The Process of Localization of Participatory Approach in Pedagogy and Its Introspection: Based on the Experiences in the China-UK Gansu Basic Education Project

Gai-xia FAN\textsuperscript{1,a,*} and Hui-jun MAO\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1,2}Center for Studies of Education Development of Ethnic Minorities in Northwest China of Northwest Normal University, Gansu, China

\textsuperscript{a}gaixiafan@163.com

*Corresponding author

Keywords: China-UK GBEP (Gansu Basic Education Project), Participatory Approach in Pedagogy, Reform of Basic Education, Development of the Schools.

Abstract. As the core of China-UK Basic Education Project in Gansu Province, participatory teaching includes staffs’ participation of development planning, school management and class cooperative learning of students and inquiry learning. Taking two primary schools in Shishan County, Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture as an example, this paper introduces the concept of participatory teaching and the effect of its implementation by the introduction of interview, observation and analysis. It turns out that participatory teaching is still hampered because of the lacking of school supervision and evaluation system as well as the internalization of the participatory teaching approach. Which means that the best strategy to promote participatory teaching is to exert government functions, establish supervision and evaluation system and shift the role of teachers, which also presents the localization of the concept of participatory teaching approach.

Introduction

“China-UK GBEP (Gansu Basic Education Project) was an educational reform to the basic education in Gansu, because it started in four of the autonomous counties in Linxia Hui autonomous prefecture in December of year 1999 and brought to a successful end in April of the year 2006” [1]. As one of the cores of the GBEP, participatory approach played a vital role in expediting the basic education in the target area. Using survey and interview as the main methodology, the thesis focuses on the process of the conduct of the GBEP and the participatory approach, its successful outcome and its effect to different groups of people. With the acquaintance of the import, the implementation and impact of the concept of participatory approach, the problems surfaced, the reasons for the analysis and solution, which may be beneficial to the future development are proposed. With the retrospect and analysis of the sustainability and the problems that come along with the GBEP, the eight years after the project ended has been proven to be incredible valuable for the educational reform of the western impoverished areas.

I. The Background of the China-UK GBEP

Gansu province is one of China’s most impoverished provinces. It has two ethnic minority autonomous prefectures, Linxia Hui autonomous prefecture is one of them. Dongxiang, Hezheng, Jishishan and Kangle, the four counties of Linxia, have altogether 900 thousand populations, which are also the most impoverished counties of Linxia and the agglomeration of the ethnic minorities groups. The four counties in the face of harsh natural environment of natural setbacks, they suffer from the backward economy, and the problems with the basic education, like low enrollment rates and high dropout rates, low quality of education and poor educational management and so on.

China-UK GBEP is a cooperated project between the Chinese and British governments. Started from the four counties of Dongxiang, Hezheng, Jishishan and Kangle in Linxia Hui autonomous
prefecture in December of year 1999, the GBEP ended in 6 years and was financed by the department of international development of Great Britain. Educational department of Gansu province was responsible for the actual conducting out the GBEP with a specialist team providing technical support. The main content of the project consist of the construction of the school, the plan for the development of the school, education concepts, reading materials, the training of both the teachers and the schoolmaster. The main goal of the GBEP was to develop basic education of Gansu province and further the basic educational development of the western ethnic minority groups by improving the conditions of the school, the academic standards and the enrollment rate of the compulsory education and by importing new teaching concepts.

II. Introducing of the Participatory Approach

The participatory approach, to trace its root, is not pedagogy, but a sociological theory that the British socialists have come up with. “This theory believes that only by getting the locals involved as much as possible in the assistance itself that the aid GBEP could be successful” [2]. Later the theory was introduced into the field of pedagogy and the participatory approach was born in educational system.

The concept and the means of the participation were separately the strategy and method in the GBEP, which have penetrated into every fields, layers and details. The developmental plan of the school emphasizes on the total involvement, and by actual participation, the plan is conducted out. The participation is universal from communities to schools and from parents to schoolmasters. Everyone takes part in with an appointed responsibility, and different ideas and views are all taken in and made one from the act of the participation.

The participatory approach isn’t just applied to GBEP management; it is also an approach in class. It encourages teamwork among students, and it also goes deeper than the study itself by making the students themselves who have the consciousness and subjective initiatives. Therefore, the participatory approach no longer requires teachers to be the one who gives the lecture, it requires every student in the classroom to make contributions to the class, and it fulfills their potentials by making everyone of them feeling included and needed. The GBEP trained over 70 thousand teachers from about 31 counties. They got acquainted with the participatory approach and were able to use it in the class.

