

Challenges in establishing kindergarten education system in villages of Guizhou, China: A preliminary study

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The *Miao* ethnic group is among the 56 minority groups in China. Their ideas of education for young children differ from that of the mainstream education system in China. This study examines the scenario of early childhood education for *Miao* children living in villages of Guizhou Province. It discusses the history and traditions of the *Miaos* and the kinds and forms of education provided, but not necessarily desired, for their children between 3 and 5 years old. School principals and teachers responded to such issues, and visual data collected during a field trip to two different villages were used to triangulate the responses. Findings show that even though there has been a strong belief that links poverty to the opportunity of schooling, empirical evidence from this study cannot yet confirm this argument. Parents' views of schooling were considered as influential factors. Nonetheless, challenges of early childhood education in rural areas, especially in underprivileged villages, of China are still inseparable from availability of resources and the government's initiatives.

Introduction

In a government document entitled the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)*, a strategic development plan for education has been mapped out for China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2010). This document highlights that early childhood education for 0 to 3-year olds should be emphasised. The importance of further developing kindergarten education for 3- to 6-year olds is reiterated through including kindergarten education into the construction scheme for new villages (建設中國新農鄉村) in China. This scheme, soon turned into a campaign with the title 'The Prettiest Village of China' (中國美麗鄉村) (Wang 2015), focuses, among other issues, on the development of kindergarten education in rural areas throughout China. The implications of this kind of scheme include maximising young children's chances of receiving kindergarten education, expanding educational resources of provisions, constructing new institutions for caring of the young, supporting poor areas with extra human resources found in secondary and primary schools and setting up pre-primary classes in primary schools (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2010).

A short chapter on kindergarten education in *The National Outline* is certainly good news. However, it will take the Chinese government a while to achieve the desired goals considering that kindergarten education has not reached all children in the cities, counties and towns of China, not to mention those in the villages (Guo 2008:36). There are inevitably contextual issues embedded in the villages that need to be unpacked, addressed and resolved.

Based on empirical data, this article examines the general issues pertaining to the development of kindergarten education in rural areas in China. In particular, it will focus on illustrating the history and culture of the *Miao* people in Guizhou, a south-western province in China, as well as the current situation of young children's education through the lenses of the principals and teachers. Using the Anji Play Curriculum as an example, this article also discusses the possible approaches to providing different learning opportunities for children of the *Miao* ethnic group in Guizhou. The discussion might shed light on some of the challenges in establishing kindergarten education systems in the underprivileged villages of China.

The Chinese context and the *Miao* people

Basic statistics of school children enrolment

According to the 2010 census (The Sixth National Census 2010), in 31 provinces, cities and autonomy zones, there were approximately 8.4 million infants (the under-1-year olds) and 36 million 1- to 4-year

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olds in the rural areas of China. Among these children, about 1.7 million reside in Guizhou Province. Because the one-child policy¹ in China has never been strictly implemented in rural areas where labour force is needed for agricultural work, the number is expected to have increased moderately. Statistics provided by the Education Bureau show that in the year 2012, there were about 24 million children in some sort of early-year settings – 21 million were under 5 years old and 3 million were 6 and over (Table 1) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2012a). In terms of the number of kindergartens and pre-primary classes, there were 181 251 early-year settings in China (including 3857 kindergartens or 2.13% of minority groups), which provided 1 266 496 classes. Statistics also show that among the 181 251 early-year settings, only 36 992 or 20.4% were run by the state and the rest by communities or private sectors (Table 2) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2012b). In rural China, according to the previous survey, there were only 63 091 early-year settings (including 2791 or 4.42% of minority groups) and 17 014 or 27% of them were run by the education department. Obviously the number of early-year settings as a whole has been rising. All the kindergartens could provide 398 788 classes (Table 2).

Educational issues for the young in rural areas of China

Low enrolment rate

Schools in rural areas and urban schools often differ immensely in enrolment rate, economic standpoints, physical conditions, quality of teachers, curriculum design and pedagogy. Across these domains, the general observation is that the conditions are poor in rural areas and relatively good in the cities (Guo 2008:36). Some scholars criticise the government for not paying enough attention to the importance of education in villages; thus, the problems occurred as a chain effect (Li 2009:8). Kindergarten education is outside the 9-year fee-free or compulsory education scheme, which encompasses 6 years of primary education and up to 3 years of secondary education. As the aforementioned statistics show, most early-year settings are run by private sectors. Moreover, the state does not provide subsidies for the operation of those non-state settings.

