It Takes a Village: Professional Practical Skills Education for Rural China

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Abstract
The authors of this paper employed a qualitative descriptive study to investigate the enablers and barriers of providing “Professional Practical Skills” (PPS) education along with “Professional Technical Skills” (PTS) education to rural elementary school students in China based on the “It Takes a Village” (ITV) philosophy. Specifically, the authors conducted focus groups among teachers and students of Zhejiang rural elementary schools and students’ parents as well. It is found that all students, teachers, and parents agreed in the importance of providing “PPS” education to rural primary school students and showed their willingness to contribute and participate in the study and potential subsequent projects. From the three main barriers, which are 1) traditional exam-orientated educational philosophy in China; 2) school being the only entity responsible for providing education; and 3) financial issues, the authors recommend a nonformal education format to provide “PPS” education along with “PTS” education. In addition, the authors recognized the importance of role identification among different education providers under the “ITV” philosophy. As a result, the authors recommend more research be done from the perspectives of government and other social entities, so that some efforts can be made to facilitate the communications, understanding, and role identification among teachers, parents, students, and other social entities so that they will work together to provide “PPS” along with “PTS” education through the “ITV” philosophy.
Introduction

“Professional Technical Skills” (PTS) and “Professional Practical Skills” (PPS) are two kinds of education that are often written and discussed among writers. Different writers often describe them in different terminologies (Shen & Jones, 2004). “PTS” refers to a specific subject matter like physics, are “associated with technical aspects of performing a job and usually includes the acquisition of knowledge (Page, Wilson, & Kolb, 1993)” (cited in Rainsbury, Burchell, & Lay, 2002, p. 9). “PTS” are often termed as “Technical Knowledge” or “Hard Skills”, which are “primarily cognitive in nature and are associated with ‘Intelligence Quotient (IQ)’” (Rainsbury, Burchell, & Lay, p.9).

“PPS”, on the contrary, stands for the ability to apply and put into practice “PTS” in real life situations. These are usually called “Soft Skills” or “Life Skills” by other writers (Shen & Jones). “PPS” are “primarily affective or behavioral in nature and has [have] been recently connected with ‘Emotional Quotient (EQ)’” (Rainsbury, Burchell, & Lay, p.9).

Based on the ideas of Brown (1996) and Weatherford and Weatherford (1987) (cited in Morris, 1996), the authors identified three dimensions of “PPS”: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social dimensions. Within each dimension, there are certain skills, for example, “decision-making”, “problem-solving”, and “learning to learn” belong to the intrapersonal dimension; “teamwork” and “empathy” are interpersonal skills; while “leadership” and “citizenship” are part of the social dimension.

A combination of “PTS” education and “PPS” education is what a market economy requires for the development of its individuals and of the nation as a whole. “Competitive advantage [among countries] is determined by the productivity with which a country, region or cluster uses its human, capital and natural resources” (“Workforce development,” 2003). Of these, human resources play a key role. “Those countries and regions that have adaptable workforces with a rich mixture of skills” are able to benefit from the global economy, while “Those countries, regions and people that lack necessary skills are destined to fall further behind” (“Workforce development”). Also, “there is growing emphasis in the literature on the importance of “soft” skills which are now seen as complementary to “hard” skills and required for successful workplace performance” (Ashton, 1994; Caudron, 1999; Georges, 1996; Mullen, 1997; Strebler, 1997) (cited in Rainsbury, Burchell, & Lay, 2002). Goleman (1995) stated, “At best, IQ contributes about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other forces” (p. 34), these other forces are “PPS”.

In China, a developing country that is transferring from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, rural youth are not provided with the opportunity to learn “PPS”. The traditional educational philosophy in China is exam-orientated, “places heavy emphasis on textbooks, memorization, and examination of core academic subjects [i.e., “PTS”]” (Su, 1996, p. 142). This kind of education produces rural students, most of who are classified in two categories, “high score and low ability” or “low score and low ability”. The only difference between these categories is their students’ performance on exams that are totally designed for evaluating the mastery of “PTS”. Regardless of their exam scores, students in both these categories lack “PPS”. Lin (1993) said, “They [graduates from rural schools] can not draw up a contract, or write a poster or an advertisement...Few can use what they have learned to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of their areas and to utilize local resources to increase their earnings”
Seventy percent of the total population in China resides in rural areas, and China is in a crucial turning point of reform from policy-induced development to science and technology-induced development (Ma, 1990), thus incompetent human resources (i.e., rural youth) has become one of the biggest challenges to the further development of rural community in China and the nation as a whole. According to Dewey, education should be modified according to the change of the society and the needs of the new society (cited in Archambault, 1964), otherwise, “when education programs exist out of context, without a bearing on the surrounding job market, or on the local culture, sooner or later they lose their ‘clients’” (“Shifting the focus,” 2000). Given the context of the challenge the Chinese rural community and the nation is facing, there is no doubt that providing “PPS” education together with “PTS” education for rural youth in China is imperative.

