



STAYING OR LEAVING? MENTOR EXPERIENCES OF ARTISTIC SPORTS ACTIVITIES WITH LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN IN RURAL CHINA

FICAR OU PARTIR? A EXPERIÊNCIA DOS MENTORES DE ATIVIDADES DESPORTIVAS ARTÍSTICAS COM CRIANÇAS EXCLUÍDAS NA CHINA RURAL 


¿QUEDARSE O IRSE? EXPERIENCIA DE LOS MENTORES EN ACTIVIDADES DEPORTIVAS ARTÍSTICAS CON NIÑOS EXCLUIDOS EN LA CHINA RURAL 


 <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8918.138029>

 **Yutao Zhou*** <zhouyutao@hut.edu.cn>

 **Francesco Vincenzo Ferraro**** <f.ferraro@derby.ac.uk>

 **Chengwen Fan*** <fanchengwen@hut.edu.cn>

 **Andy Hooton***** <a.hooton@derby.ac.uk>

 **Chris Ribchester***** <c.ribchester@derby.ac.uk>

* Physical Education College, Hunan University of Technology, Zhuzhou 412000, China

** School of Human Sciences, College of Science and Engineering, University of Derby, United Kingdom

*** Pedagogic Innovation, Enhancement and Research Team, University of Derby, DE22 1GB, UK

Abstract: Previous studies have demonstrated the impacts of artistic sports on the mental health and academic performance of children. Our project focuses on mentor experiences with artistic sports with Left-Behind Children (LBC) in rural China. Data were collected through interviews with 32 volunteer mentors, exploring three key areas: reasons for participation, factors influencing continued involvement or discontinuation, and challenges encountered by mentors. The findings revealed that mentors were primarily driven by their passion for dance and their desire to positively impact the lives of LBC. However, they faced numerous challenges, including difficulties arising from the LBC, resistance from teachers and parents, financial constraints, as well as personal struggles in adapting to the local environment. The insights gathered from this study provide a valuable basis for guiding future initiatives aimed at improving the lives of LBC in rural areas of China through the medium of artistic sports activities.

Keywords: Mentor Experience. Left-Behind Children. Artistic Sports

Received on: Jan. 24, 2024
Approved on: Nov. 7, 2024
Published in: May. 31, 2025



This is an article published in open access under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC BY 4.0)

1 INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in China have seen a decline in population as more people move to urban areas for better job opportunities and living conditions (Shi *et al.*, 2021). While this substantial population shift has helped to mitigate some rural poverty and support urban labour demands (Qian; Wang; Zheng, 2016; Su, 2017), it has caused significant changes in the social and economic dynamics of these regions and the traditional ways of life for migrant families (Tang, 2022). One significant consequence has been the growth in the number of left-behind children (LBC) who were entrusted to caregivers, usually grandparents and other relatives (Dong, 2021), as their parents sought opportunities in the cities (Chen; Hu; Zheng, 2022; Zhang; Xu; Lu, 2020). Table 1 reports data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (China, 2023). The term “left-behind children” (LBC) describes children under 16 years old who reside in rural areas where both parents have left for work or where one parent has departed while the other has lost custody, the government of China established this definition of rural LBC in 2016 (Zhou, 2020).

Table 1 - The Statistics Data of Left-Behind Children in China

Age		0-2 Years	3-5 Years	6-11 Years	12-14 Years	15-17 Years	0-17 Year Total (Million)	
Level		Infant	Before- school	Primary School	Secondary School	Senior School		
Number (Million)	All Children	41.64	52.79	108.74	50.21	44.27	297.66	
	Nation Internal Migrant Children	8.08	11.47	23.21	10.43	17.91	71.09	
	LBC in Rural Areas	7.13	7.80	15.90	6.72	4.21	41.77	46.4%
	Urban Left-Behind Children	4.54	4.96	9.35	3.85	2.46	25.16	

Data source: The data of left-behind children is calculated based on the microdata of the 2020 national census (CHINA, 2023)

Left-behind children (LBC) often lack adequate care and supervision from their guardians who are usually grandparents or relatives with limited resources and education (Song *et al.*, 2018; Zhao; Ge; Li, 2021). This means LBC commonly face challenges related to result in low educational attainment (Huang; Gong, 2022), poor academic performance (Qiu *et al.*, 2023), low self-esteem (Cui *et al.*, 2021), psychological distress (WANG *et al.*, 2021) and behavioural problems (WEN *et al.*, 2019). In Shao Yang County, the number of LBC has raised alarm. Here, statistics from the Chinese government reported that LBC totalled more than 700,000 in 2018, accounting for 10.1% of total LBC numbers in China (China, 2018). In response, in 2018 the local government in Shao Yang County cooperated with the Hunan Women and Children’s Development Foundation (HNWCDF) and organised the “Micro Warm Initiative (MWI)” - Dance Teaching Support Actions for LBC (Micro, 2021). This initiative covered 27 poverty villages in Shao Yang County and 100 LBC-primary schools and continued until the end of 2022 (Micro, 2021). The initiative aimed to support LBC development in social and physical behaviour.

However, the effectiveness of artistic sports for LBC hinges significantly on the quality of mentors and their level of engagement with programmes. Therefore, mentor experiences should be explored to reveal the overall quality and effectiveness of these initiatives. This will help fill a gap in the literature on mentor experiences working with LBC in rural China.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 AIMS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