The natural geographical features of villages in rural areas make accessibility to educational settings a problem. The villages are usually scattered in mountainous and vast areas. Many children have to walk for 2–3 hours on mountain trails to school, making it almost impossible for young children to access the schools. Others are fortunate enough to live near their schools and can go home for lunch.

Lack of qualified teachers

The poor economy and living conditions of rural areas cannot attract qualified teachers to work and stay in the villages

1. The One-Child Policy stated that any couple could only give birth to one child (including legal adoption). This policy was under the Birth Control Plan, which had been effective since 1979. In year 2013, modifications were introduced into the policy, which loosened the restrictions. In 2015, the policy was further relaxed. Now all couples are allowed to have two children.

TABLE 1: Number of students in pre-school education by age (total 2012).

Variable	Entrants	Enrolment	Leavers
Unit: person			
Female	8 697 429	17 071 302	6 880 483
Minorities	1 790 051	2 838 231	1 381 359
Total	19 119 154	36 857 624	14 335 717
Run by Education Department			
3 years under	207 879	223 959	-
3 years	2 215 727	2 499 047	-
4 years	1 726 324	3 820 414	-
5 years	3 564 353	6 367 647	1 551 456
6 years and over	1 365 988	1 839 965	5 600 387
Run by Non-Education Department			
3 years under	31 415	33 844	-
3 years	116 671	156 830	-
4 years	43 200	199 571	-
5 years	43 211	220 911	46 933
6 years and over	12 770	33 267	173 139
Run by Local Enterprises			
3 years under	117 659	332 217	106 699
3 years	20 382	22 645	-
4 years	56 693	87 367	-
5 years	20 242	105 160	-
6 years and over	18 063	108 967	22 440
Run by Public Institutions			
3 years under	2279	8078	84 259
3 years	284 925	593 417	249 930
4 years	17 149	19 229	-
5 years	88 474	116 380	-
6 years and over	62 481	170 452	-
3 years	94 881	244 227	37 922
4 years	21 940	43 129	212 008
Run by Army			
3 years under	42 669	130 534	33 282
3 years	9130	9949	-
4 years	23 964	36 405	-
5 years	5297	42 308	-
6 years and over	3927	39 980	5339
3 years	351	1892	27 943
Run by Communities			
3 years under	690 140	1 878 557	673 257
3 years	49 142	55 517	-
4 years	371 626	460 722	-
5 years	135 345	601 616	-
6 years and over	118 187	697 707	96 427
3 years	15 840	62 995	576 830
Non-government			
3 years under	8 656 223	18 527 444	5 900 634
3 years	960 742	1 140 549	-
4 years	3 014 102	4 302 957	-
5 years	2 225 447	5 860 850	-
6 years and over	2 120 223	6 415 535	1 453 843
3 years	335 709	807 553	4 446 791

Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012a, 'Number of students in pre-school education by age (Total 2012)', viewed 10 March 2014, from <http://www.moe.edu.cn>. [In Chinese]

(Xu & Wang 2008:33). There are many challenges. Electricity supply is unstable. There is a shortage of accommodation for teachers. Recreation is scarce in mountainous and remote villages. All these adverse conditions make life in rural areas intolerable for young and qualified teachers who are used to living in towns and cities.

Government policies

In rural areas where the annual income per head is still very low, most parents cannot afford to pay school fees. In recent years, education for ethnic minorities in China has received

TABLE 2: Number of kindergartens, classes in pre-school education (2012).

