Functional Literacy: New Requirements in Rural Economic & Social Development

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Abstract: Proposed by UNSECO in the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), the concept “Functional Literacy” is the extension and development of the traditional literacy, and new challenge to the adult literacy education in the countryside. As the result of the rapid development of science, technology and economy, functional literacy is a new requirement for promoting rural economic and social development. Besides, it will play an important role in the progress of rural economy, democracy, living standards and farmers’ own ability. The government’s leading role is vital in expanding the category and content of functional literacy education so that farmers can improve their productivity and living standards and get rich by functional literacy.

Introduction

“Functional illiteracy is a serious problem in all countries, industrialized and developing,” as is pointed out in the World Declaration on Education for All and the framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs (1990) issued by UNESCO[1]. Functional literacy education is a requirement for the rapid technological and economic development. It plays an important role in the acceleration of economic and social development, and the improvement of the population quality and living standards, especially in the elimination of poverty. As a new development and feature of literacy education, it is an important channel to rural progress.

1 Functional Literacy: New Challenge to Rural Adult Education

Continuous development of world literacy was emphasized in Oxford Declaration on the first World Literacy Summit on April 2012. World literacy, especially functional literacy, is a necessity to push the economy and the society forward and to develop human beings physically, politically, spiritually and culturally. Literacy through providing equal access to education is crucial for poverty elimination and economical and social progress.

1.1 Origin of Functional Literacy

Firstly brought forward by UNESCO in the Experimental World Literacy Programme in the 1960s, functional literacy was defined as the ability to be engaged in any activity involving reading and writing according to the needs of the group or society one belongs to. This definition, against a narrow understanding and regulation on illiteracy elimination, underlined specialized and technical education of the knowledge and skills necessary in people’s production and daily life. It is an extension of traditional literacy education.

Functional illiteracy is the main form of modern illiteracy, including the disability in reading and writing, understanding science, and using communication tools and computers. The economic and technological advancement raises new requirements for people’s knowledge and ability in their production, daily life and social interaction. However, the majority of farmers in China are lagging behind in their knowledge and skills. According to Literacy and Adult Education (1965) issued by the
UNESCO, “functional literacy and adult education constitute one of the essential factors in the economic, social, political and cultural progress of individuals as well as of communities.” [2] In fact, functional literacy and traditional literacy are the same in nature while the former is broader in content and higher in requirements and level. Many countries in the world have been engaged in functional literacy education. Nationwide functional literacy in America was required in the Adult Education Act. The government of England also implements an national strategy to improve “living skills” of people in this century. China has also made endeavor in functional literacy education, despite the regional differences in this respect due to the uneven economic and cultural development among different regions. Shanghai launched a campaign of science illiterate elimination in the 1990s and implemented a plan to promote the functional education for its citizens. Beijing carried out a training project for improving the quality of its citizens in 1999. However, traditional literacy is still an important task in rural areas in Western China especially the poverty-stricken areas.

1.2 Functional Literacy: A New Requirement in Adult Education in Rural Areas of China

During the urbanization of China, many farmers go to work in the city and become urban residents. However, they cannot be well adapted to city life, which is a kind of “function lag” in terms of social development and adaptability, because they become functional illiterate with their knowledge and skills inadequate for them to “exercise their functions” in the complex city life. As World Declaration on Education for All and the frame work for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs (1990) pointed out, “More than one third of the world’s adults have no access to printed knowledge, new skills and technologies that could improve their quality of lives and help them shape, and adapt to, social and cultural change.” Functional literacy education, a new requirement for civilization, rural modernization and rural economic and social development, constantly give farmers access to new knowledge and skills to meet the needs of urbanization and modern production and life. The elimination of illiterates and functional illiterates is still an arduous task during the modernization of China. It is one of the major forces enhancing China’s national strength, just as elementary education, higher education and adult education do. With the improvement of the productivity and living standards, people’s demands for cultural life have also increased. Thus, education is a means not only to teach people living skills but also for them to pursue spiritual culture and enjoyment, and even becomes a goal in itself. The priority of China’s literacy education in the future will be functional literacy, which is closely related to our production and life, as the officials from Basic Education Department under the Ministry of Education mentioned at the Asia Pacific Literacy Conference (in Beijing, 2007).