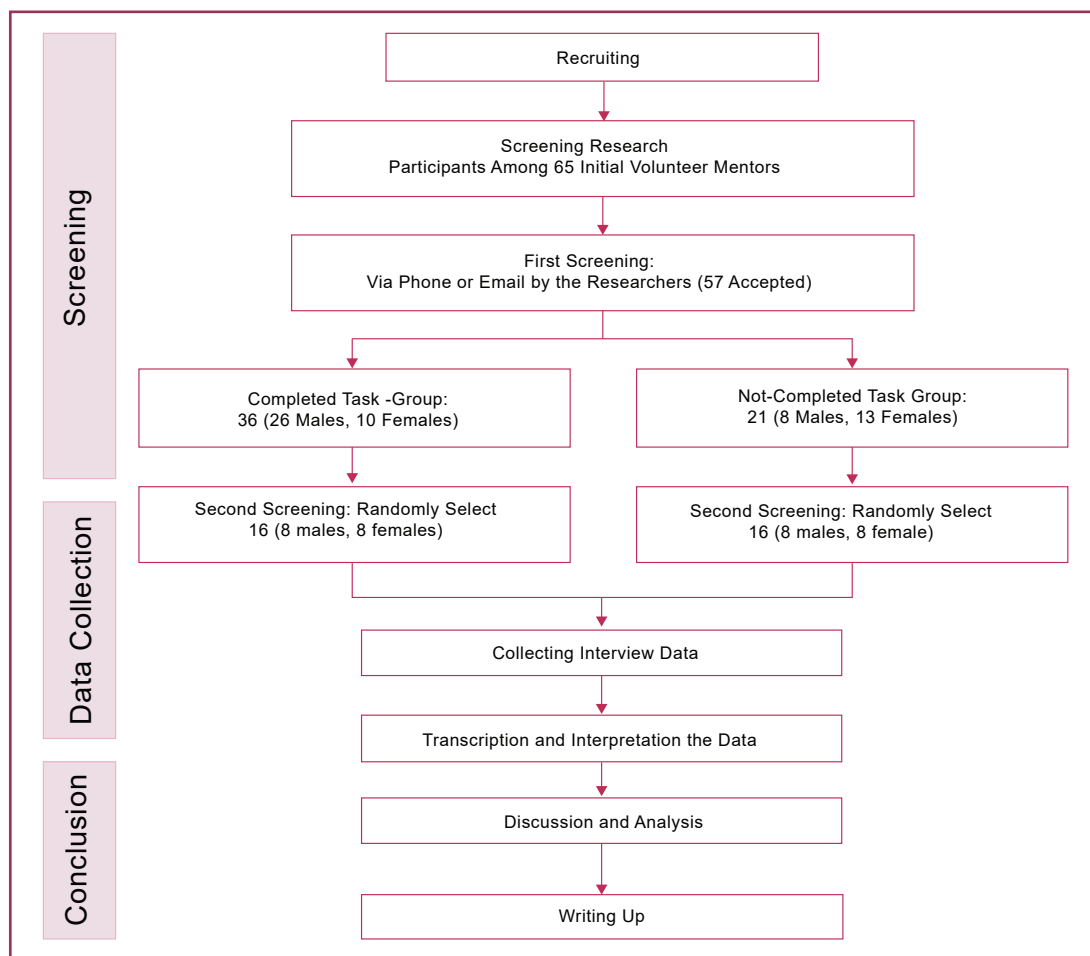
This study employed Grounded Theory, a qualitative research approach that uses symbolic reciprocity (Creswell; Poth, 2016) to gain insights into fields with limited understanding or to reinforce existing theories (Corbin; Strauss, 2014). The study explored the factors affecting volunteer mentors working with LBC in remote areas. Its research question was: “What factors have affected mentor engagement and continued participation in Artistic Sports Activities’ intervention actions for LBC in rural China?”

2.2 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

2.2.1 Screening

Between September 2018 and February 2022, the ‘Micro Warm Initiative (MWI)’ positively impacted 27 villages in Shao Yang County and 100 primary schools. Over one hundred volunteers participated in these initiatives to bring about meaningful change. Specifically, three supportive actions were implemented by the programme to assist the children studying in these villages. Notably, one initiative offered dance teaching support for LBC, which was carried out in six randomly chosen primary schools in Shao Yang County, located in the Hunan Province of South China. These primary schools were selected using a list provided by the government-sponsored Hunan Women and Children’s Federation. Sixty-five volunteer mentors took part in the initiatives. Each holds a bachelor’s degree in artistic sports and has at least two years of experience teaching dance to children. All volunteer mentors were assigned randomly to six selected primary schools. To avoid the potential influence of teacher effects on the artistic sports activities assigned to the children, all mentors involved in the study underwent a unified teaching content learning and training programme at the same university before the research commenced.

Upon receiving ethics approval, all 65 mentors were contacted via phone or email by the researchers. In total, 57 mentors accepted the invitation, while eight mentors declined. Among the 57 recipients, 36 (26 men, 10 women) finished the interventional task, and 21 (8 men, 13 women) left during the intervention (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - CONSORT Chart Displaying Research Procedure

Source: Authors, 2024.

A second screening process was conducted to comply with the research design requirements. Researchers numbered each group member (Completed Task Group and Not-Completed Task Group). In the Completed Task Group, 16 participants were randomly selected from the completed group of any age, and in the Not-Completed Task Group, 8 women were randomly selected, and only 8 men could be selected with no opportunities for randomisation (this is because there were only 8 men in the Not-Completed group, refer to figure 1 above). Participants signed a written consent form and were informed by the investigator that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions in China during the interview period (June – August 2022), the interviews took place online. All participants agreed to have their interview audio recorded, and a research assistant experienced in qualitative research co-conducted the interviews.

2.2.2 Participants

Finally, 32 volunteer mentors were screened and were separated into two groups (based on who completed the whole interventional task and who did not complete it) and interviewed individually (Table 2-3), including:

- Group 1 – 16 mentors who completed the whole interventional task.
- Group 2 – 16 mentors who did not complete the whole interventional task.

Table 2 - Details of Target Participants

	Recruitment Portals and Number	Experience limitation	Inclusion Criteria
Group 1	Fully participated in the interventional task (16, 8 men, 8 women)	Original Participants have at least 2 years of prior dance teaching experience.	1. Artistic Sport Activity Background 2. Experienced Dancer in Competitive dance
Group 2	Partly participated in the interventional task (At least more than one year) (16, 8 men, 8 women)	Original Participants have at least 2 years of prior dance teaching experience.	1. Artistic Sport Activity Background 2. Experienced Dancer in Competitive dance

Source: Authors, 2024.

Group 1 consisted of 16 participants (8 men and 8 women) with artistic sports backgrounds, including highly experienced dancers and athletes. Participants took part in the interventional task (Teaching Dance) with LBC without missing any sessions.

