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An Investigation Into the Academic Performance of the Students Within the Compulsory Education Phase in Changdu, Tibet

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Abstract

Through an investigation into the academic performance of the students within the compulsory education phase in Changdu, Tibet, it is found that their overall academic performance is poor, which is primarily attributable to three causes, namely the teaching material too distant from their life experience, the teaching language and the school management mode. To eliminate the aforementioned barriers, several strategies are worth adopting, namely the exploitation of the local teaching resource, the implementation of a humanistic management mode and the cultivation of teachers of the Tibetan ethnic origin.

Key words: Changdu; Tibet; Compulsory education; Academic performance

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INTRODUCTION

The pillar economic sectors of Tibet are farming and animal husbandry; the farming and animal husbandry areas within Tibet are populated by approximately 77.3% of its total population. The development of the farming and animal husbandry areas is of paramount importance to Tibet as a whole, consequently being prioritized or even focalized on the development agenda of Tibet. Tibet is economically backward and the per-capita income is low, as a result of which the central government has enacted the Three-Free Policy (namely the food, accommodation and tuition are all free of charge) since 1985 which is aimed at overcoming the difficulty encountered by the children of the peasants in receiving education. Additionally, the students have been granted yearly aid-stipends and the amount has been raised annually. Up to December 2012, in Changdu were there 15 middle schools with 32,776 students, 198 elementary schools with 66,679 students and 306 teaching centers; the elementary school entrance rate among the children of the appropriate age reached 98.23% and the middle school entrance rate 90.58% (Yan, 2012). Great achievements have been made in the educational quality within the compulsory education phase in Changdu, Tibet, and the educational focus has shifted from the educational popularization onto the educational quality. How on earth is the educational quality within the compulsory education phase in Changdu, Tibet? What are the determinants? How can obstacles be removed? Given that the academic performance is a crucial index indicative of the students' academic achievement, in this research the teaching result, namely the academic performance, is selected as a criterion to evaluate the educational quality, through which the current educational quality within the compulsory education phase in Changdu, Tibet can be enquired into and the causes behind analyzed, and then strategies targeted at these problems can be proposed as a point of reference for people concerned.

1. BASIC INFORMATION OF THE SURVEY

1.1 Time and Subject of This Survey

This survey was conducted from April 20th, 2013 to May 15th, 2013, and its main subjects are part of the students within the compulsory education phase from 8 counties, namely Luolong, Chaya, Zuogong, Mangkang, Dingqing, Leiwuqi, Gongjiang, Jiangda, as well as their teachers.

1.2 Methodology

The major methodology employed by this survey includes the questionnaire, the interview and the participant observation. The student questionnaire was devised on the basis of a scrutiny of relevant documents and considerations of the survey's specific requirements. After a preliminary familiarity with the general academic performance of the students within the farming and animal husbandry in Changdu, Tibet, classes from Grade 6 through up to Grade 9 were selected at random, and then students were randomly selected from each class selected previously. After that, 550 questionnaires were issued to students, 550 collected, thus the collection rate 100%; among them were 505 valid, thus the validity rate 91.8%. 532 questionnaires were issued to teachers (randomly selected) among the sample schools, 532 collected, thus the rate of collection 100%; among them 530 were valid, thus the validity rate 99.62%.

Besides, an outline concerning the interview with the

students and teachers within the compulsory education phase in the farming and animal husbandry areas was designed. The interview is characterized by a combination of structured and semi-structured nature, that is to say, it is a semi-open interview revolving around the pre-designed outline.

1.3 An Inquiry Into the Academic Performance of the Students Within the Compulsory Education Phase

1.3.1 An Analysis of the Elementary School Students' Academic Performances on Respective Disciplines in Changdu

As indicated in Table 1, the average score of examinees of the middle school entrance examination is over the passing line in none of the four designated tests, the general level being relatively low. Students whose total score of the four disciplines was below 100 are 3,871 in number, accounting for 67.24% of all the examinees; students whose total score ranged between 100 and 200 were 1,342 in number, accounting for 23.31% of all the examinees. Calculated together, students whose total score is below 200 were 5213 in number, accounting for 90.55% of all the examinees. Such a high rate of low score exposes a fact that defies any further neglect, namely the educational quality within the compulsory education phase in Changdu was generally low and only a rare number of students met the fundamental requirements in all the disciplines.

Table 1
The Test Scores of the Respective Disciplines in the Middle School Entrance Examination 2012

	Chinese philology	Comprehensive test	Tibetan philology	Mathematics
Sample capacity (missing values)	5,757 (0)	5,757 (0)	5,676 (81)	5,757 (0)
Average score	23.8	27.07	22.71	15.1
Passing rate	12.94	3.90	5.83	4.10

Note. Source: the scores of the middle school entrance examination of part of the students in Changdu; The Missing Values here designate that the score of the corresponding test received by the examinee is zero.