III. The Participatory Approach in Action

Jishishan located in the southwest of Gansu, is the only multi-ethnic autonomous county in the province. “Till the year 2011, there are a total number of 181 schools in Jishishan: 1 high school, 9 junior highs and 171 primary schools” [3]. The thesis takes the Anji School and the Qianzhuang School as two cases to closely study the roles and effects the participatory approach has on these two schools.

3.1 The requirements of the GBEP

The GBEP requires every school make plans in lieu of their own circumstances, and that the developmental plan for the schools should be focused on participation, which is a collaborated work between the communities and the school. And through the democratic development of plans, proposals and sound should all be heard from the parents, the teachers and the students. The developmental plan for the school is the very first step for the participatory approach.

The GBEP requires faculty training for the target school. The main content of the training is to see how the approach works in actual class. And the way to conduct the training is also involved, which guarantees that teachers should fully grasp and master the spirit of participation. Besides, training for the leaders of the school is also mandatory.

The participatory educational method requires the teachers to fully grasp their values and concepts, which can be applied to classroom teaching. This is a big revolution to the current pedagogy. Changing the past way of teachers being always in charge and giving lectures, the
approach reverse the roles from teachers talk and students listen to students discuss and teachers conclude. By teaming up or some other ways that organize the students, it guarantees that students could all feel included, and they could all make improvements learning from the groups and in the process of discussing.

3.2 The effects of the GBEP

Anji primary school and Qianzhuang primary school all put the concepts and directions of the participatory approach into action for five years of the GBEP. And for each of the year, the Education Department, the school and the communities cooperated to make the developmental plan for the school, which mainly includes the general situation of the school, the current problems of the school and the possible measures and solutions. Investigations and surveys were conducted out personally by the author to study the Anji primary school and the Qianzhuang primary school of Jishishan County. We have learned that the school didn’t get everyone involved in when making a development plan. Both of the leaderships of two primary school respond that the planning is theoretically promoted by the tree parts, but basically all missions are decided by educational department. During this time, although they have adopted some proposals from teachers and students, there is no formal way to ensue everyone getting involved in.

During the Gansu Basic Education Project implementation, teachers and headmasters of Anji and Qianzhuang primary schools have a training which is basically involved in the education method. But they have less trainings after the GBEP. “After the project has ended, few of trainings for participatory educational method are planned. Only when the educational departments order a mission will they have a training” (From an interview of a headmaster). We have learned that teachers who have been trained to believe that this method is worth to be introduced and applied in class.

In the several years of GBEP implementation, most of the teachers apply the participatory educational method in class, but not continue after the GBEP. And the teaching method is simple. According to my research, at the beginning of the project, teachers from Jishishan School are trained to teach in groups which students group together in six, discuss, record and elect one student to speak. But when the project ended, most of the teachers still take groups of six students without any creative ideas. A stereotypical thought teacher can’t bring us a vanity class. Most of the teachers replaced the participatory teaching method with traditional teaching approach after the GBEP.

In general, participatory educational method is a new idea or method for most teachers and students. It does make some efforts in teaching. But with the reducing and formalizing of the late teachers training, this method is not active for long. The implementation of participatory method has changed from a creative way to a stereotyped model. The original function of it has lost. Even the participatory teaching approach itself has disappeared with the ending of GBEP.

IV. Reflections on the Issues in Participatory Educational Method

The Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP) was successfully concluded, and the basic education reformation is advancing vigorously. However, a blind reformation can’t make progress. That’s why the review and survey after a reformation are needed. I did some research and outlined some issues in the introduction and implementation of participatory educational method.

4.1 The lacking of independence and vitality of superincumbent compulsory educational management system in reformations

The participative education idea requires the impetus from both teachers and education department. Yet in the social environment in which everyone needs to follow policies and regimes, a project implementation and reformation promotion are usually proceeded in a perfunctory state of “task only”. In the process of making school development plans, educational administrative department, teachers, schools and communities should participate in sharing the suggestions of students and their parents. Therefore, we can strengthen the connection between school and communities and make plans with their participation. But in my investigation it shows that the
suggestions of students and their parents haven’t been listened by school. Although educational administrative department participated in thesis defenses and made their plans, but they didn’t implement the follow-up work of the planning. Top-down concentrative rights system is not only a big problem in educational reformation but the emphasis of governmental system transformation.

A good project is not valued without implementing in a well-established policies system. China’s educational management system is a centralized system which schools listen to government and education administrative department and obey their instructions unconditionally. The results of this administrative means controlling are rights concentration and lacking of information feedbacks and autonomy abilities of schools.

