

Decline and Reconstruction of Functions of School Education in Impoverished Ethnic Areas: Based on the Investigation Into Liping of Guizhou

ZHANG Xiaoyan^{[a],*}

^[a]Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
*Corresponding author.

Supported by National Social Science Fund With Key Support “Survey and Research of Improvement of People’s Well-being in Minority Areas of Southwest China” (11AMZ004); Faculty of Education, Southwest University for Making Breakthroughs in scientific and Research Planning “Research on Theory and Practice of Improvement of People’s Well-Being Through Education” (2012ZGXM2-03).

Received 15 April 2014; accepted 26 July 2014
Publish online 31 August 2014

Abstract

It is found from an investigation into the education of Liping County, Guizhou Province that there exist evidences which indicate decline of functions of school education in impoverished ethnic areas. Such decline may be attributable to the following causes: drain of human capital resulted from poor economic development level in the local area; erosion of traditional cultural concept on the functions of school education; lack of “educational criteria” in social development and irrationality of education per se. To reconstruct the functions of school education in the impoverished ethnic areas, such strategies as promoting concurrence of local economic & cultural development and educational input, boosting educational quality and vigorously developing vocational education are feasible.

Key words: Impoverished ethnic areas; Functions of education; Economic development; Ethnic culture; Improvement of people’s well-being

Zhang, X. Y. (2014). Decline and Reconstruction of Functions of School Education in Impoverished Ethnic Areas: Based on the Investigation Into Liping of Guizhou. *Canadian Social Science*, 10(6), 47-52. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/5430>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5430>

INTRODUCTION

Referring to the “prioritized development of education” strategy in impoverished ethnic areas of China, it would be an ought-to-be trend to realize “elimination of poverty via education” by right of developing education through increase of input and giving full play to the functions of education in promoting economic & cultural development and improving people’s livelihood. However, plenty of facts demonstrate that although the education in impoverished ethnic areas has seen remarkable progress in recent years, the poverty in the local areas is not alleviated accordingly. In this process, what causes the decline and how to reconstruct the functions of education and ameliorate its position in the development of economy & culture and improvement of people’s well-being have become the realistic issues confronted by current development of education in impoverished ethnic areas. In the following context, an analysis will be taken on Liping County, a national-level poverty-stricken county under the administration of Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in Guizhou Province.

1. BASIC INFORMATION OF THE SURVEY

1.1 Time and Subject of This Survey

This survey was conducted from October 10, 2013 to November 10, 2013, and its main subjects are schools in Liping County, including secondary vocational schools and elementary and middle schools. Furthermore, considering that this survey is themed upon the status quo of functions of school education in impoverished ethnic areas, the survey subjects also include natural environment, economic situation, traditional culture and residents’ living conditions in the local areas.

1.2 Methodology

The methods adopted in this survey are participant observation and interview. In view that the issues involved in the survey are closely related to the development of local economy & culture and the living conditions of people, it is an indispensable method in this research to collect related first-hand information through participant observation. Meanwhile, to understand the status quo of functions of school education in Liping county in a more comprehensive and concrete manner, the author carried out numerous interviews with associated personnel in and out of the schools, and targeted the local education managers, teachers, students and residents for in-depth interviews.