Group 2 consisted of 16 participants (8 men and 8 women), each of whom had a background in artistic sports studies and extensive experience in either dance or athletics. They did not fully participate in the interventional task on LBC but were involved in it for at least one year.

Table 3 - Participants Information

Group 1: 16 Mentors Who Completed (C*)			Group 2: 16 Mentors Who Not-Completed (N*)		
C1: Xue	C7: Hui	C13: Pei	N1: Wen	N7: Dong	N13: Xiao
C2: Ping	C8: Cui	C14: Yue	N2: Ken	N8: Zhen	N14: Zhou
C3: Yan	C9: Zhen	C15: Mei	N3: Gu	N9: Wu	N15: Kong
C4: Wei	C10: Dan	C16: Jun	N4: Long	N10: Tan	N16: Song
C5: Ling	C11: Tao		N5: Chang	N11: Long	
C6: Rong	C12: Bao		N6: Qi	N12: Kai	

*The given names are pseudonyms

Source: Authors, 2024.

2.3 DATA COLLECTION

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews from June to August 2022. These interviews were recorded, and all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into English. On average, each interview lasted 60 minutes, though some were longer.

Open-ended questions were developed in advance of interventions based on literature examining mentor experience and through discussions with experts in related work areas. Interviews began by focusing on the participants' everyday experiences during the intervention. Two sections were included: a) Demographic information was collected, including sex, parental job and income level, original living region, and dance learning background. b) Data were collected regarding mentors' mentoring experiences during the intervention, including their feelings about the regions, relationships with local teachers, challenges encountered, and potential

barriers and difficulties. Additionally, they were asked if they would engage with classes again and why, and were asked to highlight features of the intervention that would either encourage or preclude them from participating in the future. Interviewees were probed when necessary to extract detailed information. Ultimately, the data gathered contributed to a comprehensive understanding of mentor perceptions of the class experience. The experience gave me the opportunity to create a self-reflection on the mentors' experience. Additionally, the data collected and published via the following manuscript can be used to inform good practice on how LBC activities can be improved, producing an impact nationally in the Chinese county and internationally in other areas where children experience socio-economic difficulties.

2.4 DATA ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGICAL RIGOR

This study utilised Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory (Corbin; Strauss, 2014) for data collection and analysis. This method encompassed three stages: open coding (sub-categories), axial coding (main categories), and selective coding (themes). The researchers employed theoretical sensibility to compare the original data, identify common sub-categories, and abstract them into categories. These categories were then further refined into higher-level topics through discussions with other experienced researchers/authors and research assistants, resulting in the identification of "themes". In instances where there were differences of opinion during the analysis, the researchers integrated these perspectives by reconfirming the original raw data (this is part of the peer debriefing sessions, where researchers present their themes to colleagues who are not directly involved in the analysis. Feedback from these peers was used to redefine the themes and ensure they accurately reflect the data). To ensure the reliability and verifiability of the data, all levels of coding were examined independently by both peer reviewers and experts experienced in grounded theory or qualitative research, and the research team discussed the data to guarantee internal consistency across all categories, which ensured their high relevance to the focus of this study. All coding information was reported, extracted, and narratively presented as "accounts" from the mentors' interviews, including representative quotations, to ensure that the research question was answered accurately.

2.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study received approval from the College of Science and Engineering Research Ethics Committee of the University of Derby, with the reference number ETH2122-2492. Before participating in the study, all participants received a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, methodology, confidentiality, anonymity, recording, and potential publication. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, along with the assurance that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. To safeguard participants' privacy, personal information was anonymised using symbols during transcription and kept confidential and secure by adhering to relevant legal requirements.

3 RESULTS

3.1 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

The study involved a total of 32 mentors. Table 4 provides a demographic description of the two groups of mentors: those who completed the intervention (16 mentors) and those who withdrew at some point during the process (16 mentors). The demographic themes include the area they originally came from, their parent's income level, their parent's occupation, and their willingness to participate in the intervention again. Area of Origin: Of the 21 mentors who originally came from urban areas, 6 completed the intervention, and 15 withdrew. Conversely, of the 11 mentors who came from remote areas, 10 completed the intervention, and only one withdrew. This suggests that mentors involved in the study who came from remote areas were more likely to complete the intervention than those from urban areas.

Parent Income Level: Among the mentors whose parents had a high-income level (>20,000 RMB per month), three completed the intervention, and nine withdrew. For those with parents in the middle-income bracket (10,000 RMB 20,000 RMB per month), five completed the intervention, and six withdrew. Interestingly, among the mentors involved in the study whose parents had a low income (<10,000 RMB per month), eight completed the intervention, and only one withdrew. This indicates that mentors involved in the study who had lower-income families were more likely to complete the intervention.

Parents' Occupation: The data shows a variety of occupations for the parents of the mentors. However, it is notable that all mentors involved in the study whose parents were in education, working as manual workers, engineers, chefs, or farmers completed the intervention. Whilst for parents who were businessmen, doctors, freelancers, architects, lawyers, or police, their children were more likely to give up the intervention.

Willingness to Do It Again: When asked if they would participate in the intervention again, five of the mentors who completed the intervention said yes, while 11 said no. All mentors who withdrew from intervention (16) said they would not do it again.

Table 4 - Demographic Description

Demographic Themes		Completed (16)	Not Completed (16)
Original	= Urban (21)	6	15
	= Remote (11)	10	1
Parent Income Level = High (>20,000 RMB per month)		3	9
	= Middle (10,000 RMB>20,000 RMB per month)	5	6
	= Low (<10,000 RMB per month)	8	1
Parents Occupation = Education		5	0
	= Worker	2	0
	= Engineer	1	0
	= Chef	1	0
	= Farmer	1	1
	= Businessman	3	2
	= Doctor	2	3
	= Freelancer	1	3
	= Architect	0	3
	= Lawyer	0	1
	= Police	0	3
Do It Again? = Yes		5	0
	= No	11	16

Source: Authors, 2024.

