



Educational engagement in China: A case from the Northwest[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Reports show Chinese students have lower enrollment, higher dropout rates, and larger gender gaps in secondary schools in poor areas. Research indicates students' perceptions about schooling contribute to their decisions about staying in school. In this study in a poor rural area with high percentages of minority students, the student questionnaire from the GSCF-2 investigated middle school students' views on issues connected with educational engagement by gender and ethnic status. Findings include descriptive statistics on all items, as well as significant differences on gender and group status on some sub-constructs. Implications for targeted professional development and policy efforts are included.

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1. Introduction

The Education for All campaign, the most widely recognized international educational initiative for countries in the world, has sought to promote education for all children and young adults. In 2000, the World Conference on Education for All (2000) reviewed the comprehensive set of goals developed at earlier conferences to promote universal primary and secondary education for young people. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has supported the campaign's mission since that time (Hannum, 2002; Peterson et al., 2001; Postiglione, 1999; Seeborg and Zhao, 2008; Teng and Wang, 2004). China has in fact made impressive strides primary education for all children as indicated in the country's well-developed policy frameworks, educational policy reform initiatives, and instructional programs. Both government and international agency statistics indicate that these efforts have paid off for the primary school population. Country statistics indicate net enrollment rate of primary schools have reached 98.58% (Country Report, 2004; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2000). However, another government report indicates problems for certain groups of students.

In general, more problems seem to arise at the secondary level. China's "Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education

in China" report (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2000) – drafted and produced according to the objectives of the World Conference on Education for All – shows that enrollment ratios are lower, dropout rates are higher, and the gaps between boys and girls are larger at the secondary level, especially for students residing in poor areas.

Those residing in poor areas are often ethnic minorities, who along with females have higher illiteracy and dropout rates than majority children (Postiglione, Jiao, & Gytso, 2006; Zhou, 2009a, UNICEF, 2009; Zhou, 2009b, UNESCO, 2009). While there are literature examining education trends for majority Han students in China, we have much less knowledge about the experiences of particular minorities in China, even though the government of the PRC wishes to address areas of need.

One arm of research that examined numerous sociological factors impacting the lives of rural minority peoples in China is the work done under the Gansu Study of Children and Families. This longitudinal work contributed much knowledge examining the connections between poverty and psycho-social development (e.g., Adams, 2007), health and nutrition (e.g., Yu and Hannum, 2007), parenting and family life (e.g., Liu, 2003), and schooling and career outcomes (e.g., Hannum, 2001; Hannum and Park, 2002). (For more information on the GSCF work as a whole, readers are referred to the project website: <http://china.pop.upenn.edu/Gansu/intro.htm>.) While this research takes place in an area populated by members of various minority ethnic groups, it also includes data from the Han who also reside in the area. We can add to this body of literature by separately examining the case of minority groups that reside in Gansu.

By far, the largest collection of research focusing on ethnic minorities in China has been conducted on the Tibetans. For

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example, research on ethnic minority education in the broader context of social systems has been conducted by Postiglione (2006) and Postiglione and Tan (2007). The concept of dislocation, that is, the issue of the ‘fit’ of Tibetans (in Tibet) as part of the Mandarin (Han) culture is examined in depth by Postiglione et al. (2005, 2006), Postiglione (2009), and Postiglione and Chen (2009). While there is still more work to be done even with the case of Tibet, there is very little literature available about the experiences of other minority people in China.

The current study builds upon the part of the GSCF-2 that examined rural minority students’ ideas about schooling. We investigate issues of such students’ educational engagement in schooling at the middle school level because it is there that statistics generated by the government of the PRC begin to show sharp declines in literacy and in enrollment. Educational policy initiatives from both government offices and international agencies are being designed to try to improve the existing situation, however, data is needed in order to guide changes that will make a difference for these populations. Our work focuses on minority groups with exceptionally low levels of literacy and high rates of dropout, for whom there is not much data yet collected: the Dongxiang, Boa’an, and Salar Muslim minority groups.