1.3.2 An Analysis of the Scores of Respective Tests of the Middle School Students in Changdu

In terms of the passing rate, the passing rates in Politics, Chinese and Tibetan Philology are all above 20%, but below 30%, and the lowest passing rate is in English with 3.84% (as indicated in Table 2). Judging from the bands

of the total scores, their total scores vary rather widely and the overall level is low (as indicated in Table 3). It is, therefore, revealed that only a limited number of students satisfied the basic requirements and that the educational quality within the middle school phase is very low.

Table 2
The Scores in the Respective Disciplines in the Middle School Entrance Examination 2012

	Chemistry	English	Politics	Chinese philology	Mathematics	Physics	Tibetan philology
Sample capacity	4,117	4,117	4,117	4,117	4,117	4,117	4,117
Average score	22.13	20	35.52	31.27	21.73	26.34	32.6
Passing rate	7.12%	3.84%	25.9%	25.1%	6.85%	10.29%	22.9%

Note. Source: The scores of the middle school entrance examination of part of the students in Changdu

Figure 3
Percentage of Scores in Different Score Bands for the Middle School Entrance Examination 2012

Examinee number	Below 300	300-350	350-400	400-450	450-500	500-550
4,117	70.34%	7.72%	5.25%	4.81%	3.55%	3.81%

2. AN ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF STUDENTS' LOW ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

2.1 The Teaching Material Is Too Distant From Students' Life Experience, Thus Diminishing Their Desire for Knowledge

The content of the textbooks includes the interpretation, elucidation, the directional processing of the textual content by the compilers, and the corresponding exercises and further reading material or anything of relevant importance; it is a concentrated manifestation of the school's educational content and the critical medium of teaching and studying. The positive emotional experience and an inclination towards studying will be produced in students only when the content of the textbooks meets their demands and is closely related to their culture. In order to get well informed of students' adaptation to the textbook content, such questions were deliberately added into the questionnaire as "Do you find any familiar story, figure or animal in textbooks?" and "What will be the degree of your affinity with textbook if there are familiar stories, figures or animals?". According to the survey, only 44.9% of the students can feel an affinity between the textbook and the stories, figures or animals they are familiar with; 55.1% of them feel the textbook content is relatively strange and unfamiliar. When the textbook contains what the students are highly acquainted with, 25.5% and 51.7% of the students marked "Like Very Much" and "Like" respectively, adding up to 77.2%.

In one of the interviews, a teacher pointed out that there are excessive Tang poetry, Song iambic verses and modern poetry, and the description of many of them is drastically different from the characteristics typical to their animal husbandry areas, thus compounding the difficulty of their understanding. For example, in Changdu what surrounds them is the boundless prairie and herds of buffalos and sheep; it is almost impossible for the students to picture what is depicted by the famous essayist Zhu Ziqing in his essay entitled *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*. Almost all the students here come from animal husbandry areas, and seldom are the traffic lights seen at the crossroads even in the counties, and hence it is difficult for them to grasp what it means "to stop when red and to walk when green".

For the ethnic minority areas, the modern school education is embedded education. Presently, both the ethnic minority areas and the cities are adopting the same

textbooks which prevalently abound with the knowledge system and value orientation against the context of cities. The local knowledge and value orientation peculiar to the ethnic minority areas are denigrated and excluded, and thus get completely muted in the dominant national educational discourse.

2.2 The Difficulty Caused by the Teaching Language Blocks Students' Understanding and Then Influences Their Efficiency

Some American scholars explored the cultural differences by means of the sociolect differences in the school and came to the conclusion that the general poor academic performance of students of ethnic majorities are largely attributable to the inconsistency between the teaching language in the school and the language employed in the family as well as the discrepancy in the language communication between students and teachers (Teng, 2004). According to our survey, the students' fathers who cannot speak Chinese account for 46.7%, and the mothers of 63.9% (as indicated in Table 4). Parents who can speak Chinese are usually those living in the vicinity of cities or those who work outside the farming and animal husbandry areas, but the language they speak in their family is Tibetan. Children born and raised in the Tibetan surroundings are only capable of Tibetan, and consequently the major factor that retards their study after attending the school is the language.

