

Exploring parental involvement in children's music education experience: An intrinsic case study of Urban Left-Behind Children parents in Nanchang, China

Explorando o envolvimento dos pais na educação musical de crianças: Um estudo de caso intrínseco de pais de Crianças Deixadas para Trás (ULBC) em Nanchang, China



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Abstract: In some urban regions in China with relatively lower levels of economic development, some parents migrate to economically developed cities for work to provide greater financial support for their families, which often results in prolonged parent-child separation. These parents are referred to as Urban Left-Behind Children (ULBC) parents. While most previous research has focused on face-to-face models of parental involvement in children's music education, little attention has been given to the online participation of ULBC parents in their children's music learning experiences. This qualitative intrinsic case study examined the experiences of ULBC parents in musical parenting through online involvement in their children's music education, specifically exploring the challenges

they encountered, the roles they assumed, and the responsibilities they fulfilled during this process. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, instructional documents, and participant observation with 12 ULBC parents from Nanchang, China, and analysed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged from this study: 1) parents' experiences of involvement; 2) challenges faced by parents, and 3) parents' roles and responsibilities. This study addresses a gap in the involvement of ULBC parents in their children's music education, assisting music educators in building stronger connections with parents and fostering a sense of community among ULBC families.

Keywords: Urban Left-Behind Children parents; parental involvement; music course; qualitative case study; thematic analysis

Resumo: Em certas áreas urbanas na China com menor desenvolvimento econômico, alguns pais migram para cidades mais desenvolvidas para trabalhar e oferecer maior apoio financeiro às suas famílias, o que muitas vezes leva a uma separação prolongada entre pais e filhos. Esses pais são conhecidos como pais de Crianças Deixadas para Trás (ULBC). Enquanto a maioria das pesquisas anteriores se concentrou em modelos presenciais de envolvimento dos pais na educação musical dos filhos, pouca atenção tem sido dada à participação online dos pais ULBC nas experiências de aprendizagem musical de seus filhos. Este estudo qualitativo de caso intrínseco examinou as experiências de parentalidade musical dos pais ULBC por meio da participação online na educação musical dos filhos, explorando especificamente os desafios enfrentados, os papéis assumidos e as responsabilidades cumpridas durante esse processo. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas, documentos instrucionais e observação participante com 12 pais ULBC de Nanchang, China, e analisados utilizando a análise temática. Três temas emergiram deste estudo: 1) experiências de envolvimento dos pais; 2) desafios enfrentados pelos pais; e 3) papéis e responsabilidades dos pais. Este estudo

aborda uma lacuna relacionada ao envolvimento de ULBC pais na educação musical infantil, ajudando educadores musicais a estabelecer conexões mais fortes com os pais e promovendo um senso de comunidade entre as famílias ULBC.

Palavras-chave: Pais de Crianças Deixadas para Trás; envolvimento parental; curso de música; estudo de caso qualitativo; análise temática.

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1. Introduction

Internal migration patterns in China, both rural-urban and urban-urban, have led to a significant increase in the country's migrant population, growing from 6.6 million in 1982 to 245 million in 2017 (Wang et al., 2020). Much of this has been due to the country's rapid economic development and urbanisation, resulting in some cities attracting large numbers of workers from rural areas and less developed cities (Lyu et al., 2018). Due to the restrictions of the *hùkǒu* 户口 or household registration system, many children of migrant workers are unable to access health and education services in cities where they are not registered. As a result, they are often forced to remain in their place of origin, where they are cared for by family members, friends, the wider community, or childcare institutions. Those children are referred to as "Urban Left-Behind Children" (ULBC) (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2020). These migrant workers are commonly referred to as "ULBC parents" (Lyu et al., 2018).

Due to the inevitable separation between parents and children in ULBC families, ULBC parents often struggle to engage with and understand their children's academic lives, leading to limited parent-child interactions. This is concerning, as ULBC are more likely than non-ULBC to experience emotional (Lan & Radin, 2019; Li, Chu & Zhong, 2017), and behavioural problems (Ge & Liu, 2015; Otake, Liu & Luo, 2017), as well as poor academic performance (Cai, 2015; Chen, 2017).

Fortunately, some studies have indicated that learning music can effectively improve the mental health of ULBC, particularly by alleviating anxiety disorders (Wang, 2012), reducing psychological distress (Gao, 2017), increasing life satisfaction (Wang, 2012), and decreasing loneliness (Zhang, 2019).

