

Role of Literacy Education in Sustainable Development of Poor Rural Ethnic groups

Project name: Literacy Education in Sustainable Development of Poor Rural Ethnic groups

Responsible Person: Dr. Liu Yibing

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Implementing organisation:

Research & Training Center for Literacy Education (RTCLE)
Literacy Resource Center for Girls and Women in China

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Research & Training Center for Literacy Education
Literacy Resource Centre for Girls and Women in China
Lancang Lahu Ethnic Autonomous Country Education Commission

Background:

Ever since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government has been making great efforts to develop literacy education and giving priority to it in basic education. After 1990, especially after the 1990 EFA in Bangkok, Thailand, literacy education has been developing rapidly and steadily, with an average of over 4,000,000 people having eliminated illiteracy every year. From 1996 on, the focus of literacy education has been shifted onto poor rural disadvantaged population. For an effective and efficient implementation of such a shift, a better-informed understanding is in urgent need of the theory and practice of literacy education to this population. Based on vast investigations in poor rural areas of western China, the fact has been uncovered that literacy education in poor rural areas, especially in poor rural ethnic communities, should not be confined to mere reading or practical skills. The traditional concept of literacy education should be broadened and a new system of literacy education should be developed, with focus on the learner's urgent needs. Hence, DR. LIU Yibing, who is responsible for it, has proposed the present project.

Lancang Lahu Ethnic Autonomous County is the only autonomous county for Lahu people in China. It is located in south-western China, bordering on Burma, with a size of 8,807 square kilometres, 99 percent of which is covered by mountains, and a population of about 460,000 people, 78 percent of who are consisted of 26 different ethnic groups. Lancang is a poor county of the state level. Average schooling of its people amounts to merely 1.9 years, and according to the 4th national-wide census in 1990, there were 195,147 illiterates or half-illiterates among those aged 15 or older, accounting for 37.39 percent of all such. After vast fieldwork, the project team believes that it is an excellent experimental base for theoretical as well as practical research on literacy education in ethnic areas.

This project has gone through the assessment of scholars employed by the Chinese National Educational Science Programmes Planning Foundation, and it has been evaluated as important and valuable in both theory and practice, and ranked as a 1997-2000 major research project, funded by this foundation, of the Chinese Ministry of Education. The progress of this project is under the supervision of the Chinese Ministry of Education and the result will be reported to it for reference in policy making concerning literacy education.

The project has been applied to Nalan village, Annuokuo village, Banli village, Mangdon village and Fuben village in Lancang Lahu Ethnic Autonomous County, Yunnan, China. Learners totalled up 176 in 5 literacy classes, with 73 females, 121 Lahu people and 55 Thai people.

This project was proposed by Dr. LIU Yibing, based on his series of investigations in poor rural areas of western China. After its experimental plan had undergone the assessment of scholars employed by the Chinese National Educational Science Programmes Planning Foundation, the project was concluded important and valuable in both theory and practice, and accepted as a major research project of Chinese Ministry of Education and by this foundation. The project is under the leadership of Chinese Ministry of Education and its result will be reported to it for reference in its policymaking concerning literacy education in the whole country.

Procedures of the project:

A. Fieldwork - to learn about the urgent needs of ethnic illiterates in poor rural areas

Researchers from RTCLE went to Lancang county and made field testing and survey, and they found that Lancang is covered mainly by mountains, rich in natural resources, -- there are five mountains and six rivers, and abundant vegetation, medicinal crops and fruit trees, etc. But these potential resources had not been developed and tapped, and the villagers had very low income. Lancang has various ethnic groups, scattered in separate areas, speaking mainly languages of their own, such as *Lahu*, *Wa*, *Thai*, *Hani*, and *Bulang*, etc. Language of the ethnic group, especially *Lahu*, are dominant here and in most remote mountain villages, the people do not understand Chinese or cannot communicate with it. Most people in these ethnic communities do not understand what are being talked about on TV and radio, what are written in publications or posters, in Chinese -- they are ignorant of and isolated from the world beyond their mountains. Their life lacks variety; their "social" life is confined to the cage of their villages, as Babel's tower may arise just on the borders of these villages. The villagers expect little from education and they have little awareness of market competition. In accordance with these findings, the main objectives of this project have been set as follows:

1. Seek for the ways an educational management operation system is to be established, which will involve governments and NGOs in employing literacy education to improve sustainable development of poor ethnic population;
2. Develop rich, novel and interesting learning atmosphere, and develop illiterate's awareness of the significance of life-long learning and pioneering spirits, elevate their learning motifs, improve their living and surviving abilities.
3. Carry out the experiments, and decide the main aims and essential contents of literacy education and continuing education for poor ethnic population in rural areas;
4. Make model literacy educational textbooks and supplementary reading materials orientated to learner's psychology and their needs in everyday life and work for the ethnic communities, improve the form of educational organizations, teaching process and teaching methods of literacy education and seek for guiding principles ways and methods for achieving a comprehensive elevation of literacy teaching quality in ethnic areas;
5. Based on findings in experimental research, construct an effective evaluation indicator system for literacy and post-literacy education of ethnic people in rural areas.