1.3 Analysis on Status Quo of Decline of Functions of School Education in Impoverished Ethnic Areas

1.3.1 It Is Hard for School Education to Become the Major Impetus of Economic Development

Located at the intersection among Guizhou, Hunan and Guangxi province, Liping County, as a transitional area from Yunnan-Guizhou plateau to Jiangnan hilly area, is characterized by mountains, and it has always been called “a place made up by 90% mountains and 10% waters and farmlands”. The total population of this county is 530 thousand and the per capita farmland, which is distributed sporadically between the gullies and the slopes with an elevation of 400-1,000 meters, is 0.085 hm². Unevenly distributed, the per capita farmland in some rural areas and towns is less than 0.033 hm². It is therefore a county typical of big population and little land. The point is, though with rare per capita farmland, the peasants who are fully engaged in agricultural production account for up to 156,397 thousand, 29.5% of the total population (Bureau of Statistics, 2012, and the vast majority of them stick to traditional farming which is a kind of work dependent on experience, where the production technology can be accumulated step by step without any need to rely on modern science and technology. In terms of industry, the power consumption industries, with low industrial production & marketing rate, enterprise profitability and technological content, including rice processing, industrial silicon and artificial board remain to be the pillar industries. Besides, driven by the development of ethnic tourism in recent years, initial development of tertiary industry has been achieved, which, however, is not mainly motivated by school education, but by the fiscal support of the government, the expansion of the tourism market and the charm of Dong minority’s traditional culture itself.

In general, no matter it is agriculture, industry or tertiary industry, it has quite limited demand for modern science and culture, thus constituting restricted demand for school education whose major function is to impart modern science & technology and culture. This leads to the fact that most of the students who have completed

their higher education outside the county would choose to stay in other places, and increasing surplus labors go out of the county to make a living. By the end of 2012, the migrant workers of the county have reached 107 thousand, amounting 20% of the total population. It can be concluded that school education has not yet become the dominant force to drive the development of local economy.

1.3.2 The Cultural Functions of School Education Are Not Fully Realized

With 350 thousand Dong people, Liping is a county resided by the largest number of Dong people in China. Throughout the history, Dong people have accumulated abundant ethnic wisdom which still sparkles today in its practices in adapting to the nature. It is embodied by drum tower, stilt house, Shelter Bridge, knitting, carving, Dong cloth, Dong cotton, Dong embroidery etc. in terms of material culture and by myths and legends, poems, Dong songs, Lusheng dance, Dong play, ethics etc. in terms of spiritual culture. In the contexts of modernization and globalization, however, the traditional culture of Dong minority is on the verge of distinction, because the mainstream culture and the foreign culture are gradually introduced and large number of young adults going out to work result in severe loss of major subjects for inheritance of Dong minority’s traditional culture.

In general, the schools in the impoverished ethnic areas, apart from implementation of the national curricula, undertake the function of inheriting, integrating and innovating minority culture, which is also a key function of school education in the impoverished ethnic areas. Nevertheless, due to the test-oriented education, the function of inheriting ethnic culture in local school education has not been brought into full play. In front of the classroom building in a middle school in Liping County rises grandly a hall for boards used to display the analysis table of monthly exam quality. The highest score, the number of students with excellent performance and the number of students passing the exam for each grade, each class and each subject are all recorded in details with the scoring rate, average score, rate of students with excellent performance and rate of students passing the exam being correct to percentile. In terms of curriculum, the national curricula dominated by modern science and mainstream culture take up the basic education, and despite the fact that every class would be granted a lecture on ethnic culture each week, it is a mere formality or just an “embellishment” because it is not incorporated into the regular education knowledge system. To certain extent, school education obviously plays an insufficient role in inheriting ethnic culture.

1.3.3 Education Plays an Inconspicuous Part in Improving People’s Quality of Life

In recent years, the living standard of people in Liping County has been bettered to some extent owing to various policy support from the nation and the local government

as well as the development of the market economy, but most families still remain poor and live with low living quality. Most of the students, who only receive compulsory education and quit further education, would be likely to face the embarrassing situation of “finding no access to job and wealth”, and they therefore go to a foreign place to work, or otherwise stay in the local place to carry on the traditional production method and life style of their ancestors. With poor cultural quality, most migrant workers can only select an ill-paid job requiring low knowledge content and high labor intensity. However, those peasants who carry on the traditional production method of rice field farming on which they live can just maintain a life that merely keeps their body and soul together for insufficient land, ignorance of modern agricultural knowledge and low crop output.

