Designing effective learning experiences for diverse and scattered ethnic minority groups across Yunnan Province, China

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Abstract

Five key interrelated areas are being mapped, analyzed, and synthesized to better understand the challenges and issues for quality multicultural educational materials and learning experiences for ethnic minority groups within a large province in southwest China. Rapid urbanization and intensive social exchanges have changed the cultural outlook of ethnic minority groups and society. The related educational issue is how to preserve the cultures and languages of ethnic minorities and their sociocultural identity in the process of government-encouraged social and cultural integration with Han culture, Mandarin, and modernity.

Sociocultural Ethnic Minority Groups in Yunnan Province, PRC

Yunnan Province in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is slightly smaller in size than the U.S. state of California. Its diverse geography and widespread rurality are home to approximately 48.3 million people (2018 estimate). While the majority are of Han ethnicity, 34% (16.4 million) of the population are members of ethnic minority groups. The 25 largest ethnic groups within the province have populations of 5,000 or more, including the Yi, Hani, Bai, Dai, Zhuang, Miao, Hui, and Lahu. A number of these ethnic groups also move freely back and forth between the borders of the PRC and neighboring countries leading to fluctuations in minority populations and quite active cross-border relations. Yunnan is widely known as an area within China where ethnic minorities are concentrated; it ranks first in the country in variety and number of ethnic minorities.

Gao and Wang (2015) believe that the 26 distinct ethnic groups found in Yunnan are the epitome of China’s multi-ethnic groups and are uniquely different in religion, food, clothing, architecture, festival etiquette, literature and art, etc. They serve as representatives of the different characteristics found among the entire 56 recognized ethnic groups throughout the nation. Wu (2020) conducted field investigations on the development of compulsory education in nine ethnically-concentrated provinces, including Yunnan. According to his team’s investigation, the development of compulsory education in ethnic areas still faces difficulties and problems, such as the diversification of education supply functions, special school administration units, high school operating costs, and a poor supply of teachers. Wu (2020) noted that within education in border ethnic areas such as Yunnan, it is considered vitally necessary to continuously enhance ethnic students' recognition of the outstanding culture of the Chinese (overwhelmingly Han-dominant) nation. The purpose of this educational effort is to prevent ethnic separatists located...
on China’s border areas from propagating false statements and undermining national unity. This concern has led to the implementation of additional social functions to compulsory education. These additional social functions provided by the compulsory education program in ethnic areas brings a substantial increase in tasks for frontline teachers. The required diversified educational services pose significant challenges to teachers' knowledge levels, language abilities, and working styles. Teachers' teaching energy is diffused by all these requirements and teaching quality inevitably decreases as such policies are implemented (Wu, 2020). Because ethnic areas are scattered in mountainous areas, pastoral areas, and forested areas which are sparsely populated, the forms of compulsory education are also unique, with boarding schools and small-scale schools (teaching sites) most common. These small-scale schools in the Chinese context refers to schools with less than 100 students (Lei & Zhang, 2011; Yang & Zhang, 2014).

We are mapping a variety of information sources across the following five areas to increase our own understandings of the complex interactive issues in play regarding education of ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province:

1) Chinese national government policies and the formal curriculum of schools
2) Instructional designs that promote learning by ethnic minorities in China
3) Rurality and the tradeoffs facing rural development in Yunnan
4) Urbanization and globalization as both threats and opportunities for China’s ethnic minorities
5) Analogous situations and approaches that have been or could be fruitful when confronting these types of challenges

National Government Policies and the Formal Curriculum of Schools

In 1951, the “Report of the Ministry of Education on the First National Education Conference on Ethnic Minorities” mentioned that for ethnic groups, school subjects in primary and middle schools must be taught in their own languages. The meeting unanimously agreed that schools of all ethnic groups at all levels may provide Chinese (i.e., Mandarin) lessons according to the needs and voluntary wishes of the minorities. Between 1957 and 1965 the government largely ignored ethnic differences and the role of ethnic languages declined. The Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, 1996-1976, further damaged bilingual education. The teaching of ethnic languages was abolished, and ethnic primary and secondary schools in ethnic autonomous areas were mostly closed or converted to ordinary schools (Huang et al., 2015).

Between 1992-2001 the PRC issued a series of policies to promote the (re)development of minority education. The National Civil Affairs Commission and the State Education Commission of China in 1992 stipulated that "in areas where ethnic languages are used for teaching, bilingual teaching shall be carried out in accordance with local conditions." The policy encouraged the compilation and publication of ethnic textbooks while also promoting “universal Mandarin” as the required lingua franca. By 2010, bilingual education became compulsory for pre-school age minority children, and bilingual teaching objectives were further expanded.