Although learning music can improve mental health, it is essential to note that children often face difficulties in learning music without parental support. Firstly, children rely on their parents for financial and material support in acquiring musical

instruments and creating a conducive learning environment. Additionally, parental involvement and encouragement are essential to maintaining children's interest and motivation in music learning (McPherson, 2009). When parents are actively engaged in their children's music activities, it reinforces their values regarding music education and fosters autonomy and a willingness to learn (Oliveira et al., 2021). Additionally, when parents set high expectations for their children's music learning, it positively influences their learning outcomes (Dell et al., 2014).

Most children require parental supervision or guidance for their after-lesson practice. Parental involvement helps children feel more comfortable and confident in overcoming learning challenges (McPherson & Davidson, 2002). When parents supervise their child's daily practice and actively participate in instrumental lessons, it can significantly enhance the child's playing skills (Margiotta, 2011).

Although numerous studies have examined parental involvement in children's music learning, the specific involvement of parents from ULBC—who are separated for extended periods—remains underexplored. In particular, the ways in which ULBC parents engage with ULBC's music learning experiences and their perceptions of this involvement process are not well understood. Therefore, this study investigates the experiences of ULBC parents' involvement in instrumental music learning, focusing on the challenges they face, as well as their roles and responsibilities in the music education process.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Design

This study focuses on a pipa (a traditional Chinese plucked instrument) course conducted in a blended learning environment, in which the first author also serves as the instructor. She participated in a 12-week pipa course in a blended learning environment with 12 pipa students (aged 8–12 years old) from the ULBC and 12 ULBC

parents (one of both parents). During the course, all ULBC were required to learn the pipa by taking one online and one offline lesson each week. Each lesson is 60 minutes long and lasts for a total of 12 weeks. Among other things, ULBC parents were able to participate in the ULBC online lessons each week via the internet. Figure 1 presents a photograph of the pipa and depicts a scene in which ULBC participants play the pipa during this study.

Figure 1: The pipa (Source: Authors' photographs)



The case is not broadly representative, as it focuses on a phenomenon actively taught by the first author (Crowe et al., 2011) and is strongly exploratory. Therefore, it is appropriate to use the case of intrinsic as a research methodology.

2.2 Sample

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, as well as the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. Participants included 12 parents from ULBC, all of whom were from Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China. Some of them were screened from a list provided to the first author by the Nanchang Women's Federation, who then contacted the ULBC parents by phone. Several of the ULBC parents who expressed interest in the study volunteered to participate.

Additionally, some ULBC parents actively recommended other families in similar situations to the first author for inclusion in the study. After verification, these recommended families were also included. The first author provided the children of the ULBC parents with free pipa instruments and a 12-week pipa course. Furthermore, the first author maintained contact with some of the ULBC families after the program concluded and continued to offer them a free pipa course. However, it is essential to note that this follow-up pipa course was not part of this study.

Due to work commitments, ULBC parents live in cities separate from their children and are unable to participate in offline courses; however, the internet enables them to join ULBC courses remotely. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for this study were: 1) parents whose children participated in the course, and 2) parents who were able to participate in online lessons and interviews.

To ensure the completeness and validity of the data, parents who were unable to participate in the online lessons or whose attendance was less than 60% were excluded from this study, as they may have experienced difficulty fully comprehending the entire ULBC pipa learning process. Additionally, parents who did

not participate in the follow-up interview were also excluded due to their inability to provide comprehensive study data. The specific exclusion criteria were: 1) parents whose children were not involved in the course; 2) parents who were not able to participate in the online lessons and be interviewed; 3) parents who had attended seven or fewer of the total of 12 online lessons.

2.3 Analysis

The data for this study primarily consisted of semi-structured interviews, instructional documents, and participant observation. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with ULBC parents at the end of the 12-week course, either in person or by telephone, to explore their experiences of participating in the course. The interviews lasted approximately 40 to 50 minutes. All interview questions were provided to participants in advance by the first author, one day before the interview. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in Mandarin.

