

FEATURE

A new approach

The Rural China Education Foundation promotes education for people in rural China that prepares them to improve their own lives and communities.

By Wei Ji Ma, Diane Geng and Sara Lam

Rural China is home to about one in every ten people on Earth and to more than 150 million school-aged children – a staggering number, comparable to half the U.S. population. The children of rural China frequently suffer the negative consequences of China’s economic boom: they are separated from their parents, who move to the cities as migrant workers, they lose their best teachers to city schools, and their communities fall in the blind spot of many national politicians.

Rural parents often perceive education as a means for their children to break free from harsh living conditions and to find jobs in the city. However, in practice, the odds are heavily stacked against rural students, due to the lack of adequately trained rural teachers, urban-centered textbooks with content that rural students cannot relate to, the rules of the university admission system, their parents’ inability to afford private exam preparation, and sometimes the need to earn money for their family. As a consequence, the vast majority of rural children do not advance to high school, whereas the vast majority of urban children do.

The disparity in education levels between urban and rural areas, though prominent, is not the defining challenge facing rural education. The deeper issue revolves around the single-minded focus of the education most rural children do receive. Throughout China, the contents and methods of the entire basic education system are finely tailored to make students perform well on

standardized examinations. By comparison, little attention is devoted to the development of thinking and action skills that are applicable outside the classroom. In cities, this is mitigated by extracurricular activities and other learning opportunities, which are largely absent in rural areas. The basic education that rural children receive lacks relevance to their lives and does not provide them with the capabilities they need to make a difference in their communities.

A middle school teacher in Guizhou stated this problem as follows: “I started teaching wanting to develop human talent, but this education is taking human talent and making it useless. Students come in with their own talents, interests and a desire to learn. Only those with extreme determination make it through and most break under the pressure, becoming good-for-nothing. Those ones will go to labor in the city or stay here as farmers, but will not have learned to do either. I want to make the fields their school. I want them to learn how to take the riches of our land and turn it into something valuable. I want them to develop the talents they have into something that is useful to them.”

We founded the Rural China Education Foundation (RCEF) in 2005 with the problems of goals, contents, and methods of rural education in mind. We found that many nonprofit organizations already focused on material aid for rural students, including book fees, boarding fees, school buildings, books, teaching supplies, school furniture, and computers. It was





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disconcerting to observe that attempts to improve the quality of education – that is, what happens in the classroom after all the material needs are satisfied – were few and far between. RCEF's mission became “to promote education for people in rural China that prepares them to improve their own lives and communities.”

In our first years, we organized summer volunteer programs in which students and young professionals, mostly from overseas, received a one-week training and went to rural schools to teach classes. Subjects ranged from Health Education to Community Research to Theater Games. In late 2007, we decided to stop these extracurricular summer camps. Although the program was successful and expanding it to more schools would have been relatively straightforward, such a program would always have structural deficits. Being short in duration, relying on non-professional teachers, and unintegrated with regular schools, it would not stand a chance of leaving a lasting impact on the quality of rural children's education. Instead,

RCEF's focus shifted to the year-round, professionally led coaching of local teachers in new teaching methods and curriculum development.

We received a fellowship from Echoing Green, the non-profit incubator that also supported Teach for America in its early days. Our main site became Guan Ai Primary School in Yongji, Shanxi Province, a school founded by local teachers dissatisfied with the regular education system and with big dreams about providing nurturing, holistic education to rural children. Our staff consisted of teaching coaches, who were experienced teachers or other educational professionals. They collaborated with local teachers using a method called “action research”, a term coined by the American psychologist Kurt Lewin: a continuing cycle of the teaching coach observing a class and then together with the teacher evaluating it, implementing improvements, and reflecting. This methodology was more helpful to teachers than watching “model lessons” – a frequent training

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technique in China – as it was tailored to their particular situation, required their active participation, and stimulated them to engage in critical reflection on the outcomes of their teaching.

In terms of content, RCEF worked with the teachers to develop creative curriculum across a range of subjects, but our philosophy culminated in a flagship subject, service learning. In one characteristic example of service learning, fourth to sixth-graders conducted research on smoking in the village. This comprised preparing and conducting interviews with villagers, and analyzing self-collected statistical and qualitative data. The students then formulated and implemented an anti-smoking campaign, an important part of which was a presentation to the residents of three villages around their school. Students reported feeling greatly empowered by this project.

In another example, we funneled students' interest in raising animals into a project of raising chickens at the school. This involved many activities that developed children's analytical, decision-making, lateral-thinking, and communication skills: interviewing chicken farmers about their techniques, designing the coop, calculating the amount of material needed to build it, and discussing whether to use chemical or organic feed (the students unanimously decided to use organic feed). The students raised the chickens successfully, learning about the characteristics of chickens along the way, and eventually sold their eggs at a local market.

These projects stand out in China for two reasons. First, RCEF strives to let students decide

About RCEF

RCEF is an international non-profit organization dedicated to promoting education for people in rural China that empowers them to improve their lives and communities. They support rural educators to develop teaching methods and curriculum in line with our mission. From 2005-2010, RCEF grew from a volunteer-run organization to a staff of 7 overseas and 6 mainland education workers in rural China.

<http://www.ruralchina.org>

what topics they want to research – the projects above arose out of student choice, not just teacher choice. Second, RCEF's projects consciously try to integrate skills from different subjects (language, math, science, art, social studies) so that children experience pulling together and applying academic skills or knowledge to solve real-world problems.

At Guan Ai School, we were also involved in other aspects of education. We introduced methods for creative testing that complemented the national examinations, since the latter typically only test a narrow set of skills and overlook

application. We initiated Parent Meetings; in rural China, it is still very uncommon to actively and structurally involve parents in their children's education. The first few parent meetings focused on common parenting challenges: "How to help children make better use of holiday time" and "Limiting children's intake of junk food".

Guan Ai had to close its doors in 2010 because of a nationwide policy of consolidating smaller primary schools into bigger ones. However, with the support of the local government, we began partnerships with two public primary schools in the same county. In these schools, we continue our focus on service learning, but now largely embedded in Reading class, a subject that also provides more easily measurable benefits. In addition, RCEF is moving towards becoming a platform for teachers and principals from all over China to develop their own ideas on quality education. We are in the process of developing teacher training courses and written documentation to provide support and a learning environment to practitioners in other schools.

RCEF's model is considered one of the more innovative among education-related non-governmental organizations in China. Because of this, RCEF has been recognized by Echoing Green, Clinton Global Initiative, Global Fund for Children, Tiger Woods Foundation, the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation, and others. It has been very gratifying to see the breadth and depth of support for education in rural China beyond material needs.

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This article will also appear in Solutions;
<http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com> in September 2011.