Unit: person	Kindergartens		Classes
	Total	Minorities	
Total	181 251	3857	1 266 496
Run by Education Department	36 992	3107	475 581
Run by Non-education Department	1853	33	18 753
Run by Local Enterprises	1406	-	10 699
Run by Public Institutions	3192	52	19 513
Run by Army	487	1	4046
Run by Communities	12 683	93	65 349
Non-government	124 638	571	672 555
Urban area	57 677	340	433 113
Run by Education Department	6706	128	85 412
Run by Non-education Department	1195	4	13 343
Run by Local Enterprises	1132	-	8855
Run by Public Institutions	986	14	7877
Run by Army	461	1	3902
Run by Communities	3707	15	26 175
Non-government	43 490	178	287 549
Urban-rural transitional area	11 784	58	79 847
Run by Education Department	1100	42	14 448
Run by Non-education Department	48	-	485
Run by Local Enterprises	78	-	535
Run by Public Institutions	133	1	655
Run by Army	16	-	104
Run by Communities	1660	3	9441
Non-government	8749	12	54 179
County and Town Area	60 483	726	434 595
Run by Education Department	13 272	477	166 405
Run by Non-education Department	539	10	4679
Run by Local Enterprises	225	-	1591
Run by Public Institutions	941	17	5855
Run by Army	13	-	80
Run by Communities	2755	11	18 348
Non-government	42 738	211	237 637
County-town transitional area	19 233	167	131 774
Run by Education Department	3853	120	50 205
Run by Non-education Department	55	1	482
Run by Local Enterprises	52	-	338
Run by Public Institutions	269	4	1419
Run by Army	1	-	6
Run by Communities	1388	7	7444
Non-government	13 615	35	71 880
Rural Area	63 091	2791	398 788
Run by Education Department	17 014	2502	223 764
Run by Non-education Department	119	19	731
Run by Local Enterprises	49	-	253
Run by Public Institutions	1265	21	5781
Run by Army	13	-	64
Run by Communities	6221	67	20 826
Non-government (<i>Min ban</i>)	38 410	182	147 369
Total independent kindergarten	-	-	1 016 462
Kindergarten classes attached to school	-	-	250 034

Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012b, 'Number of kindergartens, classes in pre-school education (2012)', viewed 10 March 2014, from <http://www.moe.edu.cn>. [In Chinese]

much attention from the Central Government. Yang and Wu (2009) reported that from exemption of family policies such as the one-child policy, protected employment opportunities, preferential admissions to higher education and at lower fees, to political representation in the government offices, there have been policy preferences and privileges for all the ethnic minority groups. Yet, ethnographic research shows

that education is not the top priority for the *Miaos* (Wang 2011).

Others speculate that parents' ideas of education prevent young children from entering early-year settings. Many parents of minority ethnic groups believe that acquisition of knowledge takes place not only at schools. Some parents consider that it is better for children to learn farming and grazing from their parents than going to schools. Even picking wooden sticks for fire is a useful life skill (Wang 2011). The reason why some send their school-age children to school is that these children are too young for heavy farm work. Moreover, they are pressurised by the local government to register their children at school so as to comply with parents' lawful duty (Yang 2009). As the enrolment rate is low, only a few non-state early-year settings manage to survive.

A brief account of the Miaos – their history and culture

The history of the *Miao* people can be traced back to the tribal period of China, and they are the descendents of the *Chi You Clan* (蚩尤族). The *Miao* ethnic group is one of the oldest minorities in China and they migrated to Guizhou from different parts of the Chinese territory. There are approximately 8.7 million *Miaos*, about half of them reside in Guizhou. The *Miaos* worship nature and totem, and their ancestors' life stories make them a special group (Introduction of the Miao Ethnic Group 2010). They use the *Miao* language (苗語) but do not have their own scripts. Their values, knowledge and skills have been passed on verbally. They are known for their unique dance and handicrafts, such as cloth printing, head ornaments and embroideries. In *Miao* societies today, most *Miaos* speak and write the *Han* or Chinese language (漢語) (Introduction of the Miao Ethnic Group 2010).

The *Miao* people cleverly recorded their history, culture and traditions through the embroidery designs on their clothing. Hence, instead of preserving their history and culture in writing and archives, they used to migrate with their history and culture in an artistic form (Sund 2009). The themes of the *Miao* embroidery ranges from history, worship of nature, understanding of life, legends, to expression of affection. Their embroidery work symbolises their writing. Residing in remote and often underprivileged villages in China, such as those in Guizhou, agriculture is still their primary source of livelihood. In the context of such a unique culture and the absence of recognised writing, it might take a way of thinking about teaching and learning that is different from what is presently offered by the education system in China, which is established predominantly by the *Hans*.

Literature review on the idea of 'schooling' – A conceptual framework

This review briefly examines three aspects that are pertinent to this study, namely, schooling effects and mobility process

for rural children and the concepts of cultural and family ecology.

Schooling effects and mobility process for rural children

Any schooling anticipates either short-term educational outcomes or long-term effects. Such effects usually bring forth job security and economic results in the future. Others might reckon that personal growth in professional competence or even universal values, for example, a sense of justice and equality, are desirable educational effects. To use Allmendinger's (1989) term, there are mobility processes in one's development, which allow an individual to gain the momentum for upward mobility. This creates variation in how education is organised for different social classes. Hugh *et al.* (2000) argued for the concept of diversity of growing up. Both individual and environmental factors interactively shape the mobility processes (Allmendinger 1989).