The instructional documents included WeChat chats and instructor memos. Before the course began, the first author created a WeChat group for all participants, which facilitated the sharing of insights and questions among group members. Additionally, participants were able to communicate privately with the instructor via WeChat. These WeChat chats were incorporated into the instructional materials. During the study, the first author consistently referred to teacher memos to maintain objectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These memos documented the first author's considerations for course design, reflections on instructional implementation, and various thoughts during the data analysis process.

The researchers also conducted participatory observation of ULBC parents. To accurately document the details of instruction, the first author performed weekly participant observations via Tencent Meetings, recording the attendance, participation, and cooperation of ULBC parents during the online lessons. To mitigate potential research bias, the first author consulted with the other authors on maintaining an observation log.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure, with coding and member checking performed using NVivo 14 software. To minimize bias in the data analysis process, the first author conducted peer checking by reviewing and providing feedback with the other authors (Braun & Clark, 2012). Additionally, to ensure the transparency and credibility of the study, the data are accompanied by a detailed audit trail to support objective review.

2.4 Demographic profile

A total of 12 ULBC parents (6 females and six males) participated; their occupations included civil servant, university teacher, school counsellor, police officer, community manager, businessperson, salesperson, and photographer. Regarding marital status, three were divorced and nine were married. Educational attainment varied: one held a PhD (P2), one held a master's degree (P1), two held bachelor's degrees (P8, P10), five held associate degrees (P3, P4, P5, P7, P9), and three held high-school diplomas (P6, P11, P12). Notably, only two ULBC parents (P7, P9) had prior music learning experience. P7 reported learning the erhu in childhood, whereas P9's experience stemmed from her role as a kindergarten teacher.

3. Result

This study aimed to explore the experiences of parents from ULBC involved in their children's musical learning. To address this theme, the challenges, roles, and responsibilities of these individuals were observed in the context of their children's pipa music education course. The observation of the findings led to the emergence of three analytical categories: 1) parents' experiences of involvement, 2) challenges faced by parents, and 3) parents' roles and responsibilities.

3.1 Parents' experiences of involvement

ULBC parents reported that before enrolling their children in the pipa course, they were informed in advance about the content of the lessons and the pieces their children would be playing through the WeChat group. After each lesson, they were also able to communicate with the teacher to monitor their children's progress and address any challenges that arose. This, they noted, was an "invaluable convenience" for parents working in other locations. P3, who has been employed in Jiujiang for an extended period, stated, "Although we are swamped, we still want to know what our children have learned and how they are progressing... This course makes it easy for us to do so."

ULBC parents can participate in their children's weekly online lessons via the internet. Not only can they watch their children's performances throughout the lessons, but they also have the opportunity to engage in interactive games with them for 5–10 minutes. P9, who has some basic music knowledge, shared how watching her child's online lessons rekindled memories of her own musical background. She stated, "I can learn alongside her. I've refreshed some of the [knowledge] I had forgotten, and I believe I've learned more than she has."

Parents reported that their participation in the lessons not only enhanced their understanding of their children's learning but also helped some realize that playing the pipa fluently is not easy, thereby fostering greater interaction and communication between them.

Although the first few lessons felt relatively easy to learn, as the learning progressed, I clearly felt that the difficulty of their knowledge was gradually increasing... Sometimes I watched her learn it in one go and thought she was so great (P5).

3.2 Challenges faced by parents

ULBC parents encounter two primary challenges in course participation: work-or life-related stress, and limited musical knowledge.

3.2.1 Work-or life-related stress

Some parents noted that they were occasionally unable to attend online lessons due to last-minute over work. P7 said, "Sometimes I am busy at work, and I have to work overtime every day... In addition, my job requires me to travel a lot, and I really can't make it to the classes on time".

P11 discussed how her family's financial pressure led her to "think about how to sell the goods every day". As a result, she mentioned that she often needed reminders from the teachers via phone to ensure she participated in her children's online lessons.

P5 described the difficulty she faced in finding the energy to participate in her children's online classes due to the demands of caring for multiple children, especially since her youngest was only a few months old. She explained, "My youngest is only a few months old and needs milk... Sometimes it gets busy, and I forget to participate" (P5). Consequently, P5 occasionally logged in late or required reminders from the teacher to join the online lessons.

3.2.2 Limited music knowledge

P2 discussed how he had not received formal music training, making the melody creation activities in the online lessons particularly challenging for him.