Xu and Cai (2018) analyzed the current development status and problems of curriculum resources in minority areas in China from the perspective of multicultural education. First of all,
the development of multicultural curriculum resources in many ethnic areas is only a spontaneous act initiated by the supervisor, without systematic and standardized guidance from the Ministry of Education or regional educational officials. Secondly, in many ethnic regions, the multicultural curriculum takes Han culture as its core value and standpoint and then merely introduces the cultural content of ethnic minorities as a supplemental attachment. This kind of multicultural curriculum has not taken significant hold in the multicultural environment of ethnic minority areas not least because it does not adequately account for students’ daily experiences. In addition, the implementation of multicultural courses in many regions follows common utilitarian purposes. Multicultural courses in most ethnic regions are integrated with disciplines such as music, sports, and fine arts. These subjects are not included as examination subjects. Due to the influence of exam-oriented education, these courses are often squeezed by exam subjects and receive little distributed time in the curriculum. Some education authorities require schools to offer multicultural courses; others leave it to local discretion. Some schools offer courses only to satisfy upcoming inspections and investigations by superiors.

Finally, the development of ethnic minority curriculum resources and the implementation of multicultural courses requires evaluation as a driving force. The teaching evaluation system needs to be developed in a diversified way that accounts for the existence of ethnic minority curriculum content. But in the actual operational process, strongly affected by test-oriented education, the scores achieved are still the dominant factor used to measure the quality of a school's teaching. This has largely precluded the establishment and implementation of a diversified teaching evaluation system that is sensitive to multicultural issues. Both teachers and students are constrained by the scores. Teacher initiative and student interest in the implementation of minority curriculum issues is diminished and incommensurate with the needs to preserve ethnic minority awareness and cultural and linguistic understanding.

Instructional Designs that Promote Learning by Ethnic Minorities

Li and Ma (2010) proposed that only by implementing a multicultural education concept into the curriculum content can education be culturally inclusive and adaptable to diverse needs across the nation. Students from ethnic minorities come from different ethnic groups and possess deep and diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, appropriate curriculum content should have its own characteristics consonant with these backgrounds. However, the current curriculum content still rarely covers minority cultures. The content of courses continues to use mainstream culture as the standard which not only leads to a superficial understanding of minority cultures, but also causes minority students a lot of discomfort in the classroom as many topics discussed are ill-matched to local cultural mores, customs, and practices.

There are many practical difficulties in multicultural curriculum design. For example, should a multicultural curriculum include all cultures? It seems reasonable on the surface, but in reality it doesn't work because the capacity of the curriculum is limited and the learning burden of both students and teachers is limited. Moreover, some cultural customs or mores may only be suitable for students within that ethnic group; there is no need to enculturate students from different cultural groups to these unique features. Yet Feinberg (1995) correctly points out that students who have not received their own cultural education may feel alienated and rootless. At the same time, students who lack mainstream cultural education will lose many economic, political, and
social advantages and opportunities. Therefore, not only is it difficult for curriculum designers to make cultural choices, but it is also a challenge for affected ethnic minorities. Monistic culturalism is still the dominant guiding ideology within the current Chinese national curriculum, so how will the curriculum within Chinese schools in areas of high minority concentrations solve this dilemma?

In the context of maintaining the diversity of world cultures, the inheritance and development of ethnic minority traditional cultures has become more and more prominent. In August 2015, the State Council of China issued the “Decision on Accelerating the Development of Ethnic Education,” which clearly states that it is necessary to ensure the continuance and promote the excellent traditional culture of ethnic minorities. Among topics mentioned is the construction of ethnic culture school-based courses as an important measure to promote the inheritance of ethnic culture and advance the progress of ethnic education. During this period, the guarantee of relevant national policies and regulations also provided motivation for the study of curriculum reform in ethnic areas.

Zhu and Li (2020) used “Citespace” software to conduct a content quantitative analysis of relevant documents in the field of school-based construction of Chinese ethnic culture from 2003 to 2018. Their research shows that the rapid development of ethnic culture school-based curriculum research took place between 2012 and 2018. Zhu and Li demonstrate that there are some common problems in the development of an ethnic culture school-based curriculum: First, the goals of curriculum development were too general to play a true guiding and regulatory role. Second, there is a lack of external support. Meng and Wu (2016) concurred, pointing out that there is a lack of financial support and policy guarantee in the development of an ethnic culture school-based curriculum. Finally, the regulatory system is imperfect. Most ethnic schools have not established a special school-based curriculum development committee, nor have they introduced a supporting inspection (i.e., evaluation) system (Zhu & Li, 2020).