**Theoretical Framework**

A confluence of “PTS” education and “PPS” education not only is necessary for a market economy, but also is the ultimate goal of education. Nicolas (2001) stated, education “is not to simply transfer knowledge or skills [mastery of “PTS” education]….What really counts in education is the ability to truly understand subject matter so that it can be applied in various circumstances [mastery of both “PTS” and “PPS” education]” (p.19). The realization of this goal of education requires an experiential learning approach. Morris (1996) stated, “The learning of life skills [i.e., “PPS”] occurs within an educational context through a means of active participant participation….Within the literature reviewed this educational process is often referred to as an experiential one” (p. 10).

The essence of experiential learning is that learning from experience makes learning meaningful. First, experiential learning enables the learning process to be situated in the social context learners are in. According to Jarvis (1987), learning process is “intimately related to [the] world and affected by it” (p. 11) (cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 1). Even though some knowledge may be objective and stable, especially those from physical science, it is still contextual. According to symbolic interactionism, the learner can learn the knowledge and apply it creatively only if s/he can make meaning of it in the context (Esterberg, 2002).

Second, experiential learning “integrates the cognitive and the affective domain” of the learner (Brown, 1996, p.7). Each learner has two minds; one is the mind to think while the other is the mind to feel (Goleman, 1995). Thinking is traditionally regarded as rational, while emotion is irrational (Brown); as a result, the latter is typically neglected and not introduced intentionally during school education, even though it is present in any learning situation (Ringness, 1975). This doesn’t mean that affective domain is not important. According to both the study of the physical organization of the brain and the cognitive development of the brain, the affective domain plays an equally important role as the cognitive domain (Mirriam & Caffarella, 1999). People filter the information entering into their brains and decide its ultimate destination based on their feelings. If they feel the information is meaningful, they will direct it further to the cognitive mechanism of the brain. Otherwise, the information even won’t have the chance to be learned (Goleman). “It is not that we want to do away with emotion and put reason in its place….But instead find the intelligent balance of the two” (Goleman, p. 28-
29). Experiential learning opportunities help students find this balance and enable students to learn both “PTS” and “PPS”.

As discussed above, under the traditional education system in rural China, students are treated as passive receivers. Even primary school students are deprived of the opportunity to learn “PPS” education through experience. Ideally, school education would employ experiential learning theory to provide both “PTS” and “PPS” education to its students. In reality, however, schools alone cannot shoulder the whole responsibility (Su, 1996), especially that of providing “PPS” education. It’s not because schools can’t employ experiential learning, it is because it takes a village (ITV) to bring up children (Clinton, 1996). Families, other social entities, and even students themselves should also be involved in the process of education, because they have their own expertise in terms of providing education that schools don’t have. For example, schools are financially unable to provide certain educational activities, while other social entities have the money to do so. In addition, from the perspective of organizational theory, an orchestra is better than a one-man band because the former leads to synergy. As early as 1920s, Tao has put forward the ideas of “society as school”, which is similar to the “modern-day effort made by some American education reformers to “go beyond schools to seek educative communities and the educative society (Goodlad, 1984, 1992)” (cited in Su, p. 133).

**Purpose/Objectives**

Even though a combination of “PTS” and “PPS” education is imperative for Chinese rural youth to survive and succeed in a market economy, little research has been conducted regarding how to design an appropriate educational program based on “experiential learning” and the “ITV” philosophy to provide both “PTS” and “PPS” education for rural youth in China. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to help China build the educational infrastructure in its rural areas through investigating the feasibility of providing “PPS” and “PTS” in rural Zhejiang Province based on the “ITV” philosophy from the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents. The result of this study was expected to facilitate the design and implementation of an appropriate educational program. The specific objectives of this research were as follows:

- Investigate the enablers of providing the educational program that combines both “PPS” education and “PTS” education to elementary school students in rural Zhejiang, China based on the “ITV” philosophy
- Investigate the barriers of providing the educational program that combines both “PPS” education and “PTS” education to elementary school students in rural Zhejiang, China based on the “ITV” philosophy