3.2 CODING DATA

Using the grounded theory approach, this research examined mentors' experiences and their perceptions. The research team identified 69 key concepts first, subdivided into 21 sub-categories during the open coding step. Following this, the sub-categories were integrated into five main categories during the axial coding step. Finally, the selective coding step revealed two research themes, summarised in Table 5.

Table 5 - Themes, categories, and subcategories of mentors' experiences for helping LBC.

Themes	Main-Categories	Sub-Categories (Frequency)
Perceptions	Relationship	With LBC (13)
		Good Relationship (12)
		Poor Relationship (1)
		With Local Teachers (45)
		Good Relationship (29)
		Poor Relationship (16)
	Reason for Continuation	With Headmaster (38)
		Good Relationship (20)
		Poor Relationship (18)
		Have Opportunities to Help LBC (11)
		Our Teaching Was Fully Supported by Local Teacher (9)
		Opportunities for Self-Development (8)
Challenges	Reason for Giving Up	Children and Local People Moved Me (7)
		Feeling Alone, Missing Family, and Unhappy (13)
		Poor Relationship with Local Teacher/Headmaster (12)
		Poor Living Condition (7)
		No Financial Support (3)
		Too Much Work and No Help (5)
	Barriers and Difficulties	Difficulties Arising from Left-Behind Children (15)
		Barriers From Teachers and Parents (20)
		Lack of Financial Support (3)
		Communicating Effectively and Getting Support (19)
	Personal Challenges	Adapting to the Local Lifestyle (10)
		Overcoming Personal Issues (6)

Source: Authors, 2024.

3.3 PERCEPTIONS

The first theme focused on the mentors' perceptions, specifically their relationships with LBC, local teachers, and headteachers, and their reasons for continuing or giving up the intervention.

1) Relationship

Participants experienced varied relationships with their LBC and local authorities (Teachers and Headmaster).

– Relationship with LBC

Most mentors reported having an excellent rapport with LBC, built on a foundation of mutual respect and trust. The students exhibited enthusiasm for learning dance, and mentors fostered an equitable teacher-student dynamic. Meanwhile, mentors fulfilled their roles and garnered positive perceptions throughout the intervention process. For example, one mentor stated that:

... be friends with students, see things from their point of view, and make them trust me... then, some students really love dancing. They are so fun and sweet, and they always help me show how cool dancing is and get more students to join in. (C2: Ping)

On the contrary, one mentor cited strained relationships with LBC due to what they perceived to be inadequate communication skills, particularly on the part

of students from LBC backgrounds. Here, mentors felt incapable of comprehending the needs and expectations of LBC, which made it difficult to involve them in dance activities and required them to navigate challenges in managing their classroom behaviour. This mentor expressed:

... I'm not good at talking to them... I don't really get what they want or need, and they don't seem interested in dancing with me... it's hard to keep them in line and make them behave well... I feel like they don't like me, and maybe they're scared of me too... (N1: Wen)

– Relationship with local teachers

Most mentors expressed a positive experience regarding the relationship with local teachers. Indeed, they found them supportive and encouraging of their students' participation in classes. Moreover, they helped mentors apply for teaching opportunities to support LBC learning and assisted in finding places and equipment for teaching. For example:

... The local teachers are quite supportive and awesome... they help me out with things like finding places and equipment to teach. Some of them even help me spread the word about my artistic sports activities and get more students to join in... (C4: Wei)

However, some mentors reported poor relationships with local teachers due to a lack of coordination, leading to challenges with communication and organisational challenges. These challenges ultimately impacted their ability to effectively support the learning of LBC. Two mentors specifically mentioned facing these challenges:

... after we came to school, we requested help from the school for equipment such as mirrors and a speaker, but the school did not give us much help, just let us solve it ourselves... teacher thought we were too troublesome and didn't want students to come out to learn... (N9: Wu)

– Relationship with headmaster

When asked about their relationship with the local headteacher, half reported a positive relationship. Wherein they felt fully or at a minimum, partly supported their initiative of incorporating artistic sports into the curriculum. Two mentors shared that:

... I was really lucky because the headmaster at the local school has been super supportive and cooperative with my work... they even encouraged more students to learn artistic sports activities so they can improve their artistic performance... and because of that, we've been able to keep a really high participation rate among the students... (C14: Yue)

However, mentors in the other half reported experiencing challenges with establishing a positive relationship with the headteacher. This was due to poor communication, a loss of trust, and misunderstandings about the benefits of artistic sports activities. Two mentors specifically stated that:

... to be honest, I find it a bit difficult to communicate with the headmaster. We don't have many chances to chat. And the worst part is, the headmaster doesn't seem to trust me very much. They believe that only female teachers should be teaching dance and not male teachers like me... (N2: Ken)

2) Reason for Continuation

Learning from successful mentors who have completed the intervention process can offer valuable experiential insights for working with LBC in rural China. However, these successes can also present challenges, as supporting LBC can be emotionally demanding and require significant time and energy. Indeed, some mentors who persevere in this work often do so because they are driven by a strong sense of purpose and the desire to make a positive impact on the lives of these children.

– Opportunities to Help LBC

First, most mentors who completed the intervention mission thought offering opportunities to LBC was crucial to making a positive impact in the lives of LBC. This belief motivates mentors to push through challenges they may find as they work to provide opportunities to local children. Mentors also hoped that their work could inspire others to get involved to support the cause. Two mentors expressed:

... to be honest, I think what we were doing there is pretty awesome and could inspire others. I hope more people will be motivated to help LBC like we were doing... (C7: Hui)

– The intervention Process Was Fully Supported by Local Teachers/Leaders

Second, the support of local teachers and leaders is a critical factor that enabled mentors to complete the intervention process successfully. The collaboration between mentors and teachers was instrumental in identifying the needs of LBC and designing effective intervention strategies.

The school leaders were amazing when I got to the local area. They really supported me and cared about what I was doing. It felt great, you know? Like, that's exactly how it should be. That's why I've been able to keep going and stick with this project - I know I've got their backing, and we're all in this together. (C18: Cui)

– Opportunities for Self-Development

Third, mentors looked for opportunities to develop themselves. They were willing to do hard work and put in effort to achieve their goals. Some mentors tested themselves to develop their problem-solving skills, while others sought opportunities to develop their teaching skills and experience. Regardless of their goals, all mentors were driven by a desire to improve themselves.