In addition to the above, teachers' beliefs and concepts of educational values and strategies are important factors associated with achieving schooling effects (Diez 2010; Hedge & Cassidy 2009; Tatto 1998). Richardson (2003) argued that teachers' beliefs are supported by personal theories about teaching and learning. Once they take shape, they have a persistent impact on the teacher as well as the pedagogies employed.

Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1997) added activities of siblings as another factor associated with children's schooling progress and future life activities. This focus highlights the role of family effects. When studying children's schooling situations in Peru, these scholars found that for children from rural families, who usually have more than one child, family issues have significant impact on a child's schooling experience, upbringing and future life patterns. Continuing this vein of thought, Seal and Harmon (1995) studied rural Appalachian families and reported that there are communal and cultural issues to be considered contextually as the indigenous groups have their own educational and occupational aspirations, which may differ from those of the educators' and educational authorities'. Giving children an education that prepares them to leave the communities for city life was opposed by the locals (Seal & Harmon 1995). Kellar (2000) delineated the importance of sustaining rural development in the Australian context, which should take into account the factors that lead to rural stabilisation. To reach the goal of rural development, it should take more than offering financial incentives. The ideas presented above are important information for this study.

The concept of cultural ecology

Children do not grow up in isolation. The idea which states that children grow up within ecological systems was first advocated by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s (Bronfenbrenner 1977). The ecological systems, micro to macro, are saturated with social interactions between the

child and the immediate environment. From a time perspective, as the child grows and develops, the immediate environment changes, so does the social experiences. However, different social groups will respond to their social environment with distinct differences (Ogbu & Simons 1998). The cultural beliefs developed among members of a social group are inevitably key factors that shape the group members' attitudes and behaviours towards their 'environment', for example, towards the school system (Ogbu & Simons 1998). Ogbu and Simons (1998) applied the cultural ecology theory to explain the attitude and behaviours of voluntary and involuntary minority students in the United States towards schooling. The researchers highlighted that parents of involuntary minorities delivered 'double message' to their children as they reckoned that children should do well in school, but the school system and teachers are not to be trusted. Such mixed messages were, to a great extent, accountable for those children's low performance at school. The cultural ecology theory serves the purpose of reminding educators that there is a certain cultural pattern of attitudes and behaviours among group members. Children are inevitably socialised by the group members and demonstrate the attitude and behaviours they observed in the ecology of their living; thus, certain patterns of living and thinking are passed down from one generation to the next, such inter-generation views constitute what is known as cultural ecology.

The concept of family ecology

While Ogbu and his colleagues focused on group effects on children's development, other researchers have taken a microscopic approach to study the family's ecological effects on children's development and learning. According to Harrison *et al.* (1990), family ecology signifies that, '... important family functioning reflect the interactions between the family as a social system and other societal institutions and systems' (p. 348). Harrison and his colleagues suggested that alongside changes of the social environment, adaptive strategies, manifested as adaptive behaviours, are observable and cultural in nature. This observed social phenomenon also holds true for ethnic minority families. According to these researchers, the adaptive strategies or behaviours were learned in the family and adopted to enhance interdependence and avoid cultural discontinuities among ethnic minority children. Under the family ecology theory, children develop cognitively with cultural contents. The fear of cultural discontinuity was also discussed by Ogbu (1982). In other words, when cultural sensitivity is the priority for ethnic minority family members' development and learning, other educational goals become less important. Education as a stepping stone for economic interests and a life outside the community does not necessarily appeal to parents of ethnic minority groups (Seal & Hobert 1995). In fact, many ethnic groups have other means to fulfil their economic interests such as through making use of their geographical locations, natural resources and traditional handicrafts, which constitute an ecological economy (Garrod, Wornell & Youell 2006). It is believed that parental involvement is a strong

factor in children's success in school (Eccles & Harold 1993). In reality, it is a challenge to get ethnic minority parents' support for the school system.

In China, the *Miao* ethnic group has a distinct culture and socialisation system. Because the cultural ecology theory and family ecology theory can offer a social and cultural perspective to explain the ethnic minority groups' ideas of schooling, this article employed these two theories to scrutinise the schooling situation of the *Miao* children in China in relation to their teachers' belief and conception of kindergarten education.

The research questions

This preliminary study seeks to learn from teachers, and head teachers (most are of *Han* and few of *Miao* ethnicity), whose students are primarily from the *Miao* group, about their conceptions of kindergarten education in the local context. In particular, the following three research questions are discussed:

1. In what ways is kindergarten education understood by the teachers and head teachers in the *Miao* villages in Guizhou?
2. Which forms of education are available for young children, and why?
3. Do these teachers and parents share similar views of the importance of kindergarten education and in what ways it is important?