Table 4
The Spoken Chinese Level of Parents

		Father's spoken Chinese level		Mother's spoken Chinese level	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Effective	Very fluent	12	2.4	6	1.2
	Fluent	41	8.1	18	3.6
	Intermediate	200	39.6	144	28.5
	Incapable	195	38.6	238	47.1
	Completely incapable	41	8.13	85	16.8
	Total	489	96.8	491	97.2
Missing	System	16	3.2	14	2.8
Total		505	100.0	505	100.0

The content taught in class by teachers cannot be internalized and transformed into their own knowledge unless the students can understand what it is, and thus

language is the precondition to ensure an effective interaction between teaching and learning. It is discovered in the survey that only 52.6% students can completely understand the Chinese language and the teaching language adopted by teachers; half of the students can partially understand or cannot comprehend the teaching language (as indicated in Table 5). The importance of bilingual teaching comes to the fore in this context. Language learning requires a favorable environment and the bilingual teaching can aid students in manipulating the teaching content more effectively. According to the survey, 73% teachers teach bilingually, namely in both Chinese and Tibetan language, and only 27% teach exclusively in Chinese language. Despite the fact that more than 70% of the teachers teach bilingually in the practical teaching, the results produced vary greatly, and nearly one third of the teachers cannot meet this bilingual teaching requirement. Owing to the language barrier, the teaching effect is greatly marred.

Table 5
Students' Listening Comprehension Level

		Frequency	Percentage
Effective	Complete understanding	45	9.0
	Understanding	216	43.6
	Partial understanding	207	41.8
	Incapable of understanding	20	4.0
	Completely incapable of understanding	7	1.4
	Total	495	98.0
Missing	System	10	2.0
Total		505	100.0

The author of this paper observed in a geography class in one middle school situated in County A that 80% students were dozing, some eating sunflower seeds while some whispering and joking with each other. Only several students sitting in the front rows were listening with attention, but after class we were told that they could not understand much of the content and it was difficult to catch the teacher. 90% of these students come from farming and animal husbandry areas and they usually communicate with each other in Tibetan; there is no speaking Chinese environment, and they remain to be incapable of fluent Chinese even after their graduation from the middle school. They, therefore, have much trouble in understanding the teaching content in Chinese language.

2.3 The Negative Effect of the School Management Mode

Because the farming and animal husbandry areas are populated in a dispersed manner with a low population density, the central government has invested large amounts of money in establishing plentiful boarding schools in these areas in Tibet in the hope of providing

educational access to every child of the appropriate age. As a result, almost all the schools in the farming and animal husbandry areas in Tibet are boarding schools whose management mode exemplifies features typical to the boarding school. Notwithstanding enormous advantages of the boarding school, its negative effect cannot be neglected.

On the one hand, this type of management mode stifles students' enthusiasm for studying. Boarding school students usually range between 6 and 14 in age; naturally, they tend to rely heavily on their parents and relatives and cannot live an independent life. Teachers, in consequence, take on the role of parents to look after them in their daily life; nevertheless, the students, especially those in the lower grades, still miss their parents. When asked in interviews "What bothers you most in school?", many students share the same answer shockingly unanimously, namely they miss home and their parents. When mentioning their parents in interviews, students were frequently seen to have tears rolling in eyes. Owing to the long distance between their home and the school—to give one example, it takes students who live furthest away from the school two days' horse-riding—they do not go back home except in special circumstances; schools implement the no-holiday policy with the presidents, teachers and students enjoying no weekends and a closed-off management. Approximately 70% students cannot get adapted to this type of management, ultimately spoiling their studying enthusiasm and exercising a negative effect on their study.

On the other hand, this type of management suppresses the teachers' teaching investment. It is found in the interviews that though many of the teachers originally chose this job mainly in order to have a stable income, they also harbored some zeal for the job itself and came to this wonderful and sacred land from afar as teachers wishing to aid the educational development in the poor and remote areas. Since the very first step they set onto the podium here, they almost treated this job as a conscience project, hoping to make their own contributions to and providing what they could for the students here. However, the inhuman management and poor living conditions exhaust their working enthusiasm and positivity, rendering them incapable of working cheerfully.

One teacher (male, of Tibetan origin, from Shannan) who has devoted himself to the elementary education for more than 30 years usually has a heavy load of teaching work, in consequence of which he can seldom go back to visit his parents. He sobbed when relating that his asking for leave was rejected the moment his father passed away just because of the heavy teaching work, but he also admitted that he could understand the school's dilemma. Nobody has extra time to take your place since everyone's teaching task is as formidable; besides, apart from the teaching work, every teacher must take care of these

students in their daily life. Eventually, he had no choice but to spend one weekend chanting the Buddhist scriptures in the temple in the hope of reincarnating his father as compensation for his being unfilial as a son. “How can these emotions not influence the teaching? Harboring a bad mood, one can deal with nothing with attention”, he said in the interview.

3. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENTS’ POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

3.1 Exploitation of the Local Teaching Resource

The Tibetan people have created a magnificent and sparkling ethnic culture, and boasted rich heritages in literature, music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, Tibetan medicine, etc., all of which can be developed as the source of course material. Schools should increase the teaching content related to their own ethnic culture, which is also of some help in their job seeking. Additionally, the teaching mode ought to be adopted if possible that Tibetan is the main teaching language while Chinese language the auxiliary.

