

Education in Rural China: A Fieldwork Study on Reasons Behind School Dropouts of Female Students

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ABSTRACT: In the remote provinces of Southwest China, school dropout, especially among girls, has been a widespread phenomenon. This sociological paper presents findings from a two-year field study tracking female students withdrawing or continuing their education in Guizhou. Based on ecological systems theory, the analysis concludes that the main causes of student exits are parents' low expectations for girls' education and a lack of intrinsic motivation for learning at the microsystem level. Moreover, local traditions promoting early marriage and dismissal of education as futile exacerbate dropout occurrences in the macrosystem.

Keywords – Inequality, women and rural education, school dropouts, China

I. Introduction

China has become one of the upper-middle-income countries in the world (World Bank). In 2022, the retention rate of its nine-year compulsory education was 95.5% (Ministry of Education). Despite these achievements, dropout remains a considerable educational issue in rural areas, especially among female students.

Existing literature has examined the phenomenon of school withdrawal among rural girls from various perspectives. Important reasons for their dropout included pregnancy (Zhou), son preference, household poverty (Meng et al.; Lei), and a widespread belief that education is of little practical value in society (Li).

With the implementation of poverty alleviation policies and the gradual improvement of local economic conditions, cases where students are unable to continue schooling due to financial concerns have become relatively rare. However, school abandonment is still prevalent among rural primary and secondary schools, more often voluntary than coerced, where students willingly give up their studies (Ou and Wang).

In today's society, where transmission of information is rapid and students' wills are growing stronger, why do outstanding female students still choose to quit school voluntarily? To investigate this question, the author came into contact with several rural girls who chose to discontinue their studies at schools in the southwestern Guizhou province. Through daily interactions and multiple interviews, the author gathered and analyzed interview records to gain insights into their decision-making.

II. Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Voluntary dropout among academically well-performing students is complex and not monocausal; rather, it is a result of multiple interplaying factors. Considering this characteristic, this study adopts ecological systems theory as the theoretical basis for analysis.

The ecological systems theory was proposed by American scholar Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979, integrating biology, psychology, and other social sciences. It states that various influencing systems present in an individual's living environment affect him or her in different ways, while the individual, in turn, exerts influence on those systems. This ecological systems framework can be regarded as a series of nested structures (Bronfenbrenner and

Ceci), comprising five interrelated systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, “Ecology of the Family as a Context for Human Development”).

The microsystem includes complicated personal characteristics, such as an individual’s personality, beliefs, and temperament, as well as the people with whom the person interacts regularly, such as family members, school teachers, and classmates. The mesosystem refers to the system of microsystems, which is composed of the connections among different microsystems in an individual’s life. For instance, the interaction between the school and family forms a mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* 3). The exosystem involves one or more environments that lack a person’s active participation but are connected to the microsystems. For example, the parents’ workplace is an exosystem, which can directly influence the schedules, thinking, and emotions of parents and indirectly cast an impact on their children’s experiences (Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* 3; Bronfenbrenner and Evans; Brim). The outermost layer is the macrosystem, which represents the broader social blueprint of a specific culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci). It creates the overarching patterns of interaction among different micro-, meso-, and exosystems, in which patterns of social communication are an essential component (Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* 3).

2.2 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research method using purposive sampling. The four participants come from southwestern Guizhou, China. Among them, two academically successful girls dropped out of school, and two continued their studies. They belong to different ethnic minority groups, live in neighboring villages, and attend the same rural school. All four ranked, or used to rank, among the top ten students in their grade and are of similar ages.

Moreover, this study adopts the in-depth interview method, conducting multiple rounds of interviews with the four participants, their school principals and teachers, and their parents. The initial interviews with the participants were designed to build trust and help them feel comfortable. Conversations were kept informal and friendly, following a semi-structured questioning format to collect data. Based on the content summary, the author refined the questions of the initial interview according to the keywords mentioned, making the interviews more targeted.

Table 1: Information About Research Participants

Participants	Ethnicity	Family Background	Education Status
A	Miao	She is the eldest daughter in a family with two younger sisters and two younger brothers. Her father works away from home for extended periods, while her mother remains at home to care for the children. The family’s financial condition is modest but sufficient to support her education.	Quit school in the first year of high school and subsequently married.
B	Yi	She resides in a family with two younger brothers. Her parents engage in subsistence farming. The family is registered as being in poverty, and her education is supported through societal financial assistance.	Left school in the second year of middle school to seek jobs.
C	Yi	She lost her father in an accident at the age of eleven, and her mother left the family thereafter. The eldest of five sisters, she was raised by her grandmother until her passing in 2020. She has been identified as a student from a low-income household and receives sponsorship for her education.	Continued schooling.