... this project was a great opportunity for me to develop myself. It required me to be adaptable and to persevere through challenges, but I was confident that I could rise to the occasion. I had already prepared myself mentally and emotionally, and I was excited to see what I could accomplish... (C12: Bao)

– Children and Local People Moved Me

In some cases, mentors were moved by the children and local people they worked with. The children's eagerness to learn and love of dance touched mentors deeply. In addition, the local population's diligence, hard work, hospitality, and gratitude became a source of inspiration. These experiences could be rewarding, and they left a lasting impression on mentors, which encouraged them to continue this process:

... I did my best to help them in the limited time I had. Their love of dance touched me, and the students' enthusiasm for learning gave me the motivation to continue. The students greeted me with 'Teacher, thank you for your work' and 'Goodbye, teacher' at the start and end of each day, which impressed me the most... even when the work was tiring, the gratitude of the kids and parents made it all worthwhile... (C15: Mei)

3) Reason for Giving Up

On the other hand, not all mentors had positive experiences.

– Feeling Alone, Missing Family, and Unhappiness

Central factors leading to negative experiences and impacting positive attitudes amongst mentors were correlated to feelings of being alone, missing family, and experiencing unhappiness during the intervention process. One mentor stated that:

The reasons why I decided to give up was because I had been away from home for too long, and my family didn't support that. I also felt really lonely because I had no close friends nearby... I just couldn't adjust to the local lifestyle, making me feel even more homesick. I'd often felt sad when I talked to my friends on the phone, and some of them came to visit me over ten times, but it wasn't enough. (N10: Tan)

– Poor Relationship with Local Teacher/Headmaster

Meanwhile, poor relationships between local teachers and headteachers created a challenging environment. One mentor who gave up during the process stated:

The school leaders and teachers have not shown much support towards us... additionally, the headmaster did not provide support for teaching artistic and sports activities, making it challenging to motivate children to practice these activities. (N14: Zhou)

– Poor Living Conditions and No Financial Support

Furthermore, poor living conditions and a lack of financial support posed significant challenges for all mentors, impacting their motivation and ability to effectively carry out the intervention.

... I struggled with adjusting to the local living environment and conditions, which were vastly different from what I was accustomed to in the city. Especially during the summer months, I experienced a lot of discomfort due to the lack of air conditioning in my living place, and I was frequently bitten by mosquitoes, which made me worried about getting sick... (N5: Chang)

– Too Much Work and No Help

Ultimately, some mentors were burdened with excessive workloads that caused stress and difficulties. Additionally, the lack of support and assistance from individuals with the necessary skills exacerbated the problem.

... Completing the project was a challenge for me due to the complexity of the dance teaching plan and its implementation. Also, unfortunately, there was no one with the skills to assist me... Additionally, the negative words of others affected both my work and personal life. I had to work beyond my usual hours every day, which resulted in a heavy workload that I struggled to manage. (N15: Kong)

3.3.1 Challenges

The second theme focused on understanding the challenges faced by mentors during the intervention process. These challenges were categorised into two main areas: “Barriers and Difficulties” and “Personal Challenges”.

1) Barriers and Difficulties

Mentors experienced multiple barriers and difficulties, including difficulties arising from LBC and barriers from teachers, headteachers, and parents. In addition, a lack of financial support presented a significant challenge for mentors.

– Difficulties Arising from Left-Behind Children

Mentors faced several challenges when teaching LBC, including the management of differing learning abilities, poor behaviour, and a lack of interest in artistic sports activities. They also found it difficult to implement their teaching plans and to get children focused on their studies. Two mentors said that:

... I had some trouble teaching the local students because they didn't learn as quickly as city kids... they were pretty naughty, especially the boys, so it was hard to keep them in line... it was tough to get them interested in my activities... after-school life is pretty simple in the countryside, so they're used to running around and playing. It was hard to get them to calm down and focus on something new... (C15: Mei)

– Barriers from Teachers and Parents

Further, during intervention activities, mentors faced barriers to programme delivery, largely deriving from teachers and parents/caregivers, (usually grandparents and other relatives), who did not support the dance initiative because they believed it was not a valuable use of time. This finding aligned with those which identified reasons for mentor dropout: Poor relationships with the Local Teacher/Headmaster above. For example:

One of the barriers I faced was that students didn't always show up for class. Some teachers would make them stay in class to finish their work... they thought students should focus on their studies instead... I also had trouble getting support from some teachers... they didn't want to take on the extra work of helping me with the programme... they just wanted to focus on teaching academic subjects. (N15: Kong)

– Lack of Financial Support

A final difficulty facing mentors was a lack of financial backing (aligning with the “reason for giving up: No Financial Support”). The result of this was a lack of adequate supplies for students, such as dance clothes, which hindered the programme's ability to operate effectively. Despite attempts to secure funding through donation requests and fundraisers, funds ultimately fell short. Eventually, mentors had to use personal funds to sustain the intervention initiative. One mentor stated:

I was struggling to get funding. I wanted the kids to have a stage experience, so I taught them as much as I could... I even wanted to get them matching outfits, but I couldn't afford them. I asked for help from many people, but in the end, it wasn't enough... I was spending my own money to keep going,

and as a student, I couldn't sustain that for long. It was really financially unsustainable. (N13: Xiao)

2) Personal Challenges

Some mentors also faced personal challenges related to effective communication with local teachers, principals, and LBC's parents during the intervention. This hindered their ability to build trust and support, to adapt to the local lifestyle (particularly as it relates to living with limited resources and cultural differences), and to overcome their struggles with things like homesickness and physical exhaustion. These personal challenges required the mentors to develop resilience, patience, and creativity to carry out the intervention work successfully.

– Communicating Effectively and Getting Support

Sometimes, mentors found communicating effectively with school principals, local teachers, and parents challenging. They faced several obstacles, including the principals' lack of support for dance programmes, the teachers' negative attitudes towards artistic sports activities (dance), and the parent's concerns about the potential negative effects of dance on their children.