Jin (2020) proposed that minority cultures shape individuals with different personalities and abilities than those typically found in the dominant Chinese culture. In terms of the target culture of the curriculum, the pre-school curriculum in ethnic regions should cultivate multicultural awareness and promote the comprehensive and harmonious development of children; in the content of the curriculum content and culture, it should be multi-valued and culturally appropriate. In terms of curriculum evaluation culture, educators should pay attention to diversity and differentiation to meet the inherent needs of children in ethnic regions.

Zhu and Cao (2012) investigated the bilingual teaching situation in ethnic minority areas in Yunnan Province and pointed out a series of problems in the composition and support of teaching staff. For example, the distribution of bilingual teachers is uneven, the overall structure is unreasonable, and the teaching staff is unstable. In addition, bilingual teachers have heavy teaching tasks, the overall quality is not high, and the enthusiasm for bilingual teaching among supervisors is low. Although the training of bilingual teachers is institutionalized and routine, there are too few trainings on practical teaching strategies. The bilingual teaching teacher training policy for ethnic groups with a small population is very weak as compared to bilingual teaching teacher training in, for example, Mandarin and English.
Teachers in ethnic areas tend to focus on their own culture and teach from the perspective of that culture – which is most cases is Han (Wang, 2020). They lack understanding of and sensitivity towards the cultural background of ethnic minority students. Wang believes that the reason is that China's teacher education and teacher training usually form teacher professional skills and those teacher training models reflect the mainstream Han culture. Such a model ignores the acquisition of local and ethnic cultural knowledge, as well as promoting a lack of understanding of the differences in students' cultural backgrounds across the nation and within particular regions. Therefore, in the current teacher training and especially training in ethnic areas, it is necessary to enhance teachers' own cross-cultural sensitivity and strengthen the training of teachers' cross-cultural knowledge and skills.

Rurality and the Tradeoffs Facing Rural Development in Yunnan

Yang (2012) used ethnographic field work to investigate the case of a Lahu village school and summarized the difficulties in the development of local education. Among them, the early marriage and childbearing of the Lahu people has a negative impact on formal school education. In addition, the economic drive brought about by the rise of the tea trade in the villages has led to high, yet largely hidden school dropout rates. Existing textbooks were also deemed unsuitable for the realities of mountain villages with their alien and difficult content.

Lin and Zhang (2002) conducted a field survey of 25 ethnic minority villages in Yunnan and found that the economic development of Yunnan's ethnic minority villages was uneven, at best. In 2009, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of China launched the “Pilot Work for the Protection and Development of Ethnic Minority Characteristic Villages.” The main objective of the commission was the creation of a pilot program in progressive activities work. On the basis of summarizing the protection and development experience of the pilot project, the guiding principles and measures were further developed and improved. In 2012, the “Outline for the Development of Ethnic Minority Villages 2011-2015” was officially promulgated and implemented throughout China, which became the basis for the ongoing development of ethnic villages in China.

Urbanization and Globalization as both Threats and Opportunities for China's Ethnic Minorities

Historically, Yunnan was an important launch pad and hub for the opening of Southwest China to the outside world. However, due to its relatively backward economic development, limited access, and low use of resources in ethnic regions compared with the more accessible domestic coastal cities, Yunnan's level of openness to the outside world is lower and foreign investment is less than in all but three other (large ethnic minority) Chinese provinces (Li et al., 2016). After implementation of the national government’s “Belt and Road” strategy, Yunnan and its many ethnic minorities will have closer communication and greater openness with both the PRC as a whole, as well as with its many Southeast Asian neighbors. Li et al. (2016) are worried that there will be problems as cross-border ethnic groups attempt to manage both the centripetal and dispersive forces in terms of "cultural identity" and "national identity." It could cause civil unrest as minorities become restive regarding internal development versus what they see among their cultural counterparts in adjacent countries. This may resurrect prior government programs that
resulted in diminished multicultural educational efforts in Yunnan. Some areas in northern China with large minority populations already seem to be experiencing such a response.

Globalization has intensified the heterogeneous exchanges between cultures. In this cultural development, Yunnan's cross-border ethnic groups are faced with significant new challenges. The traditionality and relative independence of the original cultural system of cross-border ethnic regions has been broken (Zhou and Chen, 2020). They now exist synchronically with foreign values and local values. For cross-border students, it is particularly important to promote multicultural understanding and value consensus.