The 55 officially recognized national minorities (*shaoshu minzu*) have the highest illiteracy rates and lowest graduation rates at all levels of education in the PRC. There are 10 Muslim nationalities: the Hui, Uighur, Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tadjik, Uzbek, Boa’an, and Tatar. A large concentration of people from the Dongxiang, Salar and Boa’an groups can all be found within one region of PRC, the Northwestern region of the Gansu province, and there is almost no literature about these groups. Of the little research available for the Dongxiang (also referred to as Dongxiong), Salar and Boa’an Muslim groups, we do know that educational enrollment and attainment rates amongst these minorities is lower than that of the national average. For example, we know the Dongxiang have the lowest literacy rate of all minority groups in China, and are consistently positioned at that rank. Eighty-seven percent of the population was estimated to be illiterate in 1982 (Gladney, 2004, 271). 1990 saw the number drop to 82.6% but this was a much less significant drop than was demonstrated across the nation as a whole—from a 32% illiteracy rate to 22% (Gladney, 2004). In 2000, the estimated illiteracy rate amongst the Dongxiang reached 78.1%. Additionally, the Dongxiang over 15 years of age have an average of only slightly over 1 year of formal schooling at all (Zhou, 2000). Moreover, the attendance rate across middle schools in Dongxiang Autonomous County is about 38%, which is far lower than the national average of 90% (EU-China Gansu Basic Education Project, 2004). The Dongxiang female students’ enrollment rate (ages 13–15) is just 34%, unlike female students’ enrollment rates in other geographic areas, which range from 85% to 100% (Wang and Xu, 2005). Currently, there is very little research on these communities, and no research that begins to address reasons for the low educational enrollment and attainment rates of the Northwest minorities, especially of females. The purpose of this one study is simply to begin to address the dearth of information on minorities’ schooling in China in general—especially for female Muslim students, who have some of the lowest recorded education success in the PRC. The ethnic groups included in the present research study (the Dongxiang, Salar, and Boa’an) were chosen because they are some of the most under-studied Muslim ethnic minority populations studied. The Northwest region was therefore chosen as the site for this research because it contains the highest percentage of students from these ethnic minority groups in addition to students from the Han majority, and because the region is typified by sociological conditions existing in other poor, rural areas of the PRC.

The study is based on the assumptions that: (1) education contributes to a higher standard of living and a better quality of life; and (2) that if students are engaged in school, they are more likely to remain in school. We have defined educational engagement for this study as it had previously been structured in the Gansu Survey of Children and Families (GSCFs-2) research. Factors considered important to schooling in Chinese culture (students’ educational aspirations and perceived level of alienation with school, as well as their perceptions of teacher quality, the classroom environment, and the administrative functioning of the school) were the focus of this conceptualization. These are thought to be important to students’ satisfaction with school, which in turn is posited to affect their decisions about attending school. While deeper work remains to be done, this small initial study begins the process of examining the extent to which these factors may be at issue in a large, rural, region of China with the large population of these ethnic minority students.

This study was therefore developed to begin building an understanding of Northwest Chinese students’ perceptions of their schooling as a stepping stone to understanding their potential educational engagement, and in particular to examine gender and ethnic differences related to the factors involved. Three research questions were explored: first, what are Northwest Chinese students’ perceptions of aspects of schooling likely to be related to their engagement in school? Second, do those perceptions differ between female students and male students? Third, do those perceptions differ between female Muslim Chinese students and female Han students? The piece begins by placing this study in the context of comparative educational research by offering constructs that are known to influence student engagement. Next, it describes the instrument – a survey of secondary school students in rural Gansu, the region where the Dongxiang, Salar and Boa’an ethnic minorities reside – distributed in the spring and summer of 2006, and the sample. The findings, a simple but illuminative presentation of descriptive statistics that add this case study of China to the base of literature, are followed by a discussion of implications of our findings.

1.1. The literature: theoretical context

As Phelps (2005) suggests, there are multiple educational facets that influence students’ perceptions of school. Amongst these factors, scholars suggest that *student engagement* in school in general, and with the classroom in particular, is a critically important element of school success because of its logical relationship to optimal human development (Marks, 2000).

Importantly, however, the vast majority of theoretical frameworks and research on the topic of educational engagement are couched within the Western world. This study is an initial examination of some factors thought to be important in educational engagement in the Chinese setting, and an investigation of the importance of those factors to minority children about whom little else is recorded.

Educational engagement is a complex construct that includes academic, affective, and behavioral personal components, as well as socio-environmental factors (Caraway et al., 2003). It is mediated by both macro- and micro-structures in students’ personal, school, and community environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McMahon and Portelli, 2004; Patrick et al., 2007). As Sargent (2005) notes, multiple factors that comprise these constructs must be examined in order to determine educational engagement. The following section defines the factors examined by the instrument used in this study and provides explanation for their measurement.

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