... the biggest challenge in myself was communicating with the school principal. He only emphasised academic learning and didn't support students in sports activities, thinking it was useless. I couldn't persuade him, and I was embarrassed because this was a mission from higher departments... (C13: Pei)

– Adapting to the Local Lifestyle

Some mentors found it difficult to adapt to the local lifestyle. The area where they lived had no streetlights, and the roads were muddy and uneven. This made it difficult and dangerous to walk home in the dark. They were also afraid of the local environment.

... I'm a girl...quite afraid of the dark, so every time I went home after dark, I was terrified. The roads were muddy and uneven, with lots of potholes. If I weren't careful, I'd trip and fall. I had to walk home slowly and carefully, always looking over my shoulder... (N2: Ken)

– Overcoming Personal Issues

Some mentors were challenged to overcome their personal issues, such as they had to prevent themselves from getting caught up in the students' psychological problems.

... challenge was preventing myself from getting caught up in the students' psychological problems... I'm a people pleaser, so I found it hard to say no when they needed help. I also grew up without much parental support so that I could relate to their struggles... (N7: Dong)

Briefly, the statement above shows the complexities of the educator-student relationship, where personal experiences and emotional investment can influence professional dynamics. It raises important considerations about self-care and the need for educators to find a balance between compassion and maintaining their own mental health.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The demographic data indicates that mentors from remote areas and lower-income families were more likely to complete the intervention. Parental occupation also seemed to influence the likelihood of completion, with children of parents in certain occupations (education, manual work, engineering, cooking, and farming) more likely to complete the intervention. Lastly, most mentors, regardless of whether they completed the intervention or not, expressed a reluctance to participate again, which serves to illustrate the scale of the challenges they faced. Luthar and Zelazo (2003) found that individuals from rural or remote areas often exhibit higher levels of resilience and adaptability, which could explain why mentors from remote areas were more likely to complete the intervention.

4.2 PERCEPTIONS

4.2.1 Relationships

This study shows that the relationships between mentors and LBC, local teachers, and the headteacher significantly influenced the outcome of the intervention. Regarding relationships with LBC, most mentors reported having a positive relationship based on mutual respect and trust. This aligns with the findings of the study by White and Waters (2015), which show that positive relationships between mentors and students can enhance the effectiveness of positive psychological interventions and foster mutual trust. As Spencer (2007) reported having a stressed relationship with young people due to inadequate communication skills, the importance of effective communication in building positive relationships and facilitating successful interventions is paramount. This study found that the mentors' positive relationships with LBC were likely due to their ability to foster an equitable teacher-student dynamic and successfully fulfil their roles. However, one mentor reported a poor relationship with LBC, which, based on the researchers' interpretation, could be attributed to inadequate communication skills and a lack of understanding of the expectations and needs of the LBC.

4.2.2 Reason for Continuation

Several factors influenced the mentors' decision to continue with the intervention: a) their deep commitment to providing opportunities for LBC, b) the positive support they received from local teachers and leaders, and c) their commitment to personal growth, and their profound emotional connection with the children and local community. Hernandez *et al.* (2017) found that the desire to make a positive impact on the lives of others is a significant motivator for individuals to persist in mentorship programmes, aligning with the findings of this study. This indicates that the mentors' primary objective was to provide opportunities for LBC. In addition, Mazerolle *et al.* (2012) discovered that the support of faculty and leaders significantly

influenced the decision of athletic training students to pursue their chosen career paths after graduation. Thereby corroborating the mentors' perspective in this study that the complete support from local teachers and leaders was crucial.

4.2.3 Reason for Giving Up

Reasons for mentor dropout during the intervention process included a range of factors including personal, interpersonal, and geographical dimensions. Particularly, feelings of loneliness and homesickness profoundly impacted their morale and motivation. This aligns with the findings of Stamm (2010), which underscores the significance of social support in mitigating stress and burnout within helping professions. Furthermore, the lack of support and cooperation from local teachers and headteachers presented substantial obstacles to the smooth execution of intervention activities, corroborating the findings of Bovaird (2007), which emphasised the pivotal role of collaboration and support from school leadership in successfully implementing intervention programmes. Additionally, mentors encountered challenges from inadequate living conditions and an absence of financial support, echoing the views expressed in Bovaird (2007), which emphasised the necessity of sufficient resources and support for the effective implementation of intervention programmes. Lastly, an excessive workload resulted in stress and difficulties, aligning with the findings of Stamm (2010), which also highlighted the contribution of workload and stress to burnout within helping professions.

4.3 CHALLENGES

4.3.1 Barriers and Difficulties

Understanding the complexity of barriers and difficulties faced by mentors is crucial for designing effective interventions and providing the necessary support. The results show that some of the difficulties that stem from LBC were associated with slow learning ability, poor behaviour, and a lack of interest in artistic and sports activities. This finding aligns with the insights offered by Lyu *et al.* (2022), which underscored the challenges teachers face in engaging LBC in educational activities due to their behavioural issues and lack of motivation. Moreover, resistance from teachers and parents towards dance initiatives was driven by their perception that it is not a valuable use of time, consistent with the findings of Shi *et al.* (2016), which emphasised the prioritisation of academic performance over other forms of learning. Shi e Bai (2016) also identified financial constraints encountered by mentors in providing resources for LBC, which aligns with our results.

4.3.2 Personal Challenges

The personal challenges experienced by mentors during the intervention can be further divided into three main sub-categories: effective communication and garnering support, adaptation to the local lifestyle, and overcoming personal issues. Previous research by Maben and Bridges (2020) underscored the significance of effective communication in garnering support for interventions. This suggests that mentors

may have encountered negative attitudes from school principals, local teachers, and parents if they faced challenges in effectively communicating their objectives. Moreover, the mentors' struggles to secure support could be attributed to a need for more understanding regarding the benefits of artistic sports activities, generational differences between mentors and the local community, and the community's emphasis on academic learning over artistic activities.

