parents and children is severed due to their parents working outside, teachers attempt to help children maintain an "imagined connection" through symbolic objects or rituals. These strategies have distinct cultural specificity and creativity. For example:

"There is a 4-year-old left-behind girl in my class who draws a plane on papers every day during break time. Later, I learned that her father works as a pilot in another city, and this plane contains her missing for her father. So in a painting class, I asked everyone to draw their favorite things and stick all the paintings on the wall in our classroom. The little girl was very happy. She said it was like her father was by the wall with her, and she felt warm and secure." (F19, 6 years of teaching experience, Grade K2)

(c) Reconstructing class as a "second home": transforming collective life into an emotional community

This is a more macro strategy, teachers consciously build the class into a "family like" emotional community, partially replacing the emotional function of the family by creating a warm, accepting, and predictable collective atmosphere. For example:

"Our class has a rule that no matter who falls or cries, the nearby children should ask 'What happened? Are you okay?'. It's not about letting the children solve the problem, but about letting them know that others' emotional need is related to themselves. After this habit is formed, you can find that left-behind children have their own 'safety zone' in the class even though their parents are not around. They are willing to play with everyone and will actively talk to their classmates when they encounter unhappy things. This is particularly important for left-behind children, as they have found a second home in the class." (M18, 10 years of teaching experience, Grade K1)

5. Discussion

(1) From "problematic behavior" to "developmental signals": Rethinking the age logic of children's emotional expression

This study found that the “subtle signals” of left-behind children in different age groups exhibit a clear evolutionary trajectory from explicit aggression (K1) to implicit repression and symbolic attachment (K2), and then to strategic flattery (K3). This discovery should not only be interpreted as “different age groups have different manifestations”, but its more important theoretical significance lies in challenging the previous tendency to simply “pathologize” emotional problems in left-behind children. From the perspective of developmental psychology, these “signals” are essentially “adaptive replacement strategies” developed by children at specific cognitive levels (preoperational stage) and with limited social experience (Piaget, 1970). When direct language expression is hindered (due to insufficient ability or environmental inhibition), children instinctively choose the most “effective” means within their cognitive level to convey their needs. Therefore, the “caring alertness” of teachers is essentially a “developmental decoding ability” - it requires teachers not only to “see” behavior, but also to be able to “translate” that behavior within the age characteristics and cultural background of children. At present, there is a general lack of “developmental decoding” training in teacher training, which leads to many teachers using a unified “obedient and sensible” standard to measure left-behind children of all ages. This is precisely the practical deviation that needs to be corrected the most.

(2) Institutionalization of silence in traditional concepts: Emotional discipline mechanisms in intergenerational transmission

The traditional educational concepts such as “boys don’t cry” and “setback education” do not directly affect children, but indirectly shape the emotional expression of left-behind children through the emotional training practices of their grandparents. This reveals a deeper social mechanism: traditional concepts have not disappeared in the process of modernization, but have retreated into the private domain of families and become an “implicit curriculum” in intergenerational education. In the absence of external professional guidance, the grandparents transformed traditional concepts into “negative feedback” in their daily upbringing (such as stopping crying and denying emotional expression). This feedback loop gradually teaches children the behavioral scripts of “emotional suppression = acceptance”. It is noticeable that this transmission process is often legitimized by the grandparents themselves as “for the good of the child”, thus forming a “silent institutionalization”, that is, without written regulations, but internalized as children’s self-regulation through daily interactions. This discovery connects micro level teacher-student interaction with macro level cultural and sociological issues, indicating that the emotional dilemma of left-behind children is not only a consequence of “parental absence”, but also a product of the collision between tradition and modernity in the family field. Therefore, any effective intervention must confront this cultural intermediary link, rather than just staying at the surface level of calling for “more care”.