In addition, people should improve their living methods and habits in their daily life. For example, there exists the problem of “dirty and disorderly surrounding” in some villages in terms of living environment. In terms of weddings and funerals, people’s gift giving becomes more and more extravagant with unrealistic competitions in vogue, seriously influencing people’s quality of material life. Mostly, people waste and abuse their spare time in gambling. It can be said that how to utilize education to promote subjectivity of ethnic members so as to further ameliorate their survival, development and living quality is a realistic problem which is supposed to be solved by current school education.

2. ANALYSIS ON THE CAUSES FOR DECLINE OF FUNCTIONS OF EDUCATION IN IMPOVERISHED ETHNIC AREAS

The realization of educational functions is closely related to the level of economic & cultural development, the emphasis on education and the integral structure of education itself. There are evidences showing decline of functions which education in the impoverished ethnic areas displays to development of local economy & culture and improvement of people’s well-being, and it is mainly attributable to the following causes.

2.1 Drain of Human Capital Resulted From Poor Economic Development Level in the Local Area

It is widely accepted that in the economical production field, human capital is the major force that impels growth of economic value, and when human capital shifts from one place into another place, it is undoubtedly favorable for its destination. As mentioned earlier, limited by the factors of geographical location, climate, history etc., Liping County experiences unfavorable economic development and lacks emerging technological industries of local characteristics, so it could not produce strong

talent demanding pressure for educational activities or accommodate talents with advanced educational background. In consequence, it out of question that most students of local origin, after completing their higher education in other cities, would go to the coastal cities in eastern China or other developed places of the same province, let alone inflow of talents from other places. In a sense, the educational cause of Liping is accumulating human capital for the economic development of other places, while as the investor of human capital; Liping county receives fairly limited economic returns.

At the same time, the poor economic development of Liping’s economy inhibits the income level of local residents, which determines that people have low high-consumption demand for modern industrial products, IT products and all kinds of cultural products. This means that it exerts low consumption product demanding pressure for implementation of economic activities. Therefore, it would render the economic activities to be difficult to form demand for human capital, causing failure to stimulate realization of educational functions. In a word, the poor economic development in the local areas decides that it would be difficult to generate material demand for realization of economic functions of education.

2.2 Erosion of Traditional Cultural Concept on Functions of School Education

In the respect of ethnic psychology, Dong people are tolerant, gentle, calm, prudent, willing for unity and mutual aid, and easily contented, while on the other hand, they belong to a passive and conservative minority lacking in time consciousness, competition consciousness, creativity and subject consciousness (Yang, 1992). In some measure, the psychological features of Dong people are discrepant from the modern society that is competitive, which also leads to a universal fact that Dong children are in short of enterprising spirit in school study.

Meanwhile, quite a few outmoded conventions and customs in the traditional culture of Dong people still shape local people’s outlook on the world and the life, resulting in extravagant weddings and funerals as well as prevalent witchcraft. Influenced by traditional production methods, customs and values, they on the one hand stick to the wealth concept of “being contented with a small number of treasures”, but on the other hand, they pass on the consumption view and production method of waste and extravagance with tremendous materials and monies spared for different ceremonies. Through school education, local students have been equipped with modern scientific and cultural quality and modern consciousness, overcame the outmoded conversions and customs of their own ethnic for the time being and formed, in some sense, the idea of relying on science and technology to develop ethnic economy, but once they return to world of their own ethnic, their concept of value established in the

schools would inevitably be overridden by the systematic and comprehensive norms of traditional culture. The functions of modern school education are offset by the powerful traditional cultures and customs.

2.3 Lack of “Educational Dimension” in Social Development

Education is a subsystem of the social system, and the realization of educational functions surely cannot be separated from its support. However, as modern Chinese society is still at the critical period of transformation and development, people often use “political dimension”, “economic dimension” and “cultural dimension”, but not “educational dimension” to measure and censor the conflicts in social development(Li, 2012). In other words, the society assumes inadequate responsibility for education, neglects how to furnish superior service for the development of education, and ignores how to enable the education to develop more favorable values in this process. Instead of witnessing the society’s consciousness and actions in undertaking any responsibility for education, what we often hear is the complaint of the society over education.