**Methods**

The study employed a descriptive design, and the qualitative research method was used. According to Ary, Jacob, and Razaviah (2002), descriptive research is concerned with “what is”, while qualitative research “focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the human participants in the study” (p. 22). The purpose and the specific objectives of this study, which aimed at finding out “what is” from the perspective of the participants, provided the rationale for the employment of both research methods. Specifically, Focus Groups were used.
The study was carried out in rural Zhejiang, China. And the research population consisted of teachers of rural elementary schools, students of rural elementary schools, and their parents in rural Zhejiang, China. There are 2,639 rural elementary schools in Zhejiang, which consists of a total student population of 511,103 and a total teacher population of 26,335 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2002). Before sampling, the authors divided rural Zhejiang into three regions (i.e., northeast region, southwest region, and middle region) based on the economic development level, with which most economists in China agree (Hong & Zhang, 2003). With the help of Zhejiang Normal University, the leading teachers’ education college in Zhejiang, the authors picked up two rural elementary schools from each area as the research population and selected student, parent, and teacher participants from these schools for focus groups. The authors then had one focus group for each category of participants (i.e. students, parents and teachers) for each area, with a total number of nine focus groups. Each focus group was composed of 10 participants or so, who didn’t know each other but shared the same characteristics.

After picking the participants for focus groups based on the above procedure, the authors conducted focus groups for students, teachers, and parents respectively. Each focus group lasted for one and a half hour or so. A tape recorder was used for a record of the interaction and one graduate student from Zhejiang Normal University served as the research assistant and wrote the field notes.

Results/Discussion

Enablers

As a whole, all students, teachers, and parents agreed in the importance of providing “PPS” education to rural primary school students and showed their willingness to contribute and participate in the study and potential subsequent projects. From the perspective of teachers and parents, they recognized that only “PTS” education is not enough, because the development of market economy in China requires students to have both “PTS” education and “PPS” education. One parent commented, “I hope my child not only performs well in exams but also develop into an all-round person, having good health and all the skills s/he needs to live in the society.” Parents and teachers also indicated that they would take an active part in providing “PPS” education to their children and/or students if they were given the opportunity and if the providing of it wouldn’t influence their children’s and/or students’ performance on “PTS” exams. One parent said, “If our children still have high scores after the school provides “PPS” education, then we support it.” Teachers had similar comments.

For student participants, even though they don’t really understand “PPS” and “PTS” education, they described their willingness to learn if the knowledge is taught in such a way that they can make meaning of their everyday life experiences instead of merely being dictated to by teachers. “I like classes that are taught through our everyday life experiences, so that I can actually practice it instead of just listening to the teachers repeating the textbook.” Considering the fact that “the learning of “PPS” occurs when experiential learning are employed (Morris, 1996), the authors concluded that students would enjoy learning “PPS” education together with “PTS” education.

Barriers
The authors found 3 major barriers to providing “PPS” education to rural primary school students based on the “ITV” philosophy from these 9 focus groups, respectively and jointly. They are 1) traditional exam-orientated educational philosophy in China; 2) school being the only entity responsible for providing education; and 3) financial issues. In the following paragraphs, the authors will explain and discuss each barrier in detail.

**barrier one: traditional exam-orientated educational philosophy in China.** As discussed above, traditional exam-orientated education has an emphasis on the mastery of “PTS” education, under which not only students, but also teachers, are assessed by students’ performance on “PTS” education. One parent commented, “Under the present education system [exam-orientated education], the whole society emphasizes on scores, school lacks life skill education…Now the quality of teachers are evaluated by students’ scores.” In addition, under the traditional exam-orientated education philosophy, personal success is accredited to high scores and high degree of “PTS” education. In practice, passing a series of exams to finally enter university is the main purpose of education that parents and teachers claimed. Almost all student participants mentioned that their parents hope them to go to university and then find a good job. One student stated, “Parents want us to go to a good university in Beijing, especially Beijing University and QingHua University, so that we can find good jobs and make good money. And therefore lead a good life.” Teachers are the same from the perspective of students, “They are the same as parents, if you can go to university, and they feel happy that they educate you.” As a result, whether or not to provide “PPS” education to rural elementary school students depends on students’ performance on exams of “PTS” education. One teacher stated, “If students can not pass exams to go to senior high school and universities after a school provides “PPS” education, then the headmaster of the school will be fired.”

In summary, parent and teacher participants of focus groups agreed that traditional exam-orientated educational philosophy is one of the biggest barriers to providing “PPS” education to rural school students. One parent commented, “The present education system is problematic….Both teachers and parents only care about students’ performance on “PTS” exams.” “Exam-orientated education is like the conductor of an orchestra, under the guidance of which there is not space for “PPS” education in school education,” a teacher commented. However, teacher and parent participants also agreed that it is not wise to eliminate the whole exam-orientated education system overnight. Considering the fact that it has existed and been operated in China for centuries, it still has appropriateness under certain economic, political and social environments in China. One teacher said, “It’s not reasonable to eradicate the exam-orientated education system as there is no better way to help China with a large student population and a small number of universities.” But this doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s impossible to provide “PPS” education to rural primary school students. The reform of it should be taken gradually, just like the reform from the centrally planned economy to market economy in China. There should be a transformation process. In agreement with the focus groups, the authors thought that at present one possible way of providing “PPS” education to rural youth, together with “PTS” education, can be through nonformal education such as extra-curricular activities, working as a supplement to the formal education.