D	Bouyei	She is the only child of the family. Her father works as a migrant laborer, while her mother is engaged in agricultural work at home. The family's financial condition meets her schooling demands.	Continued schooling.
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III. Interview Description and Analysis

Based on the collected data from multiple thirty-minute interviews, three primary reasons for voluntary school dropouts are mentioned, categorized, and analyzed, including an individual's fatalism, parental expectations for education and their relations with the parents' backgrounds, and commonly found socio-cultural beliefs.

3.1 Fatalism and the Lack of Subjective Initiative in Learning

Learning expectations refer to the predictions, goals, or anticipations that individuals hold toward educational activities (Fines). They include both the outlook of the learning process and the presumptions about the outcomes. Therefore, by reflecting what a student can gain from instructions, learning expectations address the fundamental purpose of learning: How does education contribute to an individual's life and their overall well-being?

Participant B received educational financial support due to her family's poverty. She studied diligently and exhibited excellent academic performance. Since her younger brother was also of school age, her mother asked her to drop out of school and work to earn money for the family. B did not resist this decision, as she confided, "My mother told me that girls will eventually get married, so studying too much knowledge is useless. I have to take care of my younger brother, and it is natural just to follow my mother's advice."

Similarly, participant A displayed a strong academic performance and was admitted to one of the best high schools in the county. After only two months of attendance, her mother arranged a marriage for her as she dropped out of school. A explained, "Studying is very tiring. My mother said that my future husband's family is well-off. Missing this opportunity means lifetime suffering in poverty... Besides, even if you finish high school, you may not be able to go to university. Going to college far away is also not safe. It's better to stay at home."

During the days interacting with B, the author noticed that she was very self-conscious about being a girl, feeling a deep sense of inferiority that stemmed from the son preference within her family. She mentioned how her mother often scolded her, reminding her how fortunate she was to have two younger brothers. Otherwise, if B were the only child of the family, her mother would have felt that she had let her family down.

When B decided to withdraw from school, her teachers went to her home multiple times to persuade her, but she insisted that she was the eldest in the family and therefore ought to make sacrifices for the family members. She was actually relieved that she could solve her family's problems and believed that securing a regular job did not require higher levels of education. Therefore, teachers' intervention in the mesosystem level could not effectively alter thoughts upheld in the microsystem level.

A also shared, "My grandmother always said that, for a girl, finding a good husband is of the highest priority. The neighboring families and I have lived in the mountains for generations. Following their footsteps and continuing on this path will surely lead to a stable life. As for anything else, I don't dare to hope for it." During the conversation, the author attempted to ask about her opinion on resuming school multiple times. "You earned such excellent grades and have been admitted to a well-known high school. Do you think you will likely be qualified for a good university?" Nevertheless, she kept shaking her head. "It's impossible. As the high school curriculum gets more rigorous, my grades will drop. Our family has never had an undergraduate student. Besides, I'm a girl. My mother said, 'I need to properly raise my younger brother and strive to get him into university instead.'" Her words emphasized her mission as a caregiver for boys in her family.

From the above interviews, the girls who quit internalized fatalism and held a weak notion of resistance, which in turn restricted their self-awareness. They believed that even if they pursued higher education, the prescribed gender roles could not be changed in their predetermined futures. As a result, their motivation for studying was weak. For them, schooling was not essential, and they held no firm aspirations for attending university. They also rarely defied their parents' arrangements, believing that dropping out was destined and unchangeable. Moreover, they contended that their future career options would be limited to jobs with low skill requisites that required little formal educational background, thus perceiving continuing their education to be of little value. Such low learning and career expectations led to a decreased commitment to academic pursuits, thereby increasing the likelihood of terminating their education.

In contrast, the learning expectations of girls who continued their education were significantly different from those who quit. Due to family hardships, participant C relied on financial aid to continue her education. During

the interviews, she expressed great confidence in persisting with her studies and eventually attending university. C claimed, "I want to and have to study. This is the only way to change my current situation. Even if I work for a factory in the future, I will be sitting in an office earning a salary, not working around machines." Through this reasoning, C expressed that education would result in less physically intensive work, hopefully, in a position that was more respected and ranked at a higher level.

Similarly, participant D remarked, "My mother works in the fields all day. If I want to have a different life from hers, the only way is through studying and attending a university. Moreover, I perform well in school, and my teachers and classmates all like me. I also appreciate studying at school. Their recognition makes me feel happy."