(3) The paradox of “compensation outside the system”: The structural dilemma of teachers’ emotional labor

The “emotional compensation” strategy spontaneously formed by teachers is a shining example of professional conscience at the individual level, but at the systemic level, it exposes structural limitations in the education system. This study defines it as “out of system compensation” to emphasize that these behaviors are neither required by the system nor recognized or supported by the system—they rely entirely on the teacher’s personal sense of responsibility, emotional sensitivity, and additional energy investment. This compensation model has three inherent paradoxes: firstly, the sustainability paradox. Emotional labor itself is consumable, and long-term overloaded emotional output without institutional guidance will inevitably lead to occupational burnout, and the direct recipients of burnout are precisely the left-behind children who need stable emotional support the most; Secondly, the paradox of professionalism. The quality of compensation strategies depends on the individual teacher’s experience and intuition, lacking scientific evaluation and peer assistance. This makes it difficult for excellent practices to accumulate into generalizable professional knowledge, and failed attempts cannot be reflected upon; Thirdly, the equity paradox. The quality of emotional compensation received by left-behind children directly depends on whether they encounter “highly responsible” or “limited energy” teachers, which creates new educational inequalities. These three paradoxes collectively point to a fundamental problem: the current education system “delegates” the responsibility of emotional nurturing to individual teachers, but does not provide corresponding institutional resources and support systems. Teachers have become the ‘last line of defense’ to fill institutional gaps, but this line of defense itself is constantly being consumed. Therefore, how to transform “personal compensation” into “institutional care” is not a moral appeal issue, but a structural issue in educational governance.

6. Research Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study: (1) the research perspective only collects data from the perspective of teachers, and in the future, attempts can be made to include analysis of children’s painting works, video observations of teacher-child interaction; (2) as a qualitative study, the purpose of this research is to describe phenomena and construct theories, which can be validated through quantitative research or longitudinal qualitative tracking in the future; (3) the generalizability of research conclusions needs to be cautious, and comparative studies across regions and cultures will help identify context specific and universal patterns; (4) in the future, we can try to collaborate with more professional researchers to design questionnaires suitable for children’s interviews, incorporating children’s unique perspectives into our research; (5) in the future, we can try to design interview questionnaires suitable for grandparents, incorporating their thoughts on traditional concepts and interview content into our research.

7. Conclusion

This study takes the emotional needs of left-behind children as the starting point,

but it points far beyond the operational issue of “how to care for left-behind children”. Through grounded analysis of the practical experience of 100 rural kindergarten teachers, the essential question that this study attempts to address is: how can preschool education assume the role of emotional support in a transitional social structure where family emotional function is weakened, traditional concepts continue to exist, and institutional support is not yet in place? This study reveals a profound fact: the emotional support for left-behind children in current rural preschool education is essentially a non-institutionalized and fragile “emotional patch” mechanism undertaken by individual teachers. The operation of this mechanism relies on the personal educational qualities and moral consciousness of teachers, but lacks specialized technical support and institutionalized resource guarantees. Therefore, the core theoretical contribution of this study is not to provide a certain “correct answer”, but to liberate the “emotional labor of teachers” from individual moral narratives and redefine it as a professional issue at the level of educational governance. The significance of this study goes beyond rural education and the issue of left-behind children themselves. In fact, it presents a very common educational dilemma in the social transformation period of Chinese Mainland: when the change of family structure leads to the collapse of the traditional parenting function, and the modern education system has not yet completed its systematic succession, educators in the “transition zone” have to fill the institutional vacuum with individual strength. The “out of system compensation” for rural kindergarten teachers is a microcosm of this transitional state. Ultimately, the core position that this study aims to convey is that the subtle emotional needs signals of left-behind children are not problem behaviors that need to be “corrected”, but developmental language that needs to be “translated”; The emotional compensation behavior of teachers is not a personal sacrifice that needs to be praised, but an institutional responsibility that needs to be caught. Education is not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the placement of emotions and the support of life. The ultimate call of this study is to elevate the emotional education of left-behind children from the “personal conscience of teachers” to the “institutional bottom line of education”, and it is also the direction for future research and practice to work together.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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