3.2 Implementation of a Humanistic Management Mode

The school management mode in the farming and animal husbandry areas, both the boarding school management targeted at the students and that targeted at the teachers, is somewhat “tough”, lacking in some humanness. Neither the students nor the teachers can feel at home when in the school, and have no sense of belonging. Measures should be taken to initiate their positivity and enthusiasm; the welfare treatment and the living conditions of the teachers should be raised who volunteer to teach in the harsh areas because teachers are the core of education and only when teachers are willingly rooted in their positions will the students study attentively without any distraction. It is found in interviews that the income of the teachers is generally low. Firstly, the average salary of an elementary or middle school teacher is around 3,000 yuan per month, quite similar to that of a teacher on the same level in the Chinese mainland; because many of the commodities must be imported from the mainland, the prices are relatively high. With the basic living cost subtracted from their income, there remains almost no spare money. Secondly, teachers’ living conditions are extremely poor, and it is quite common for several teachers to share one dormitory. Lastly, the working cycle is long. Except for the winter vacation of one month or two every year, teachers must work six days per week; furthermore, it is hard to ask for leave due to a lack of teachers in the elementary and middle schools. Teachers play a pivotal role in improving the educational quality,

and therefore authorization positions should be added in a justifiable manner for teachers in the ethnic minority areas in order to ease their teaching burden. In addition, special subsidies should be provided for teachers in the villages in the remote poor areas so as to improve their treatment and stimulate their positivity, guaranteeing the improvement the educational quality.

The boarding school mode should be reformed to satisfy their demand of “attending the school in the vicinity”. Consequently, the adjustment of the geographic distribution of schools is a problem worth painstaking deliberation. Governmental departments concerned should carry out a poll among people from different social backgrounds, especially among student parents, and combine it with other considerations to form an adjustment scheme of the schools’ geographic distribution. On the one hand, the schools or teaching centers should maintain a certain number of students in order to consolidate the scale effect. On the other hand, students cannot be kept too far away from their families. More specifically speaking, for students of lower grades in the elementary school, the distance between the schools or teaching centers and their families should be shorter while for students of higher grades the distance is allowed to be a little longer. For middle school students, considering their relative maturity and independence, they are encouraged to board at school.

3.3 Cultivation of Teachers of the Tibetan Ethnic Origin

One decade ago, graduates from the normal schools (secondary normal schools) in the farming and animal husbandry areas in Changdu were the pillar of the educational cause. Equipped with the formal normal education, versatility and some teaching skills, they played a role of significance in the basic education in these areas and promoted in certain measure the educational development in Changdu. However, in the recent years, of the graduates allocated to the elementary and middle schools in Changdu most are from Tibet University, Hunan Vocational Technical Institute, Tibet University of Nationalities, etc. with high academic degrees; they lack professional teaching training, thus short of teaching skills and methodologies and incapable of understanding students psyche. In this context, normal schools should be rebuilt in the farming and animal husbandry areas in Changdu in order to cultivate qualified bilingual teachers who are willing to stay at the elementary and middle schools in Changdu, which is of paramount importance and urgency.

Many non-local teachers of Tibetan ethnic origin and Han Chinese teachers shared the same view in interviews that local normal schools should be reestablished to cultivate local teachers. On the one hand, many teachers born and raised in the Chinese mainland cannot adjust to the customs and climate in Changdu; therefore, they resign after a short attempt of adjustment, breaking the

normal teaching order and plan. On the other hand, many teachers of non-Tibetan origin prefer to work in their own hometowns, and only few of them would like to work outside for a long term. Consequently, local teachers have natural advantages. Firstly, they have a deep affinity with their hometown and are willing to work here with more commitment. Secondly, they are very familiar with the local language, customs and are well accustomed to the local life and climate, so they have no difficulty in teaching and living here. Employment of local teachers can avoid the frequent mobility of teachers. Considering these factors, it is necessary to rebuild local normal schools to cultivate local teachers. Not only can it provide more teachers for the local education, but also stabilize the teaching team and reduce the mobility. For those teachers holding the authorization positions, it is important for them to receive further education and training in order to get updated and guarantee the teaching quality.

SUGGESTION

Presently, great achievements have been made in the compulsory education in Changdu, Tibet, but the academic performance of the students within the compulsory education phase is generally poor. Based on the questionnaires, interviews and participant observation,

it is found that the low academic performance is mainly attributed to the teaching material, teaching language and school management mode. Thus, schools should increase the teaching content related to the Tibetan culture, adopt the bilingual teaching mode with Tibetan being the main language and Chinese language the auxiliary language, and reform the boarding school mode in order to satisfy the students' demand of "attending the school in the vicinity". Besides, measures should be taken to provide teachers with more welfare and improve their living conditions so as to initiate their positivity. Finally, local normal schools in Changdu must be rebuilt in order to cultivate qualified bilingual teachers who are willing to stay here for the elementary and middle school education.

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