B. Analysis on the causes of poverty

The concept of poverty

Among the various expressions of this concept, the generally accepted idea seems to be that poverty refers as the inability for an individual or a family to maintain the minimum living condition. The minimum living condition differs greatly in different countries, regions or its history. Firstly, poverty may be in the absolute or relative sense according to its aspects or intensity concerned. Absolute poverty refers as the inability for an individual or a family to meet the basic needs with all the income. Relative poverty refers as the living condition below the average but merely satisfying the basic needs. Poverty here discussed is in the absolute sense. Secondly, poverty may be understood in the broad or narrow sense. The former confines itself to the realm of economy while the latter incorporates also social, cultural, educational and political factors. In the circumstances of China, absolute poverty mainly exists in the rural areas. Rural poverty is defined on the basis of the minimum expenses necessary in satisfying the basic needs with the annual income per capita. In 1993, Chinese government stipulated that the minimum food needs for rural residents is below 2,100 k calorie per capita/day, which the population group may be considered in poverty. In 1995, National Statistics Bureau, using Martin Approach, made a more accurate

estimate of absolute poverty line, namely per capita income ¥440 for 1994 and adjusted it in 1996 to ¥530 for 1995. In China, 85% of the total poverty-stricken population are found in rural areas.

What accounts for poverty? Poverty may be explained in multiple aspects like historic reasons, hostile geographies and environment, sluggishness in culture and tradition, backwardness in values and ideology, poor application of science and technology, etc. Generally speaking, inefficient education and consequently unsatisfying quality of the production force stands out as the major reason. There is a possible vicious circle in the process of poverty. The low comprehensive faculties of the poverty-stricken population weaken their ambition, confidence and skills for improving their own living conditions, which in turn causes their poverty or intensifies their poverty. In the mean time, the poverty hinders the improvement of their comprehensive faculties. In an era of knowledge-based economy, what determine the speed of economic and social development for a country or a region are human resources or the quantity and quality of the production force rather than material or natural resources. As a result, economic and social development including poverty alleviation depends on empowerment of the production force through education.

How to understand poverty? Poverty is usually related to starvation, food shortage, poor hygiene, bad residency, etc. World Bank and UNESCO also define poverty from the perspective of economy. We are so accustomed to looking into poverty in the economic sense that we tend to care the phenomenon of poverty rather than study its nature as well as implicit and explicit causes. In fact, poverty should be viewed from multi-dimensions, namely, ideological and intellectual poverty besides the inaccurate and incomplete one related to economy, which used to dominate our understanding. Ideological poverty consists of several variations like inadequate ways of thinking, lack of modern spirit, enterprise consciousness and competitiveness. Intellectual poverty is demonstrated in the lack of necessary basic know-how for a citizen to conduct production, living and social activities.

C. Strategies taken by the project

1. The central role of the local government

Literacy education and poverty alleviation was considered mainly the responsibility of governments at local level. An administrator-responsibility system in this respect is implemented from the county government down to the village governments. The local government was in charge of teaching room, facilities, teacher's salaries, etc. Government should increase its efforts in the investment for poverty alleviation.

2. The role of the project researcher group

A project researcher group was formed. This group met regularly to discuss problems in implementation of the project and find their solutions. Members of this group were responsible mainly for raising funds in various ways for the purpose of making investigations, organizing seminars on specific experimental tasks, making clear tasks for each sub-project and assigning them to specific individuals, having small local workshops concerning certain research tasks, guiding and participating in writing and printing literacy educational textbooks or reading materials, co-ordinating various sides and mobilizing local resources to support the project, training trainers and teachers involved in the project.

3. Co-ordination of all sectors of the society for a campaign in poverty alleviation

Poverty alleviation is a systematic engineering that needs participation of all other social sectors besides education. The nation-wide campaign has entered its final stage. Geographically, 90% of the current impoverished population concentrate in the central and western part of China, that is, the mountainous, rocky, desert, cold and loess terrain areas as well as those stricken by epidemic and water shortage, which feature inconvenient transportation and poor infrastructure. The local government should implement a comprehensive policy encouraging social participation for the poverty alleviation in these areas. The Government not only engaged in the relevant policy-making and investment but the organization of all GOs, NGOs and individuals for this cause. Some trans-departmental endeavours incorporating efforts of governmental branches in agriculture, animal farming, forestry, agricultural by-product processing, infrastructure, research, promotion and

application of technologies, health, education, environment, etc. The significance of the co-ordination by the government lies in the timely access to resources in the form of personnel and funds for the disadvantaged people.