**barrier two: school being the only entity responsible for providing education.** Parent and teacher participants of focus groups thought that school should take full responsibility for education, while student participants have different opinions. From the
perspective of parents, they are not in the position to educate their children because they lack the knowledge (i.e., “PTS” education) and time to do so. One parent commented, “The first issue is related to our academic level. If our children need our help with some math problems, we can’t do it because we don’t have the education. The second issue is time.” As a result, some parents even thought that their responsibility is to make money to meet their children’s basic survival needs, while the responsibility of teachers is to educate their children. “As parents, we provide assistance to our children in terms of financial and basic life needs. It is the responsibility of schools and teachers to educate our children.”

Although they complained about being totally responsible for education, teacher participants thought that parents can’t share the responsibility of educating their children because of lack of ability and time. One teacher stated,

Now the love given by parents to their children is original. They only care about meeting the basic needs of their children, such as having food to eat and having clothes to wear. They haven’t thought about education at all.

In addition, teachers also mentioned that parents were not willing to educate their children. “Some parents told their children that parents’ duty is to make money, teachers’ duty is to educate, and children’s duty is to study.” Teacher participants thought that most parents were not qualified enough to help schools to educate students.

Even though parents and teachers thought that school should shoulder all the responsibility of education, student participants showed different opinions. Most students expressed their willingness to learn from their parents or other family members. One student commented, “All parents care about their children. As children, you can’t say that your parents don’t care about your education only because they don’t have enough education or time.” And when asked to whom they will refer if they have something important they want to talk about, most students actually mentioned either parents or other family members.

During focus groups, all participants agreed that other social entities played a very minor role in education. The reason given by parents and teachers was that education was thought of as the responsibility of schools, and therefore, “The whole society, even the government, doesn’t attach importance to education,” one teacher commented.

This barrier prohibits the cooperation among parents, teachers, students, and other social entities in the providing of “PPS” to rural primary school students through the “ITV” philosophy. However, this barrier can be eliminated through role identification. “According to role theories, roles are expectation held by groups for the behavior of individual members (Wheelan, 1994). The more a group and its members agree on individual members’ roles, the more productive the group is” (cited in Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998, p. 39). During focus groups, the authors actually found a lack of role identification, which is caused by the lack of opportunities for parents, teachers, students, and other social entities to communicate with each other. One parent commented, “There is almost no opportunity for parents to participate in school activities with their children.” As a result, teachers, parents, students, and other social entities misunderstand each other. For example, teachers thought that parents didn’t care about their children’s education. “What they care about is how much money they can make.” However, the reality is that parents love their children and would love to help schools to educate their children. “If schools organize activities and ask us to help our children to learn “PPS” education, we
support it," one parent stated. The authors then concluded that if parents, teachers, students, and other social entities communicate with each other and recognize the role each should play in the providing of education, it’s possible that people who traditionally may have been suspicious of one another – parents and teachers, educators and local businesspeople, administrators and union members, people inside and outside the school walls, students and adults – recognize their common stake in the future of the school system and the things they can learn from one another. (Senge, 2000, p.5)

barrier three: financial issues. Parent and teacher participants all mentioned “money” as a big barrier too. One parent stated, “First of all, money is a problem. We are in rural areas and everyone is still working hard to make a living. We won’t invest in “PPS” education if the basic educational needs and life needs haven’t been met.” Teachers had similar opinions, “Government invested too little in rural education.” As a result of this barrier, parents and teachers both thought that providing “PPS” education through experiential learning couldn’t be realized if the issue of money couldn’t be solved. Based on the “ITV” philosophy, the authors recognized that this barrier actually proves the importance of the “ITV” philosophy, because other social entities can contribute money as a way of providing education.

Recommendations

In conclusion, rural youth in China are not provided with “PPS” education along with “PTS” education, while primarily this can be mainly attributed to the traditional exam-orientated educational philosophy, based on the results of this study, the authors recommend using a nonformal education format to provide “PPS” education as a supplement to formal school education. This could allow for an easier transition from the existing exam-orientated system and allow non-traditional educational providers an opportunity to contribute. Furthermore, this could also enable education to be funded by broader sources than existing ones. However, in order to provide “PPS” education along with “PTS” education through the “ITV” philosophy, the authors recommend more research be done to investigate the barriers and enablers from the perspective of government and other social entities, so that some efforts can be made to facilitate the communications, understanding, and role identification among teachers, parents, students, and other social entities in terms of providing education.
Reference