The girls who continued their education did not hold strong fatalistic beliefs. They, instead, demonstrated longer-term expectations for their studies and regarded current learning as necessary preparation for the future, in which they aimed to achieve higher. Therefore, they had an accurate and justified understanding of the value of education. Through attending university and transcending the limits they had endured as a result of their rural identity, they could achieve a more fulfilling and meaningful life. With this strong aspiration to improve their living standards, they had more motivation and enthusiasm for learning.

3.2 Parental Educational Expectations

Parental educational expectations refer to the aspirations, goals, and psychological expectations that a family system (including parents or other guardians) holds regarding the growth, development, and achievements of their children during the educational process (Pinquart and Ebeling). These expectations are embedded in family interactions, educational decision-making, and resource allocation, directly influencing children's motivation to learn, the formation of values, and social adaptability.

When A and B considered dropping out of school, school teachers visited their homes, urging their parents to support them to continue their studies. Nonetheless, during the conversations, the teachers felt hopeless. "A's mother only completed primary school education. She believed that girls don't need to go to school and that all the money spent on their education would be a waste. No matter how much we tried to persuade her, she just wouldn't listen." She continued, "It was even more difficult to communicate with B's parents. They closed the door and refused to let us in. B kept begging us to transfer her financial aid to her younger brother and repeatedly asked us not to bother her parents, insisting that dropping out of school was her voluntary choice."

The educational background of A's parents sheds light on their beliefs. According to the teachers, A's mother, coming from a neighboring village, also married early. She gave birth to A at the age of seventeen and never explored the world beyond her village. Her husband only completed primary school and worked as a security guard in the county. Other relatives in A's family engaged in subsistence farming, barely making a living. Under financial difficulty and an agricultural setting, the family maintained a serious son preference, viewing boys as valuable economic assets and girls as encumbrances. Therefore, when the groom's family offered a substantial amount of bride price, A's parents urged her to forsake school. The situation in B's family was even more typical. Her parents had a low level of education, and, for three generations, none of her direct relatives had worked or lived in cities.

In both families, the parents' educational expectations for A and B were low, focusing on achieving marriage and preparing for family life, as opposed to academic improvement. Ideally, they would have their female children marry into wealthier nearby families so that they could support each other. Consequently, the education they emphasized concentrated on domestic skills, including completing household chores, such as cooking, washing clothes, maintaining filiality to parents, and raising children. Far less time and money were invested in empowering the girls with knowledge. A recalled, "Since I was little, my mother taught me to cook and do needlework. She always warned me that if I couldn't do them well, I wouldn't be able to find a good husband. Every week when I got home, I had to prioritize finishing all the chores my mother assigned to me before doing my homework." B also reported, "My mother has always taught me not to rebut adults and be obedient. After I got married, I should also listen to my parents-in-law and my husband. If I read too many books, no one would dare to marry me." Thus, parents' educational expectations directly shape girls' self-perception and their own learning expectations.

Conversely, the educational expectations of participants C's and D's families were completely different. C was raised by her grandmother and directly benefited from her modern perspectives towards girls' education. Although her grandmother was not well-educated, she recognized the importance of school attendance. C recalled, "After my parents left, my grandmother raised us five siblings together. When my grandmother was young, her parents also favored boys over girls, so my aunt didn't go to school, but all my uncles did, two of them even joining the army. Despite these hardships, my grandmother always encouraged us sisters to study hard, believing that would lead us to success. She took on all the household chores, as long as we studied well." When asked, "Then what about your life afterwards?" C replied, "My uncle came to take care of us as he returned from the military. We also received financial support from the government and donations. My uncle, like my grandmother, also supported our

education.” During interviews, C’s uncle was talkative and replied with a cheerful tone. “How can a girl not study? Boys and girls are the same. Now it’s the new era. We live in a remote area, but transportation has improved over the past two years. Sadly, the living conditions are still harsh,” he stated. C’s uncle also revealed contradictions in governmental policies: “The government also encourages us to move closer to the central towns, but without education, we can’t find jobs there. Quitting school means destroying one’s future. As an elder, the only thing I can do is to support them in their education.” He believed that education was the only way out of the mountains and held a more realistic perception of job requirements.

Meanwhile, D’s father has been working away from home as a bricklayer and steelworker, occasionally participating in small-scale construction projects. D’s new family house was entirely her father’s work, constructed over three years. During the interview, D’s father did not speak much but pinpointed, “We have only one daughter. I can’t let her future be tied to this undeveloped village. So, I always told her to study hard, get into university, and learn a skill to support a better life.”