I had never studied music myself, I felt there was no way I could communicate with my child and the teacher in the lessons. Even though the teacher didn't say things that made me feel intimidated, I just felt uncomfortable just because I was asked to participate in online lessons somehow (P2).

As he could not pronounce the names of the notes, and to avoid embarrassment, he tried to get his children to talk to the teacher each time while he watched. P2's nervousness was evident from classroom observations, as he was reluctant to look directly at the camera, often keeping his head down or turning his body to the side, with only half of his face visible.

Some parents reported that accompanying their children during after-lesson practice was particularly challenging. Many younger ULBC often forgot what they had learned in class and turned to their parents for guidance. P12 stated, "I don't know anything about music, and I don't dare to guide her". As a result, when her child asked how to perform a particular technique, she had to play the teacher's demonstration video for her and watch it together or ask the teacher via WeChat.

3.3 Parents' roles and responsibilities

ULBC parents identified four key roles they assume with their children during the course: participant, listener, facilitator, and instructor. These roles, along with their associated responsibilities, are discussed in turn.

3.3.1 Participants

Some parents identified their primary role in the course as that of a participant. P1 mentioned that he was initially uncertain about his role in the classroom. However, by engaging in the course, he became familiar with its structure and "knew what to do, when, and how to do it", which made him feel like a participant. P11 even stated that participating in her child's online lesson made her feel like a "student again".

3.3.2 Listener

Several parents used the term "listener" to describe the role they assumed in the course. They felt they lacked sufficient musical knowledge and skills to guide their child in learning to play the pipa, but were willing to act as their child's audience, supporter, and

encourager. By taking on the role of a listener, they demonstrated to their child how much they valued their child's musical education. P1 stated,

The listener, I think it's essential to put yourself down, communicate with her as an equal, and then let her have no thought burden, willing to put all the words can dare to talk to you, this way the words may provide greater spiritual support for her musical growth.

However, some ULBC parents expressed a desire for their children to focus on learning independently, without parental involvement, and thus defined their role as listeners. P6 stated, "The responsibility of the parent is to create a favourable environment for learning, not to instruct". He argued that by assuming the role of listener, parents can minimize their intervention and foster the child's sense of independence.

3.3.3 Facilitators

Some parents viewed themselves as facilitators in their children's pipa learning journey, helping them establish the habit of regular after-lesson practice through daily reminders. P5 shared that at the start of the course, she would call her daughter every day to remind her to practice the pipa. With parental supervision, most children developed the habit of practicing regularly. P3 stated, "Now when she comes back from school every day, the first thing she does is practice the pipa for about half an hour to an hour. She doesn't need me to remind her at all" (P3).

Simultaneously, some ULBC parents took on the responsibility of purchasing school supplies and transporting their children to and from class. P4 stated, "I usually pick her up and drop her off from class... She lost her pipa nails again recently, so I bought her another pair". Other parents noted that they were responsible for recording videos of their children's after-lesson practice.

3.3.4 Instructor

Parents with some musical background mentioned that they would guide their children through after-lesson practice or help them review their music theory knowledge, thereby assuming the role of instructor. For example, P9 frequently participated in the entire online lesson, actively interacting with both the teacher and her child. After the lesson, she would take the initiative to assess what her child had learned and provide specific instructions as requested by the teacher. "When I noticed that her sense of rhythm was weak, I would guide her to sing along" (P9). Additionally, she evaluated her child's classroom performance and provided guidance to improve it. P9 shared,

I remember one time, I thought she was still changing the tape in class, and that time, I said, "Look, you are wasting the teacher's time and your own. I told you to change the tape at home, but you didn't listen". I said, "Why do you have to change the tape during class?" I showed her how she was doing in the classroom, and she looked at it and didn't say anything. Of course, I praise her if I see her doing well; I'll say, "You're so good today, and you are a teaching assistant".

4. Discussion

ULBC parents reported keeping track of their children's learning through WeChat and actively engaging in online pipa courses, using various online resources. Throughout this interactive learning experience, parents considered that their own attitudes toward the online lessons gradually became more positive. The findings suggest that, through their personal involvement in their children's pipa lessons, parents may have developed a deeper understanding of the learning process and facilitated increased communication and interaction with their children.

This finding aligns with prior research indicating that parent-child communication is significantly enhanced through joint participation in music activities (Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2007;

Pitt & Hargraves, 2017). From an attachment theory perspective, shared experiences and memories between parents and children form the foundation of intimate attachment, playing a crucial role in influencing children's willingness to engage in dialogue with their parents (Bost et al., 2006).