Methodology

This study was conducted during a field trip to Guizhou to enhance understanding of the current situation of schooling for young children in the rural areas. A qualitative research approach was used. This approach, also tied with an ethnographic tradition, affords opportunities to learn about local people's ways of living and thinking and to experience their living conditions, so as to understand the perspectives of the locals with first-hand information (Heath 1983).

In total, 47 kindergarten teachers, pre-primary class teachers, primary school teachers, and head teachers, representing 17 schools, took part in the study. Among them, 27 teachers and head teachers gathered together to participate in a 3-day training programme organised by a non-government and non-profit organisation based in Hong Kong. These village teachers and head teachers were sent by their local education commissions to attend the programme. They were expected to bring 'new' educational concepts back to the schools they come from and to lead changes in curriculum, pedagogic orientations and practice. All these participants travelled from various counties to *Da Fang* County (大方县) of Guizhou where the training programme was organised.

Data collection methods

All 27 teachers and head teachers were prospective participants who would be invited to respond to a set of

open-ended questions devised by the first author. The questions attempted to tap into the participants' knowledge and views on the curricula of the pre-primary classes in which they teach, their views on the importance of kindergarten education as well as what they thought kindergarten education should entail. A convenient sampling method was employed. A questionnaire was handed to each teacher by the first author during break time of the first day of the training programme, together with a photocopied note explaining the aim of the study and the confidential measures to be taken for the information they provided. All questionnaires were completed anonymously. To avoid any undue influence by the researcher on the participants of the training programme, the class representative was asked to collect the questionnaires from the teachers on the next day and to return them to the first author. As a result, 25 of 27 questionnaires were completed anonymously and returned to the first author.

Among these participants, four pre-primary class teachers from different primary schools, a head teacher from a primary school and a head teacher from a kindergarten were interviewed during tea breaks for their insights on the situation based on their expertise, teaching experiences and communication with parents and children.

A 4-day field trip to two villages provided opportunities for the first author to visit one primary school in each village, during which 20 more questionnaires (together with the notes explaining the purpose of the study and the measures for confidentiality) were distributed and collected through a teacher of each school. All 20 questionnaires were returned with anonymous responses. Additionally, six more pre-primary class teachers, three in each school, were interviewed. The purposes of the interviews were explained verbally to these six teachers and their verbal consent was obtained before each interview was conducted. Most of the teachers were of the *Han* ethnicity and do not speak the *Miao* language. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin (the *Han* language) by the first author. The first author also took field notes of the classroom teaching, and teacher-children interactions. A *Miao* teacher, who spoke both Mandarin and the *Miao* language, accompanied the trainers of the programme to visit the villages and helped to explain to the *Miao* parents about the purposes of the visit to their homes and of field notes taken. Verbal permission to document familial interactions in their home environment and to take photos of the children was obtained from the parents. Information collected and perspectives noted were triangulated so as to come up with key ideas about the local educational situation for children younger than 8 years.

In this study, four methods, namely questionnaire, interview, field notes and visual data, were employed to tap into the *Miao* people's ideas of education for young children. This was done so that the findings could benefit from data collected with a range of methods as there are strengths and weaknesses in each method.

Nonetheless, ethnographic research requires the researcher to be highly sensitive to the data collected as the analyses are unavoidably interpretations of human behaviours and human thinking. As Goetz and LeCompte (1981:51–52) highlighted, the reduction and classification of field notes, visual data, narrative descriptions, all necessitate ‘a process of abstraction and analysis, which too often is only an art form in the mind of the skilled anthropologist ... or will lead to a trivialisation of findings ...’. Hence, employing various methods in this study in accordance with the nature of information to be captured provides a fuller picture of the participants’ views of education and children’s development.

Data analyses

All interview data were transcribed but only those used for writing this article were translated. All responses were content analysed to tap into the participants’ meanings and views. Content analysis has been used widely in analysing qualitative interview data and recognised as an effective means to reveal the messages embedded in people’s ideas (Berelson 1971). Responses to the open-ended questions, interview data and field notes were first analysed separately. Initial categories were derived from the key ideas/terms identified from each set of data, for example, hands-on activities, playful activities, were grouped to become a category under ‘activity-based learning’, while the idea of logical thinking, concrete thinking, were grouped to form the category ‘thinking abilities’. Next, all the categories identified from the three sets of data were collapsed to form the themes so as to make sense of all the data. All data were coded in certain formats, with the source of the data coming first, then the order of the data collected, followed by the date, for example, Interview-1, 26.12.2009, Response to Open Ended Questions-1, 26.12.2009 becomes R to OEQ-1, 26.12.2009, Field Note-1, 27.12.2009.