2 Functional Literacy: A New Requirement in the Rural Economic and Social Development

New knowledge and technology constantly emerge with the rapid development of technology and economy, and therefore, even those with formal schooling may become functional illiterate, much less most of the farmers who have no opportunity to formal education. However, informal functional literacy education provides continuing education for them, and hence a driving force for the rural economic and social development.

2.1 Functional Literacy Education for Rural Economic Growth

Theodore W. Schultz, a famous American economist, deems that the basis for the rapid growth of agricultural economy largely depends on the effective use of modern agricultural technology by the farmers, which, in turn, relies on special investments to farmers to ensure their mastery of new knowledge and skills[3], hence the requirement for functional literacy. Many countries especially the developing countries link literacy education with economic and social development. In China, there are many functional illiterates with inadequate education on modern way of social production and life, and functional literacy education can help farmers to learn new knowledge and skills, promote the development of rural human resources and the transfer of rural surplus labor force, and enable them to be adapted to urban life.
2.2 Functional Literacy Education for Rural Democracy

Education is a basis and condition for democracy. Lenin, a revolutionist in Russia, pointed out that illiterates are excluded from politics; Jefferson and Dewey, American thinkers, emphasized that democracy relies on knowledgeable citizens. Paul Freire, a famous expert on adult educator, believes that rural adult literacy education has important political and democratic significance, for literacy is either a "tool of domination" or "the exercise of freedom". He also said that the most prominent value of literacy lies its help in the complete emancipation of the individuals.

Early in the 15th century, a literacy campaigns for the spread of the Bible was carried out by the Swedish government, spreading knowledge, enhancing public civilization, and promoting urbanization and democratization. In China, farmers are the majority in political activities, but most of them are lower in education and in a disadvantageous position in political participation. Thus in order to realize the modernization of national governance, rural literacy education must be on the important status. Functional literacy education can help farmers to learn national policies, laws and regulations, enhance their awareness of civic rights and duties, improve their ability to participate in political activities and promote their full development. Literacy is not the only means of liberation but it is an essential instrument for all social change. (Declaration of Persepolis (1975))

2.3 Functional Literacy for Improving Farmers’ Living Standards

Farmers born before the 1980s didn’t acquire enough knowledge to meet the requirements of farmer modernization in China. Based on traditional literacy, functional literacy enriches the cultural life of farmers and improves their living standards through offering a series of lectures on marriage and procreation, adaptation to urban life, computer network and so on. In 2009, the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education, with the theme living and learning for a viable future: the power of adult learning, recognized that literacy serves as an important means for meeting various challenges and addressing complex cultural, economic and social problems in our life [3]. Functional literacy focuses on imparting practical knowledge and skills so that farmers can enjoy the fun of modern life and achieve literacy in all rounds. Nowadays, although computers and networks are available to many households, few of them understand and are able to teach their children the proper way of using computers, which are mostly used to play games. As a result, a social problem rises which is common and prominent in the rural areas: many children are obsessed in games, with their eyes harmed and schoolwork delayed and then farmers complain about the damage of computers. With regards to the asynchronous progress between popularization of computers and quality of farmers, it is very urge to conduct trainings about computers and internet for farmers. Those trainings, within the category of functional literacy, are necessary in their production and lives and in their guidance of their children. There is still a great gap between farmers in China and those in developed countries because the latter are skillful in acquiring information related to agriculture and agro-products, doing business and exchanging farming experience and commercial information through the internet.