While this pipa course offers an opportunity for parents who face challenges in spending time with their children due to geographic or time constraints to engage with them, some parents with heavy workloads and multiple children still struggle to participate in their children's online lessons. This difficulty may be compounded by their lower social status or economic conditions. These parents, burdened with busy schedules, are unable to participate in their children's online lessons and after-lesson practices. In contrast, parents from economically well-off families have more time and are more likely to engage in their children's learning. This aligns with past research on parental involvement, which, based on family stress theory, suggests that families of lower socioeconomic status tend to demonstrate lower levels of participation due to heavy financial burdens (McCubbin et al., 1980).

Additionally, previous research has found that the greater the number of children in a family, the fewer educational resources each child receives (Zhang et al., 2018), which aligns with the findings of this study. In multi-child families, P5, who had to care for multiple children, often struggled to balance her time, resulting in frequent lateness in participating in online lessons. Overall, parents' socioeconomic status may influence their level of participation in their child's education.

In the course, parents assumed multiple roles, not only as participants but also as listeners, facilitators, and instructors. These roles align with descriptions in the existing literature, which identify key parental activities as purchasing necessary supplies, managing their children's learning commute, listening attentively to their children's needs, and supervising after-lesson practices (Ryan et al., 2023). Musically trained parents also offer guidance

during their children's practice, consistent with previous research findings (Bugeja, 2009; Ryan et al., 2023; Uptis et al., 2017).

It is noteworthy that ULBC parents have adopted a new role identity—participant—and this change represents not only an expansion of roles but also a revolutionary shift in educational philosophy and models. It indicates that the academic environment is undergoing a profound transformation. Through the use of online platforms, the closeness and interactivity of the educational collaboration between ULBC parents and educators have reached an unprecedented level, thereby creating more favourable conditions for the overall development of children.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of parents from ULBC who participated online in their children's music lessons, with a particular focus on the challenges, roles, and responsibilities they encountered. The findings revealed that the online lessons served as a significant gateway for ULBC parents, enabling them not only to gain insight into their children's learning but also to facilitate communication and interaction within ULBC families. However, ULBC parents reported encountering several challenges during their participation. They must manage the pressures of both work and daily life and often lack the confidence to engage in their children's music lessons or support after-lesson practice due to limited musical knowledge. The research findings indicate that ULBC parents fulfil multidimensional roles: as participants, they attend the online lessons; as listeners, they patiently attend to their children's learning difficulties; as facilitators, they provide material resources and foster independent learning habits; and, among a small subset with musical training, as instructor, they actively guide their children's after-lesson practice online.

This study underscores the importance of actively involving ULBC parents in their children's music education. By highlighting the positive contributions of parental participation to family

interactions and community building, the findings offer practical insights for music educators and policymakers. Specifically, music educators can leverage these insights to design inclusive teaching strategies and collaborative online platforms that encourage parental engagement. Additionally, educational policymakers may consider these implications when developing targeted programs to strengthen family-school partnerships, enhance parental involvement, and foster a supportive and cohesive community atmosphere among ULBC families.

Due to the specific characteristics of the study population, these findings reflect only the experiences and opinions of a selected subset of ULBC parents and cannot be generalized to the broader population. To provide more generalized insights into musical parenting, future studies should broaden the sample and incorporate more diverse data. Meanwhile, during the interactive sessions of the online lessons, ULBC parents without a music education background primarily chose to observe rather than participate, due to their lack of musical knowledge. In light of this, future studies should focus on the feelings and needs of these parents when designing online interactive sessions. Additionally, parent-child interactive activities should be designed in a way that is accessible to them, encouraging and facilitating their active participation.

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Author contributions

The study was conceptualised by L. S. The methodology was guided by L. S. L. S. and L. Z. screened and recruited the participants and collected qualitative data. All of the interviews conducted by L. S. Transcription of the audio recordings and data analysis were performed by L. S., L. Z., and Z. Z. L. S. wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and all authors commented on and revised the original versions of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final draft L. S supervised the whole process of the study.

Research ethics committee approval

This study obtained ethical approval from Universiti Putra Malaysia, approval letter No. JKEUPM-2023-366.

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