In Zhaoxing town of Liqing county, the government sectors and the market entities, for the sake of economic benefit, spare no effort to advocating translocation and consolidation of schools in order to find spaces for tourism development, but as a matter of fact, capital shortage has always been a critical factor that restricts the development of education in impoverished ethnic areas. Whether translocation of the elementary school in the town center, or consolidation of the middle schools with approximately 800 students, it would not only cause waste to educational resources, but also go against the principle of convenience for school construction to some extent. In light of the government sectors’ control of educational resources and discourse power on education as well as the intervention of market forces, there is quite limited space for independent development of education. When the needs for socioeconomic development contradict with the development of education, education can just keep out of the way, or even becomes the “shield” for socioeconomic development.

2.4 Irrationality of Education per se

The irrationality of school education system itself limits the realization of educational functions. First, there is deviation for target location of schools. For example, there should have been two goals for education in the junior middle school stage: To prepare students for school education of higher level and to prepare students for career life. Yet in the background of test-oriented education, the schools focus on the former and neglect the latter. For various reasons, when students find no hope for schools of higher grade, they begin to doubt the values and functions of school education, thus resulting in their use of energy

on other things or waste of time, and schools become the place they seek for every way to escape. Ignored are the potential functions of schools in students’ career planning that the schools should have provided. In spite of any vocational school education that is directly related to the public’s production life, there exist problems such as insufficient students, faculty members and specialties.

Then, in the respect of educational policies, “imposing uniformity in all cases” lowers the quality of education in impoverished ethnic areas. For example, during implementation of “school layout adjustment”, there are problems of consolidation which set aside the actuality, so numerous students, who originally lived close to the schools, drop out because of inconvenient traffic, long distance and increased cost for education.

Finally, as for curriculum and teaching, the contents and requirements seem to be too demanding for the students in this area considering their inadequate educational accumulation. Many a student would feel tired of study resulted from “being unable to comprehend and master” because the contents for school education deviate largely from their daily language, local knowledge and traditional culture that they are familiar with. The aforesaid problems directly impact upgrading of local educational quality and further block the generation of educational functions.

3. FEASIBLE STRATEGIES TO RECONSTRUCT THE EDUCATIONAL FUNCTIONS IN IMPOVERISHED ETHNIC AREAS

The trinity of economic development, ethnic culture creation and minority member subjectivity construction is a must for impoverished ethnic areas to eliminate poverty and become better off. In order to reconstruct the educational functions in impoverished ethnic areas, development of local economy and culture should be relied on to aggrandize its absorption capacity for human resources, so that people’s well-being can be improved and benign interaction of “education-man-society” can be realized. The specific strategies are as follows.

3.1 Promoting Concurrence of Local Economic & Cultural Development and Educational Input

The realization of educational functions and the development of economy and culture are coexisted and mutually restricted. Without the demand for human resources brought about by development of local economy, it would be baseless to fully realize the social functions of education. It is the premise for strengthening of educational functions to promote a sound structure of concurrence between local economic & cultural development and educational input by carrying forward development of education via development of economy

and culture, and then propelling development of local economy and culture with developed educational cause.

For how to promote concurrence between local economic & cultural development and educational input in impoverished ethnic areas, the author holds that the starting point should be placed on the economy and culture. Experts should be employed to investigate into and research the social history, natural geography, ethnic culture, population quality etc. in the local area, to work out a plan that is suitable for local economy and culture should be formulated, and ethnic industries that are competitive should be developed. As a matter of fact, many impoverished ethnic areas have their own unique resource advantages. For example, Liping County has ample wood resources, water resources, mineral resources and distinct intangible cultural heritages. By reasonable exploitation and planned use, it is likely to build a powerful industry with obvious ethnic characteristics, which will promote development of local economy. The development of local economy and culture would, in return, be bound to impose talent demanding pressure for educational activities so as to impel development of education and realization of educational functions.