5 CONCLUSION

This study employed grounded theory to explore mentors' experiences involved in interventions for LBC in artistic sports activities in rural China. The findings revealed mentors' demographic characteristics and two main themes regarding perceptions and challenges, each encompassing several categories and sub-categories. Findings demonstrate that mentors from lower-income families and remote areas tend to complete interventions more often. Moreover, the sustainability of the intervention relies on their relationships with local teachers, parents, and the headteacher. Challenges faced by mentors, such as loneliness, lack of support, inadequate living conditions, and lack of financial support, should be addressed as these can hinder LBC participation. As such, this study explored the experiences of mentors to improve the quality and effectiveness of these initiatives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect mentor engagement and continued participation in these interventions. It also offers unique perspectives and valuable insights that can inform the design and application of future interventions.

This research suggests that mentors should receive comprehensive training that includes strategies for managing behaviours and offers a deep understanding of the unique needs of LBC. Indeed, it is also crucial for mentors to establish clear, positive communication channels and build positive relationships with local teachers, parents, and headteachers through open lines of communication. Providing adequate social and financial support and managing workload to prevent burnout is also essential and should be mitigated through policy support, fundraising efforts, or securing grants. Additionally, cultural sensitivity training and mental health support should be provided to mentors to ensure their well-being and the success of the intervention. By incorporating these suggested implications, future interventions can be more effective and sustainable, resulting in better outcomes and long-term sustainability.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite its contributions, this study had several limitations. First, the study focused solely on mentors in artistic sports, and all participants were from the same region. While this provides a unique context, findings may not be generalisable to differing contexts and geographies. Future research should explore mentors' experiences in different contexts (i.e., non-artistic sports) or other initiatives and consider a national scope to provide a more comprehensive perspective. Second, the study did not directly measure the impact of mentoring on LBC themselves. Future research should incorporate measures of student outcomes to assess the

effectiveness of mentoring efforts and the intervention initiative more broadly. Third, the study did not explore the role of policy and institutional support in facilitating or hindering the mentoring process. Future research should examine these factors to provide a broader picture of the systemic factors influencing the success of intervention initiatives. Additionally, future studies should explore the reasons why some mentors completed the projects and others did not. There are elements relative to the mentors, such as income or background, that should be further investigated. Finally, this study opens several avenues for future research, potentially enhancing our understanding of mentoring experiences for vulnerable children in rural areas.

REFERENCES

- BOVAIRD, James A. Multilevel structural equation models for contextual factors. In LITTLE, Todd D.; BOVAIRD, James A.; CARD, Noel A. (ed.). **Modeling contextual effects in longitudinal studies**. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2007. p. 149-182.
- CHEN, Ziwei; HU, Ziyang; ZHENG, Qingyi. **Research on the Mental Health Problems of Left-Behind Children in Rural China**. Atlantis Press, 2022. p. 2450-2455. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220504.443>
- CHINA. Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China **Statistics data on left-behind children in rural areas in 2018**. 2018.
- CHINA. National Bureau of Statistics. **China's Child Population 2020: Facts and Figures**. 2023. Available at: <https://www.unicef.cn/media/24496/file/2020%E5%B9%B4%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%84%BF%E7%AB%A5%E4%BA%BA%E5%8F%A3%E7%8A%B6%E5%86%B5%E4%BA%8B%E5%AE%9E%E4%B8%8E%E6%95%B0%E6%8D%AE.pdf>. Accessed on: 26 Dec. 2024 [In Chinese]
- CORBIN, Juliet; STRAUSS, Anselm. **Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153>
- CRESWELL, John W.; POTH, Cheryl N. **Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2016.
- CUI, Shu et al. Self-esteem, social support and coping strategies of left-behind children in rural China, and the intermediary role of subjective support: a cross-sectional survey. **BMC Psychiatry**, 21, article number 158, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03160-y>
- DONG, Yongging et al. The cumulative impact of parental migration on schooling of left-behind children in rural China. **Journal of Rural Studies**, v. 86, p. 527-541, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.07.007>
- HERNANDEZ, Paul R. et al. Promoting professional identity, motivation, and persistence: Benefits of an informal mentoring program for female undergraduate students. **PloS one**, v. 12, n. 11, p. e0187531, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0187531>
- HUANG, Yeqing; GONG, Huihu. Educational expectations of left-behind children in China: determinants and gender differences. **Applied Research in Quality of Life**, v. 17, n. 5, p. 2501-2523, 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-021-09987-7>

LUTHAR, Suniya S.; ZELAZO, Laurel B. Research on resilience: An integrative review. In: LUTHAR, S. S. (ed.). **Resilience and vulnerability: adaptation in the context of childhood adversities**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. p. 510-549. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615788.023>

LYU, Yuwen et al. Psychological well-being of left-behind children in China: text mining of the social media website Zhihu. **International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health**, v. 19, n. 4, p. 2127, 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042127>

MABEN, Jill; BRIDGES, Jackie. Covid-19: Supporting nurses' psychological and mental health. **Journal of Clinical Nursing**, v. 29, n. 15-16, p. 2742- 2750, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15307>

MAZEROLLE, Stephanie M. et al. Undergraduate athletic training students' influences on career decisions after graduation. **Journal of Athletic Training**, v. 47, n. 6, p. 679-693, 2012. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4085/1062-6050-47.5.16>

MICRO WARM INITIATIVE (MWI): dance teaching support actions for 100 schools won the most influential charity project of the 4th "human charity award". **China Daily. Com.CN**, 31 maio 2021. Available at: <https://caijing.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202105/31/WS60b4a4b8a3101e7ce9752979.html>. Accessed on: 26 Dec. 2024. [In Chinese]

QIAN, Wenrong; WANG, Dazhe; ZHENG, Liyi. The impact of migration on agricultural restructuring: Evidence from Jiangxi Province in China. **Journal of Rural Studies**, v. 47, part B, p. 542-551, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.07.024>

QIU, Yiwen et al. The influence of being left behind on fear acquisition and academic performance - a study of left-behind children. **Current Psychology**, v. 42, p. 28095-28106, 2023. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03914-1>

SHI, Huifeng et al. Impact of parent-child separation on children's social-emotional development: a cross-sectional study of left-behind children in poor rural areas of China. **BMC Public Health**, v. 21, article number 823, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10831-8>

SHI, Yaojiang et al. Effects of parental migration on mental health of left-behind children: evidence from northwestern China. **China & World Economy**, v. 24, n. 3, p. 105-122, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12161>

SONG, Jingjing et al. What matters most to the left-behind children's life satisfaction and school engagement: Parent or grandparent? **Journal of Child and Family Studies**, v. 27, n. 8, p. 2481-2490, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1086-4>

SPENCER, Renée. "It's not what I expected": a qualitative study of youth mentoring relationship failures. **Journal of Adolescent Research**, v. 22, n. 4, p. 331-354, 2007. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407301915>

STAMM, Beth Hudnall. **The concise manual for the professional quality of life scale: THE ProQOL**. Pocatello: ProQOL, 2010.