2.4 Functional Literacy for Farmers’ Self-development

For learners, literacy especially functional literacy, at a deeper level, is a means to get spiritual handholds through learning human culture. Self-development is crucial for illiterates at a disadvantaged position, in order to have a successful and healthy life. Functional literacy education momentously makes a combination of literacy with daily life and economic behaviors like employment on the basis of intensifying literacy education in writing and reading skills. Thanks to it, new values of thinking and existence and new ways of production and living are brought to illiterates and guide them to an enlightened and healthy life. In some ways, this kind of life is beneficial to their productivity, living standards and self-development.
3 Ways of Functional Literacy Education for Rural Economic and Social Development in China

It is of great necessity and practicality to implement functional literacy education as China has entered a new stage with strengthened economy, technology and education. Technology and functional literacy are a must to realize the modernization and sustainable development of rural society.

3.1 To Reinforce Government’s Leading Role of Functional Literacy Education

Due to a great number of functional illiterates, it is an urgent task for China to enhance the quality of farmers by functional literacy. Functional literacy involves many government organs, such as departments of education, agriculture, technology, finance and so on. Therefore, it’s the duty and leading role for the government to mobilize all government organizations and NGOs to get involved in functional literacy education. Meanwhile, a large amount of labor forces, money and substances are needed to ensure the universality and durability of functional literacy. In addition, the government should act as a coordinator in integrating illiterate elimination with poverty alleviation and making full use of all resources. Notably, more efforts should be made in poverty-stricken rural areas. All in all, unceasingly endeavor and effective measures are the important back for the implementation of functional literacy in rural areas.

3.2 To Offer Functional Literacy Education with its Range and Content in Accordance with Current Situation

For farmers, traditional literacy education on reading, writing, and calculating cannot meet their diverse needs of learning and getting rid of poverty as well as developing their own ability. In contrast, functional literacy mainly focuses on lectures and trainings to improve their productivity and living standards and help them to shake off poverty and realize modernization. L. Bataile, an educator, supports that only by combining illiterate elimination with present demands for survival and participating social reform, can literacy achieve success[5]. In Regulations on Literacy, literacy education is stipulated to be implemented with learning both culture and technology (both culture and agricultural technology in rural areas). In May 2011, Ministry of Education (MOE) of China put forward new requirements for literacy—demand oriented and problems solving centered. According to MOE, literacy courses should cover “reading and writing”, “numbers and calculation”, and “knowledge and capability”, the last within the content of functional literacy.

3.3 To Unify Functional Literacy Education with Productivity and Living Standards as Well as Anti-poverty

Poverty is positively correlated with human knowledge and education level, thus literacy education is more important for those people suffering poverty so as to develop their living skills. This is a process of getting rid of mental poverty and material poverty. Edmund King, an educator, deems that effective learning on family planning, health care, nutrition and productivity enhancement is more meaningful than simply learning to read and write [5]. Traditional literacy exerts limited influence on people in poor rural areas. That’s why functional literacy is needed to be closely related to production and life. It can refresh their values and spirits and impart necessary knowledge and skills to them to create a happy life on their own. Functional literacy on the basis of traditional literacy is an inevitable way to go in order to eradicate poverty on the surface and at the root.

4 To Learn from the Experience of Foreign Countries in Functional Literacy Education

Illiteracy and poverty are universal social problems affecting the national or regional peace and development. In the practice of anti-poverty, many international organizations including UNESCO and WTO have got a lot of achievement and experience, from which China can learn a lot. Many educational and cultural volunteer organizations and social organizations such as chambers of
commerce, political groups and trade unions in many foreign countries provide assistance for literacy and adult education. For example, some American NGOs are active in providing literacy education to the society through extensive activities that have proved to be very successful. Canada has taken various measures to encourage the universal involvement in literacy by schools, enterprises, trade unions, mass media, and social organizations (like Canadian Literacy Federation, Adult Education Association). National civil society organizations, such as the Canadian Labor Congress and the National Anti-Poverty Organization, also give support to adult literacy education. Brazil is no exception. In 1967, the Brazilian government had enacted the lifelong Education Act on Adult Education which made literacy education an important part of the Government's Ministry of Education and Culture. The act authorized the government to establish the National Literacy Campaign Foundation and raised funds for literacy through lotteries, donations and many other channels, all contributing a lot to literacy.

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