4.2 The shortage of evaluation scheme and subsequent training & the disadvantage of participatory educational method in its superficialization and formalization

In the participatory educational method experiment in the two primary schools of Jishishan county, they did not set up a specialized evaluation scheme to ensure the processing. On the one hand they just use participatory educational method when the superior department coming to visit their school, on the other hand, the implementations of participatory educational method are mostly depended on the teachers own wishes. Also their works in monitoring and evaluating are almost blank. Few teachers and headmasters are trained after the Gansu Basic Education Project, especially in the training about participative concepts and method.

As for schools, if schools’ management systems can’t ensure a reformation, a good project or idea will not bring their effects of values. The new reform ideas can’t be used in GBEP without a well-established evaluation scheme.

4.3 Teachers’ absent in participatory educational method ideas’ interpretation & weak effect of reformation

The participatory educational ideas introduced in Jishishan primary schools. It growing like a breeze in traditional classes and changes students’ former leaning state. They become actively in expressing their opinions, cooperative learning and questioning. We have learned that teachers who joined this project are positive in this new idea, but not willing to keep it up. Most teachers just use participatory educational method when superior leaders attend their lectures but go back in traditional method in other times. It makes the participative learning becomes a performance or a show. The class seems full of interactive and participative atmosphere, but actually it is no good in enhancing teaching efficiency and quality. Tradition-oriented phenomenon is one of our country’s social culture. While English schools considerate in students’ individual improvement, Chinese schools tend to divide students in classes-unit. Teachers pay more attention to the whole class knowledge receiving, as a result, our teaching traditions are ingrained in teacher’s leading role. Chinese class is in sharp contrast in English class that makes participatory educational method is hard to popularize.

Teachers act as an important role in introducing and promoting a new idea in class. If they are not willing to accept or study a new conception, the teaching effectiveness will be greatly reduced. An educational reformation, from implement of GBEP to the promotion of ideas needs everyone’s effort. Every missing link will affect the introducing of a new idea.

V. Suggestions About Indigenization of Participative Ideas

According to my research, the two primary schools in Jishishan received aid funds of the GBEP to experiment this new educational method. To some extend it is helpful to school, but what we want to talk further is that the GBEP have ended in a successful way, but the valuable experiences didn’t survive for long, as well as the deferred participatory educational method. I think there are some reforms that should be considered.

5.1 Government’s role in educational reformation

“Participation pro forma” and “Participation simply for task completion” phenomenon in
participatory educational practice are related to the faultiness and mandatory of policies. “To change this situation, the government needs to take appropriate measure to turn the decision-making function into system-building, incentive, restraining and penalty functions.” [4] Since school is the place of freedom and rights originates, but not a tool of authoritarian control. In the educational reformation, schools should be empowered by government and get rid of the totally dependent situation. Decision-making right is also needed so that schools can introduce a new teaching method grounded on realities of situation but not on superior departments’ decisions. Government should empower schools and set up a reward and punishment system to supervise and restrict schools’ autonomy rights at the same times. Therefore, they can avoid the power excessively concentrated in school leaders.

5.2 School monitoring and evaluation mechanism

To ensure the effective implementation of participative teaching project, schools should make use of its autonomy rights and set up a monitoring and evaluation mechanism which is including school leaders, teachers, students and their parents. That is, the empowerment by government is not only for school leaders’ rights but also for teachers, students and their parents. In this way, everyone can be involved and interact effectively in participative teaching classes. School is no longer an appendage for government and educational department. Combining with schools’ condition and improve internal governance structure, we believe that participatory educational method will succeed in its advantages.

5.3 The transformation of teacher’s role

Participatory teaching needs constant innovation and combining with different class situation. It doesn’t means that encourage students to participate and reduce teachers’ functions. On the contrary, teacher’s role should transform into a more important way. In traditional teaching method, teachers are more focus on textbooks and teaching. But participative learning method requires more skills including organizing skill, training skill, guiding skill and so on. Teachers should motivate students’ sense of participation, create appropriate classroom setting, develop their abilities and encourage them join in the class actively. Teachers also should inspire student’s positive initiative in various activities and guide them to study in groups then do the summary and reflection.

Teachers should be active and initiative in participative training, or the perform practically no function. To stimulate teachers’ active and initiative and to understand the meaning of the idea is to avoid this problem. If teachers are not willing to participate by themselves, the classes will be not well served by participatory educational method and students’ shoulders might not be lightened.

References