**Analogous Situations and Approaches that have been or could be Fruitful when Confronting these Types of Challenges**

Some scholars have proposed that we can innovate multicultural education through informatization and networking while providing a more precise and humane educational support structure (Xiong and Yang, 2019; Wang, 2020). They believe that the combination of artificial intelligence and education can provide promising new ideas for multicultural education and education equity. Using artificial intelligence technology allows for the real-time collection of classroom teaching data, allows educators to monitor students’ learning process at any time, analyzes the interaction between teachers and students in real-time, improves teaching efficiency, and promotes the evaluation and personalization of teaching performance and goals (Xiong and Yang, 2019). In addition, technologies such as knowledge graphs, big data platforms, and pattern recognition can also be used to analyze and accommodate the social and cultural background of students outside the curriculum (Wang, 2020). Yang and Yang (2014) believe that the research on the informatization of minority education focuses mainly on the construction of information network infrastructure, information technology education, education informatization management and evaluation, and development status and countermeasures.

Although there has been some progress in the construction of ethnic education informatization, there are also some problems. For example, the construction of education informatization in ethnic areas is relatively lagging, especially in the construction of information infrastructure and the loss and shortage of informatization talents and not surprisingly, areas of high rurality and low labor opportunities are unattractive to knowledge workers (Zhao and Liu, 2020).

**Designing Effective Learning Experiences for Diverse and Scattered Ethnic Minority Groups**

The design of curriculum structure, the compilation of teaching materials, the development of cognitive tools, the creativity of related education networks, and the development of various learning and teaching resources should all be devoted to promoting the organic connection among school, family, and society. The design concept is to actively create an open, immersive, and active interactive learning process to help students overcome knowledge inertia, enhance knowledge flexibility, and promote knowledge transfer.

Bilingual education is an effective way to realize multi-ethnic language protection and cultural diversity inheritance (Wei & Tian, 2019). The challenge is how to better provide the educated with a language environment and choice of bilingual learning so that they can master the tools,
knowledge, and skills necessary for a globalized society, instead of isolating and inflexibly inheriting a certain language that is not one’s native tongue. This requires us to focus not only on the school and the family, but to go beyond the school and the family to achieve lasting and measurable change.

As the main place for the acquisition and use of ethnic languages, the protection of ethnic minority villages is essential to help strengthen language vitality. This is also the clearest path to maintaining and improving the ecological environment of minority languages. Qian (2005) called the Wa villages in Yunnan the "cultural fingerprints" and "spiritual homes" that maintain the Wa language context (pp. 159 - 171). Protecting the Wa villages will help strengthen the vitality of the Wa language and activate the ethnic language ecology (Zhao, 2013; Fan, 2005).

In order to realize and promote the healthy development of ethnic culture school-based courses in ethnic areas, the most urgent task is to further coordinate the relationship between school education functions and the development and setting of ethnic culture school-based courses. It is necessary not only to reform and innovate ethnic education regulations and systems at the national (macro) level, but also to actively develop multicultural courses through the ethnic schools themselves. Yao (2019) combed and analyzed the literature regarding the protection and development of ethnic minority villages in the past ten years. He found that there were not too many protected villages. Whether a village can be developed is affected by the characteristics of the village and the support of the local government.

At present, in specific practice, we can see that the construction of ethnic culture school-based courses is mainly based on the education management department, supplemented by the school, resulting in the decision-making and planning related to the curriculum being determined by the management department (Zhu & Li, 2020; Wang, 2020). To a certain extent, this situation has weakened the school's leading role in the construction of such courses and the main status of students. There are some contradictions between the focus of school education and the development of ethnic culture school-based curriculum which need to be addressed if there is to be any significant progress.

Wang (2020) believes that the key to the development of teacher education in ethnic areas is the preparation of teachers' cross-cultural knowledge. Facing students from different nationalities and different cultural backgrounds, teachers need to have a certain amount of cross-cultural knowledge in order to correctly guide students of various ethnic minorities with their diverse cultures.

Conclusion

The preservation of ethnic minority cultures and their distinctive languages can only be achieved by far-ranging partnerships both within and outside of the People’s Republic of China. Success over time will undoubtedly involve learning from and learning with partners working on similar issues throughout the world, but especially among nations whose situations are similar in certain respects to those of China in regards to distribution of minority groups, geographic barriers, rurality and mountain cultures, and economic development within minority-intensive areas. While there are a reasonable number of ethnic Han scholars actively investigating these issues.
within China there remains a need for the development of additional scholarly interest and research and development investments addressing the many issues raised by language-minority cultures within larger, more pervasive language-majority contexts. It is never a question of lose-win but rather a question of balancing many factors in sufficient manner to produce future generations that appreciate the worth of fully bilingual speakers of multiple ancient languages of China with each of those languages successfully evolving its own grammar and vocabularies in a manner that increases the likelihood of language sustenance and continuance far into the future.

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