3.2 Boosting Educational Quality, the Basis for Reconstruction of Functions of School Education

In regard to the problems found in development of education in impoverished ethnic areas, the following measures should be adopted to improve educational quality. First, the emphasis placed by the education subject on education is inseparable, respect should be shown to the laws of educational development, and the hot spots and difficulties exposed in local education development should be handled based on the actual conditions of development of local society and education. For example, the conflict between the scale benefit of resource allocation in school layout adjustment, the adaptability of general educational resource allocation to traditional ethnic culture, and the relationship between traditional ethnic culture and modern school science and culture are all realistic problems faced in development of education in impoverished ethnic areas.

Then, ethnic members' education demand based on real life should be valued. In some sense, education is the result of subjective construction and behavioral selection of the subject under specific value orientation, and talking about reconstruction of educational functions without giving consideration to the subject's educational demand is unpractical. Therefore, to reconstruct educational functions, it is unescapably to show care for the educational demands and value orientation of ethnic members, to take the real life of people as the benchmark, and to pursue coordination of ethnic education and economic society.

Finally, cultural issues in education should be properly treated, and subjectivity of ethnic members be enhanced. Ethnic culture is neither a barrier to development of

economic society in impoverished ethnic areas, nor a furnishing. Instead, it is a vital resource of the minority which is passed on and inherited generation by generation. Exploring the advantageous resources in ethnic culture has become an essential path for social progress as a whole in impoverished ethnic areas. It is critical in reconstruction of educational functions to train the minority members to develop local economy based on the actual situation and resource advantage in the local area and to build the subject consciousness and subject ability for enhancing individuals' survival and development status.

3.3 Vigorously Developing Vocational Education, the Direct Access to Reconstruction of Educational Functions

Vocational education is the kind of education that is most closely associated with the relationship between development of economy and improvement of people's well-being. It would be conducive to improving employment in impoverished ethnic areas and increasing ethnic members' income if vocational education is valued, the quality of vocational schools is improved, and vocational education is applied in general education.

First, development of vocational education in impoverished ethnic areas should gear to the local conditions and local technological basis for production and industrial structure should be taken into account to reasonably design the scale, level and specialty setting of the schools. Then, apart from the vocational schools especially established with support from the government, the test and practice of applying vocational education factors in general education should be continued with a view to effectively dealing with different choices of entering a higher school or getting a job in the junior middle school stage. At last, the ratio of non-formal vocational education should be improved. In agriculture for example, the surplus labors from part of the representative and typical towns or households are encouraged to depend on non-formal vocational education or vocational training to develop high-tech agriculture, deep processing of agricultural products and featured agriculture, and then achieve radiation from a single place to a whole area. What is more, the ratio of professional training and vocational training for surplus labors from rural areas should also be enhanced and their level of vocational training pushed forward so as to fortify their vocational ability and their capability to adapt to urban life.

CONCLUSION

After years of development, the school education in impoverished ethnic areas have witnessed great achievement, but it still shows a trend of decline of functions in promoting development of local economy & culture and improvement of people's well-being. It can be found by participant observation and interview that the

decline of educational functions in impoverished ethnic areas is sourced from the following causes: Drain of human capital resulted from poor economic development level in the local area; erosion of traditional cultural concept on the functions of school education; loss of “educational criteria” in social development and irrationality of education per se. Taking into consideration the practical needs for development of economy & culture and improvement of people’s livelihood in ethnic areas, it requires promotion of concurrence between economic & cultural development and educational input, improvement of educational quality and emphasis on vocational education.

REFERENCES

- Bureau of Statistics of Liping County. (2012). *Statistical report of national economic and social development, Liping county*. Retrieved from <http://www.liping.gov.cn/info/2963/222144.htm>
- Li, Z. T. (2013). “Educational dimension” and educational basis of the social development in China. *Education Research*, (3).
- Yang, S. Q. (1992). Discussion on the common psychological quality. *Journal of Guizhou Ethnic Institute (Social Sciences)*, (2).