Comparisons among the educational expectations of different families reveal that the knowledge and experiences of parents impact their visions for their children’s education and future. Parents with a low level of education and a narrow range of social experiences, living in relatively closed environments with little access to sources of information, are inclined to adhere to more traditional lifestyles. Their expectations for their children’s education will be for them to lead similar lives as their parents, without having more forward-looking and progressive goals. Especially for girls, the deeply rooted patriarchal ideals of son preference and early marriage contribute significantly to the dropout of top-performing girls, perpetuating traditional gender roles. On the other hand, when parents’ living and working conditions allow them to be in contact with the outside world, their educational expectations will be more progressive. Having successfully ventured out of the mountains and witnessed economic development in urban areas, these parents tend to value education as a key pathway for upward mobility. These experiences reinforced the belief that, by studying hard, their children can enjoy greater opportunities and higher living standards.

3.3 Social Environment

3.3.1 Early Marriage Customs and Traditional Social Expectations of Women’s Roles

Most local ethnic minorities have a tradition of early marriage. With social development and modernization, the views on marriage and childbearing of the Yi and Bouyei ethnic groups have gradually changed. However, in the Miao culture, early marriage, as a cultural symbol and traditional custom, continues to hold strong significance in the community since it is regarded as a way to inherit and respect their culture.

In gender theory, functionalism (Wienclaw) suggests that a woman’s ability to give birth determines her occupational role. In rural communities, females are expected to spend most of their time in the domestic sphere, fulfilling their duties to feed and care for children. Such expectations for gender roles and the early marriage custom are critical social factors leading to school dropout among high-achieving rural female students. This point is exemplified by A’s comment, “Getting married earlier can alleviate the family’s financial burden. My mother said that as one grows older, it might be more difficult to have children. That would be very unfortunate and unacceptable for my parents.”

3.3.2 Belief in the Futility of Education

The growing challenges for college graduates, such as a high unemployment rate and the widening education gap between urban and rural areas, have exacerbated notions of uselessness and hopelessness of pursuing higher education among rural populations. In an interview, B said, “Getting into university is too difficult for many of us. The teaching quality in our county is incomparable with that in the cities. Besides, I have also seen news reports saying that, after graduation, one may spend months looking for a job, which has become increasingly difficult. Now, I already have a part-time job, and if I do well, I can sign a long-term contract to secure this position.” This is a common concern, as one teacher explained, “In recent years, the school’s hardware facilities have improved under government subsidies, including network coverage, multimedia teaching facilities, laboratories, and the construction of the school’s sports field. The real issue now is about having quality teachers and keeping them at rural schools.”

For primary and secondary education, school infrastructure is uniformly invested in and constructed according to standards by the government. However, disparities in educational quality as a result of limited funds and a shortage of teaching staff still pervade rural areas. Therefore, a social sentiment that children from poor families cannot become successful pervades, representing a general disillusionment with social mobility. Under this atmosphere, rural families, who already have a meager income, are more disposed to perceive education as a poor economic investment. This mindset culminates in an expectation that children should shift away from attending college and, instead, drop out of school once basic skills are learned and turn to more pragmatic alternatives, such as

early marriage and paid labor. Influenced by this social environment, academically successful female students lack self-confidence and learning aspirations to support their studies and are therefore prone to yielding to their parents' arrangements.

IV. Conclusion

According to ecological systems theory, the microsystem provides a framework for the processes that shape an individual's psychological development and behavioral changes. The family is one of the most important components within the microsystem. Therefore, the educational expectations of parents directly affect their children, representing a key manifestation of how the family's microenvironment influences children's development and educational outcomes.

Girls acquire and formulate their learning expectations and construct their social identity through their daily interactions with their parents. For instance, participants A and B, who believed in fatalism and held low expectations for education, were confused about their future and chose to leave school, following their parents' arrangements. On the contrary, participants C and D, who actively rejected fatalism and possessed high learning expectations, firmly believed that education could bring about better futures and thus continued their studies. These contrasts reflect the familial influences that result in divergent educational and life pathways for students of similar academic capacity.

The early marriage custom and the futility of education operate on the level of the macrosystem. During social and cultural development, these forces influence society's perception of female education, fostering the belief that women should marry early rather than pursue higher education. The futility of education is also a social concept that impacts certain groups, downgrading the value of learning and distorting educational expectations, thereby affecting an individual's decision. In this study, the dropouts of A and B are indirectly affected by factors in the macrosystem in which traditional gender norms lessened their motivation for continuing school.

In conclusion, this study indicates that the reasons behind the withdrawal of high-achieving rural female students are the result of the interaction between the microsystem of the family and the individual and the macrosystem of the social environment, with familial influences especially impacting students' decision-making.

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