4. Integration of rural functional literacy programmes and poverty alleviation projects

As the basic for the adult education, literacy promotion should directly serve the production and living of the rural adults, which should be the constant policy of Chinese Literacy programmes and projects. It could be the most attractive and beneficial to the disadvantaged group when they are combined with practical techniques relevant to handicrafts or agricultural and other economic activities. Functional literacy consists in not only continuing education in reading, writing and computing on a self-learning basis, but also education in citizenship, production and living, sanitation and health) population, environment, etc. Specific contents will be available for the education of women, for example, education in confidence and self-reliance, hygiene and child-care, family economics, etc. In ethnic areas, additional contents such as ethnic cultures and traditions are incorporated into the education on a voluntary and bilingual basis. As a result of these measures, the literacy learners are greatly motivated, which in turn improves the quality of literacy activities and accelerates the process of poverty alleviation in disadvantaged areas.

5. Development of practical functional literacy materials

Popularity of superstition and inadequate application of science and technologies are very common because of lack of information and cultural activities. In view of this, this project has been paying constant attentions to the development of functional literacy materials suitable for the rural areas, especially those helpful to poverty alleviation in these areas.

Generally, the development of functional literacy materials is required a) to take the state policies and goals as the guiding: principles. The development of functional literacy materials should be in compliance with the *Literacy Promotion Regulations* issued by the State Council and the objectives for post-literacy programmes issued by the Ministry of Education. For example, poverty alleviation, the current focus of rural literacy education should be emphasized in literacy materials; b) to center around the practical problems faced by the disadvantaged population, for instance, drinking water, lavatories, pig sties, etc.; c) to explore variety in the format of literacy materials. Current materials in China include texts (books, booklets, leaflets, etc.), picture books, posters, audio-visual materials, etc.

D. Perspectives on Literacy Education in Disadvantaged Ethnic Group People

A. Government as the mainstay in the anti-poverty Campaign

Determination and specific measures of the government are the premises of poverty elimination that involves various aspects and consequently needs the active participation of all social sectors. Literacy promotion is usually conducted in areas with inefficient social development, weak infrastructure and backward education. Hence there are the complexity and length of literacy promotion and poverty alleviation. As a result, governments or all countries take the major responsibility in anti-poverty campaign incorporating literacy promotion and poverty alleviation as one of the governmental priority activities. It is unimaginable and unpractical to accomplish this goal without national will and determination. To carry out the integration of literacy promotion and poverty alleviation, we should, first of all reform the traditional idea and practice of "economy before literacy". In disadvantaged areas, it is unwise to depend on economic development for literacy promotion. On the contrary, literacy education should take the precedence of economic development so as to get rid of the vicious circle of illiteracy, poverty and backwardness. The investment in education should be prior to rather than in parallel with economic development.

B. A comprehensive functional literacy and continuing education oriented to the basic needs and job demands of the disadvantaged group

Fundamentally, the gap between the rich and poor is that between population quality, knowledge or educational level. Studies show that there is a high relevancy between the educational level and productivity' income, health and poverty of a population. The impoverished population usually concentrates in areas with very low adult literacy rate. The Lancang Lahu

Ethnic Autonomous County of Yunnan Province is a state level poverty-stricken county with 26 ethnic groups. The average schooling for the population in this county is 1.6 years, and that for the Lahu people is only 1.4 years. A great vicious circle of illiteracy, poverty and ideological backwardness is always haunting this area. The only way out for this is education. Poverty alleviation should take phenomenon and nature into consideration while focusing on the nature. "Enlightenment for poverty alleviation and education for the enlightenment" The basic approach to the eradication of poverty, therefore, is to consciously impart the disadvantaged population with the awareness of enterprising creativity, self-reliance and surviving skills through functional literacy and continuing education.