SU, Shaobing et al. Future orientation, social support, and psychological adjustment among left-behind children in rural China: a longitudinal study. **Frontiers in Psychology**, 8, p. 1309, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01309>

TANG, Shuandshuang et al. Poverty stories of rural households in China: the case of North Jiangsu. **Journal of Rural Studies**, v. 91, p. 1-9, 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.02.010>

WANG, Yining et al. Left-behind children's social adjustment and relationship with parental coping with children's negative emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic in China.

International Journal of Psychology, v. 56, n. 4, p. 512-521, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12754>

WEN, Yu-Jie et al. The effect of left-behind phenomenon and physical neglect on behavioral problems of children. **Child Abuse & Neglect**, v. 88, p. 144-151, 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.11.007>

WHITE, Mathew A.; WATERS, Lea E. A case study of 'The Good School:'examples of the use of Peterson's strengths-based approach with students. **The Journal of Positive Psychology**, v. 10, n. 1, p. 69-76, 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2014.920408>

ZHANG, Chunyang; XU, Wei; LU, Haiyan. Longitudinal relationship between inferiority and aggression in Chinese college students: The moderation of left-behind experience. **Personality and Individual Differences**, 156, p. 109791, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109791>

ZHAO, Jingxin; GE, Jing; LI, Qianyu. Grandparent-child cohesion, friendship quality, and left-behind children's positive/negative affect in rural China. **Journal of Health Psychology**, v. 27, n. 11, p. 2489-2504, 2022/09/01 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591053211049941>

ZHOU, Yu-Ming et al. Emotional and behavioral problems of left-behind children in impoverished rural China: A comparative cross-sectional study of fourth-grade children. **Journal of Adolescent Health**, v. 67, n. 5S, p. S48-S54, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.06.016>

Resumo: Estudos anteriores demonstraram os impactos dos esportes artísticos na saúde mental e no desempenho acadêmico das crianças. Nosso projeto se concentra em experiências de mentores de esportes artísticos com Crianças Excluídas (CE) na China rural. Os dados foram coletados através de entrevistas com 32 mentores voluntários, explorando três áreas-chave: razões para a participação, fatores que influenciam a continuação da participação ou a interrupção, e desafios encontrados pelos mentores. Os resultados revelaram que os mentores foram motivados principalmente pela sua paixão pela dança e pelo seu desejo de influenciar positivamente as vidas de CE. No entanto, enfrentaram numerosos desafios, tais como dificuldades decorrentes das CE, resistência dos professores e dos pais, restrições financeiras, bem como dificuldades pessoais de adaptação ao ambiente local. Os insights coletados neste estudo fornecem uma base útil para orientar futuras iniciativas destinadas a melhorar a vida das CE na China rural através de atividades desportivas artísticas.

Palavras-chave: Experiência de Mentoria. Crianças Excluídas. Esportes Artísticos.

Resumen: Estudios anteriores demostraron los impactos de los deportes artísticos en la salud mental y el rendimiento académico de los niños. Nuestro proyecto se centra en experiencias de mentores de deportes artísticos con Niños Excluidos (NE) en la China rural. Los datos se recogieron mediante algunas entrevistas realizadas a 32 mentores voluntarios, explorando tres áreas clave: razones para la participación, factores que influyen en la participación continuada o en la interrupción y retos encontrados por los mentores. Los resultados revelaron que los mentores estaban motivados principalmente por su pasión por la danza y su deseo de influir positivamente en la vida de los NE. Sin embargo, se enfrentaron a numerosos desafíos, como las dificultades derivadas de la condición NE, la resistencia de los profesores y de los padres, las limitaciones financieras, así como las luchas personales para adaptarse al entorno local. Las ideas recogidas en este estudio ofrecen una base útil para orientar futuras iniciativas destinadas a mejorar la vida de los NE en las zonas rurales de China a través de actividades deportivas artísticas.

Palabras clave: Experiencia de Mentor. Niños Excluidos. Deportes Artísticos

USE LICENSE

This article is published as Open Access under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license, which allows its use, distribution and reproduction in any medium as long as the original work is properly cited. More information at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that this work involves no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yutao Zhou: Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – Original Draft.

Francesco Vincenzo Ferraro: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – Original Draft.

Chengwen Fan: Writing – Review & Editing, Resources.

Andy Hooton: Data Curation, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

Chris Ribchester: Data Curation, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

FUNDING

This study was not supported by funding sources.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The research project was conducted following the declaration of Helsinki and was submitted and approved by the University of Derby (United Kingdom), approval reference number ETH2122-2492.

- **Informed consent statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved.
- **Data availability statement:** Due to ethics restrictions, the data are not publicly available. The data can be obtained from the corresponding author based on a reasonable request for research purposes.

HOW TO CITE


ZHOU, Yutao; VINCENZO FERRARO, Francesco; FAN, Chengwen; HOOTON, Andy; RIBCHESTER, Chris. Staying or Leaving? Mentor Experiences of Artistic Sports Activities with Left-Behind Children in Rural China. **Movimento**, v. 31, p. e31010, Jan./Dec. 2025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8918.138029>

EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

 Alex Branco Fraga*

 Elisandro Schultz Wittizorecki*

 Mauro Myskiw*

 Raquel da Silveira*

* Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Escola de Educação Física, Fisioterapia e Dança, Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil.