

# A Study on the Disappearing Rural Primary Schools from a Social Work Perspective

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## Abstract

**With the acceleration of urbanization and changes in demographic structure in China, a large number of rural primary schools have been consolidated or closed due to declining student enrollment, creating the social phenomenon of "disappearing rural primary schools." From a social work perspective, this paper reviews existing research on the adjustment of rural educational resources and the impact of school consolidation on rural communities. It analyzes, from multiple dimensions including psychological, environmental, cultural, and community development perspectives, the opportunities and challenges that the disappearance of rural primary schools presents for left-behind children, families, and rural communities. The paper aims to explore, through macro-level social work intervention strategies, how to preserve rural cultural heritage, safeguard children's welfare, and promote sustainable community development amidst the process of educational resource integration.**

## Keywords

**Rural Primary Schools; School Consolidation; Social.**

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, in order to optimize the allocation of rural educational resources and improve the efficiency and quality of schooling, China has implemented a large-scale policy of "consolidating rural schools" in its vast rural areas. According to data released by the Ministry of Education, the number of rural primary schools in China has decreased significantly over the past two decades. The original intention of this policy was to concentrate high-quality educational resources and enable rural children to receive a better education. However, as familiar village primary schools disappear, it has brought not only geographical inconvenience but also a series of deep-seated social problems, such as the hollowing out of rural culture, the lack of educational supervision for left-behind children, and the increased financial burden on families.

Rural primary schools often serve as the cultural center and spiritual landmark of a village. Their disappearance signifies not just the abandonment of physical space but also a critical rupture in the cohesion of rural communities and the bonds of cultural transmission. In 2021, the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Revitalization of Rural Areas" was officially implemented, explicitly emphasizing the need to plan and arrange rural education comprehensively, ensuring school-age children's right to enroll in nearby schools. This marks a national shift from a focus on mere resource integration to a concern for the comprehensive balance between educational equity and rural social development.

For social workers, the disappearance of rural primary schools is a classic case of imbalance in the "person-in-environment" dynamic. How to focus on the adaptive difficulties of micro-level individuals and the reconstruction of community collectives within the grand narrative of policy implementation has become a crucial task in macro social work practice. This paper will

systematically analyze the impact of disappearing rural primary schools on rural ecosystems from a social work perspective and explore potential pathways for social work intervention.

## 2. Literature Review: The Impact of Rural School Consolidation on Rural Society

Academic research on the adjustment of rural school layouts has yielded rich results. Early studies primarily focused on the field of educational economics, concerning the efficiency of resource allocation and improvements in teaching quality. However, as the consolidation policy has deepened, an increasing number of scholars have begun to focus on its social costs.

**Perspective of Educational Equity and Child Welfare:** Some scholars point out that while consolidation formally improves the concentration of hardware facilities, it also increases the distance students must travel to school, leading to traffic safety hazards and emotional deficits caused by the low-age boarding system [1]. Particularly for left-behind children, the disappearance of the school means losing their most important social support network, leading to heightened feelings of loneliness and an increased risk of dropping out of school [1].

**Perspective of Rural Culture and Social Capital:** Scholars like Xiong Chunwen argue that rural schools are not only places for imparting knowledge but also crucial carriers of local cultural heritage and community public life [2]. The closure of schools is often accompanied by the outflow of rural elites and a decrease in community public activities, resulting in the loss of rural social capital. Daily interactions among villagers, previously facilitated by their children's schooling, diminish, weakening community cohesion.

**Perspective of Community Economy and Family Burden:** Research by Li Tao and others indicates that the disappearance of schools forces families to make difficult choices, such as "accompanying their children to study in town" or having children undertake long commutes, increasing the educational and time costs for rural families [3]. This family migration triggered by the allocation of educational resources further drains the young and middle-aged labor force from rural areas, creating a vicious cycle of "school consolidation – population outflow – community decline."

In summary, the disappearance of rural primary schools has transcended the purely technical educational issue, evolving into a comprehensive social problem involving child development, family function, and community reconstruction, urgently requiring professional social work intervention.

## 3. Analyzing the Impact of Disappearing Rural Primary Schools from Multiple Perspectives

### 3.1. Perspective of Child Psychology and Development

Positive Impacts:

**Resource Concentration:** Children entering central or town schools gain access to better teaching facilities and more professional teaching staff, which can broaden their horizons and improve academic performance.

**Diverse Socialization:** Studying and living in a larger collective can help children develop interpersonal skills and adapt to a more diverse environment.

Negative Impacts:

**Emotional Deficiency and Anxiety:** Young children forced to leave their family environment for boarding school are prone to separation anxiety and lack adequate emotional support. Especially for left-behind children, the already fragile parent-child relationship becomes further strained by increased physical distance.

Psychological Adjustment Disorders: Transitioning from a familiar, close-knit community to an environment of strangers makes it difficult for some children to integrate into new groups, potentially leading to psychological issues such as自卑 and withdrawal.

Lack of Sense of Security: The school, as a child's familiar "secure base," disappears, replaced by an unfamiliar environment, increasing children's feelings of insecurity.

### **3.2. Perspective of Family Function and Environment**

Positive Impacts: Increased Educational Expectations: Some parents choose to move to town to accompany their children's studies for better education, objectively changing the family's lifestyle and increasing the family's emphasis on education.

Negative Impacts: Fragmentation of Family Structure: To ensure their children's schooling, many rural families are forced to "split," with mothers moving to town to accompany studies while fathers stay behind to farm or migrate for work, leading to dysfunctional family dynamics.

Increased Economic Burden: Increased costs for rent, transportation, and daily living place heavy economic pressure on already financially strained rural families.

Absence of Educational Supervision: For families unable to provide accompaniment, children are left in the care of grandparents, who often can only manage daily living needs and struggle to provide academic guidance and emotional communication.

### **3.3. Perspective of Community Culture and Governance**

Positive Impacts: Promotion of Urbanization: To some extent, school consolidation accelerates the concentration of population in towns, promoting the urbanization process.

Negative Impacts: Rupture in Community Culture: As the cultural heart of the village, the disappearance of the school leads to an interruption in rural cultural transmission, gradually diluting traditional customs and local identity.

Shrinking Public Space: School playgrounds and libraries often serve as venues for villagers to gather and hold activities. After the school closes, the community loses important public activity spaces, and neighborly relations become increasingly distant.

Weakening of Governance Foundation: The disappearance of the school weakens the ties between villagers and the village committee, as well as the outside world, increasing the difficulty of rural governance.

## **4. Discussion: Macro-Level Social Work Intervention Strategies**

Faced with the complex social problems arising from the disappearance of rural primary schools, social work should not merely focus on remedial actions but should engage in systemic intervention at the macro level to promote policy improvement and community reconstruction.

Advocacy and Policy Recommendations: Social workers should conduct in-depth research to understand the real needs of rural children, families, and communities. By writing research reports and policy recommendations, they can convey grassroots voices to educational and civil affairs departments. They should advocate for introducing hearing mechanisms in consolidation decisions, comprehensively considering the multiple functions of schools within the community, rather than relying solely on student enrollment data. They can promote the preservation and revitalization of "small-scale schools," supporting the exploration of models like multi-grade teaching and small-class teaching in rural areas to protect children's right to attend nearby schools.

Community Asset Building and Empowerment: For already closed school buildings, social workers should assist the community in revitalizing these assets. They can guide villagers in collectively discussing repurposing plans, transforming vacant school buildings into village cultural activity centers, homes for left-behind children, community canteens for the elderly, or

village museums, turning them from "disappeared educational spaces" into "reborn community hubs." By organizing community activities, they can help rebuild neighborly relations and enhance community cohesion.

**Building Support Networks:** For boarding students and accompanying families, social workers should advocate for establishing professional social work service stations within school communities. They can conduct adaptive growth groups for children to help alleviate separation anxiety and build new peer relationships. They can organize mutual support groups for parents to share experiences of accompanying their children and alleviate psychological stress. Establishing a linkage mechanism involving "social workers + volunteers + teachers" can provide academic support, emotional companionship, and interest development for left-behind children.

**Promoting Cultural Identity and Intergenerational Integration:** Social workers can organize activities like "Stories from Veteran Teachers" or "Small Surveys of Village History" to help children understand their hometown's cultural heritage and enhance local identity. Encouraging experienced elderly individuals to participate in extracurricular school activities can facilitate intergenerational knowledge and cultural transmission, mitigating the impact of school consolidation on local cultural heritage.

## 5. Conclusion

The disappearance of rural primary schools is a microcosm of the modernization process, reflecting the profound tension between imbalanced urban-rural development, efficient resource allocation, and social equity. In the short term, consolidation might raise the standard of educational hardware; but in the long run, if it neglects children's emotional needs, the integrity of family functions, and the sustainable development of communities, the price of this "efficiency" will be enormous.

Examining this issue from a social work perspective, we recognize that education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but also the reproduction of social relations. The disappearance of a rural primary school takes away not just the sound of reading but also the vitality and hope of a village. Therefore, future rural education policies should shift from mere "resource integration" to equally emphasizing "community building" and "child development." Social workers, as guardians of social equity and cultivators of social capital, should play a crucial role in this transformation: providing direct services to affected groups and, more importantly, promoting the construction of a more resilient and warmer rural social ecology through policy advocacy and community development.

For social work research, the phenomenon of disappearing rural primary schools also reminds us of the need to integrate micro-level casework with macro-level policy advocacy and community development. Future research could further explore how to apply theories like asset-building theory and ecological systems theory to guide the transformation of rural education, exploring how to retain local sentiment and safeguard the future of villages while ensuring educational quality.

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