C. An attitude of sustainable and coordinated development of population, economy, culture and nature in poverty ethnic areas

The Chinese way of poverty alleviation has undergone a process from financial aid to comprehensive development as a form of alleviation so as to enhance the ability of those disadvantaged people in self-reliance and self-development. There used to be an emphasis on economic development in disadvantaged areas while ignoring the empowerment of the population and cultural construction, not to say the coordination between local economy, culture and nature. Sustainable development requires a new way of thinking. To begin with, the goal of sustainable development is the all-around development of the disadvantaged population and society, which means the satisfaction of not only basic needs, but also social, spiritual and cultural activities. Moreover, sustainable development should not be confined to that in economy, rather, it is coordination between economy, society, human being and nature. The criteria in judging development should not be limited to the economic indicators. Poverty means not only economically in need, but also the inadequacy in spirit, ideology and way of thinking. As a result, with the idea of sustainable development, we should take full consideration the coordination harmony between population, economy, culture and nature in developing curriculum, programme contents, material development and teaching methodology for functional literacy promotion.

A. Extension of the concept of functional literacy

What is the basic objective for functional literacy in rural ethnic areas? This is an important question that needs further clarification. For many years, we tended to fix this objective on the further improvement of literacy and living skills after basic literacy stage. In rural areas, functional literacy used to be closely related to practical agricultural techniques, which, to some extent, did achieve immediate economic benefits and in turn relieved poverty in a superficial manner. However, this is only a makeshift and short-sighted practice. It should be noticed that the idea of functional literacy has to be in compliance with the social development. The significance of functional literacy in poverty alleviation should not be confined to training of practical skills. In fact, poverty of rural ethnic groups is first and foremost cultural poverty. In disadvantaged areas, which are in need of literacy activities, ideological or spiritual poverty is one of the deciding factors in causing economic poverty. Ideology and culture that center on values and ways of thinking is the sustaining driving force for individual and consequently social development. This has been sufficiently demonstrated by the research in recent years on anti-poverty strategies in China. As the Chinese saying goes, a financially poor man is not likely to be rich in ambitions while a man not rich in ambitions is more likely to be poor. Usually, we tend to consider the strategies of functional literacy from the point of view of economy rather than a comprehensive perspective. The functional literacy in disadvantaged areas is in fact not only a process of increasing income but also a betterment of ideas and values so as to prepare the disadvantaged people in their internal drive to get rid of poverty.

B. Examples reflecting the effect of the experiment

In an experimental class in Nalang Village of Shangyun township, a learner named Bo Yuebao said: "In this experimental class, having listened to the teachers' lectures, I have got some new ideas about production, In the past, I thought in rural areas, if food is enough, then everything is OK. Now I think only food is not enough, we must have money, we should develop sidelines."

Another learner, Mie Ambao, said: "I have a small grocery at home. In the past I only *sold* things, but I

knew little of computing, and often I made mistakes in giving change. After I have attended lectures of this literacy class, I can do computing much more easily now." Along with the elementary education were also taught scientific and technological fundamentals hygienic knowledge, such as properly using chemical fertilizers, scientifically raising and growing watermelon and cucumber home hygiene, and AIDS protection, etc.. Such knowledge made the learners better-informed science and technology and disease protection. Many learners have learnt to keep home hygiene; Tie Laoda, a learner in the Fuben literacy class, has learnt not only to improve home hygiene but also to spray chemicals and prevent spreading of disease.

Dao Yujiao, a learner of the class in Nalang Village, said: I have learnt how to grow and take care of watermelon. This year, owing to correct treatment, my watermelon is growing much better than last year.

Li Za'er, a learner of the literacy Class in Banli Village of Donghui Town said: "I have been trying herbal medicine. After I came to this class, I have learnt a lot. I have learnt through reading practice not only herbal medicine but also western medicine.

In accordance with fact that the ethnic people do not speak Chinese, besides teaching, we wrote a textbook, *A Course Book for Literacy Education: from Lahu, Wa, and Thai to Chinese*, and applied it to learners speaking those ethnic languages.

Bilingual instruction was required of teachers, which was warmly received by the learners. They said that the *Course Book* was easy to learn and understand. Li Liumei, a learner of the class in Banli village, remarked thoughtfully, "In the past, because we knew little Chinese, when watching TV, we could only watch the movements on Screen. And we did not know what was being talked about. After I learnt the *Course Book*, I understood quite a lot of Chinese and I have learnt a lot of skills from TV." Evidence shows that the use of the *Course Book* helps maintain the ethnic cultures and enable ethnic people to learn Chinese at a quicker pace as well. It plays an important role in improving social and economical development in ethnic areas.

In order to attract learners and keep them to in such classes, we made careful studies of the character and psychology of adult ethnic illiterates, - they love singing and dancing - organized lectures in some classes into varieties of extracurricular sports and recreational activities and helped them write and put on plays. Learners of the class in Nanuo village of the town of Zhutang gave performances on holidays to the whole village, which was report of their learning. The villagers warmly received it. Learners of the classes in the town of Donghui took part in the poem recitation contest held on a the town of Muga, against nearly 5,000 competitors, and they got the first prize