Findings

Teachers’ conception of kindergarten education

The first research question this study asked was in what ways is kindergarten education understood by teachers and head teachers in the *Miao* villages in Guizhou Province of China. Both the responses to the open-ended questions and interview data revealed that the teachers and head teachers had a relative clear idea of contemporary views of kindergarten education in terms of the appropriateness of curriculum and pedagogies. More importantly, their concepts were based on textbook knowledge and experiences in working with young children (3- to 4-year olds). Even though out of the six participants, only one head teacher worked with kindergarten children (3- to 5-year olds) and the others were pre-primary class or primary school teachers, the idea that younger and older children differ in thinking abilities was not new to them. Most teachers mentioned that young children’s thinking is more concrete, and they should have more hands-on activities, while older children (5- to 7-year olds) have reached abstract and logical thinking, which

would allow them to handle some abstract and complex information. Also, the teachers noticed that the younger children were so happy when they played, during break time and after school and that they should have more play time or activities. Besides, the kind of curriculum for the young was also clearly articulated. The kindergarten head teacher suggested:

‘We should provide the younger children with lots of story books, ... music and artwork have strong impact on their development. It would be great for teachers if there are playful activities for their reference’. (Interview-1, 26.12.2009)

Other teachers reckoned that young children should learn about self-care skills and knowledge about everyday life activities. He commented that, ‘It (the curriculum) should start with everyday life activities’ (R to OEQ-4, 25.12.2009, authors’ bracket). These responses showed that their conception of kindergarten education is based on children’s developmental stages, which appear to share the views of constructivism. Teachers should facilitate children to take care of themselves and integrate play and playful activities into the curriculum and teaching. Based on their training and understanding of children’s learning as well as daily interactions with young children, they have formed a personal theory about kindergarten education, that is, curriculum and pedagogy should be age appropriate, should cater for their interests and be playful in nature. If given the opportunity to educate kindergartners, and with much needed resources, these teachers were likely to have an impact on young *Miao* children’s development and learning, and such impact could be rather progressive in nature.

Forms of schooling and alternative learning possibilities in the *Miao* villages

The second and third research questions attempt to understand the kind of education and learning opportunities available for young children in the villages, and whether teachers and parents share similar views of the importance of early schooling. Data that correspond to these enquiries can be drawn from the field notes, responses to open-ended questions, interviews and visual data.

According to the participants, the kind of schooling for the younger children (4- to 5-year olds) in the local areas was in the form of pre-primary classes, which were attached to primary schools. Nonetheless, most of the very young children (2- to 3-year olds) were kept at home. A teacher explained:

‘Many are looked after by their grandparents while the parents worked in the fields’. (R to OEQ-10, 25.12.2009; Interview-4, 28.12.2009)

There was simply no kindergarten in the village or neighbouring villages. The teachers were sceptical about the quality of the learning possibilities, if there were any, if children and young people are kept at home. A teacher responded:

'Many families do not have the sufficient conditions (knowledge, training, and resources) to teach the children knowledge.' (R to OEQ-17, 25.12.2009)

It appears that the teachers considered knowledge acquisition could only take place in classrooms. At any rate, some *Miao* parents agreed and could afford to put the younger children into pre-primary classes. Ironically, it was observed that the younger children in the pre-primary classes were neither acquiring subject knowledge nor learning aspects of value in the classes. From the author's field notes of classroom teaching, the blank faces of the younger children revealed that they were physically present in the classes but could hardly understand the contents delivered by the teachers, while the older children were reciting after the teachers or practising arithmetic problems with the teachers (Fieldnotes-2, 28.12.2009). The primary school head teacher said:

'In the pre-primary classes, the older children learn counting, addition and subtraction, reading and writing, pingyin (the basics of the pronunciation system of the Han language), ... these are too ... difficult for the younger children. But we have to prepare the older children to enter primary school next year.' (Interview-3, 27.12.2009)

Hence, it appears that because of the absence of early year settings, even though parents put their young in schools, the 4- and 5-year olds are not benefiting from schooling experiences and loose opportunities for mastering skills necessary for future livelihood.

Meanwhile, it was observed during field and home visits to the *Miao* families that some learning did take place. In one family, the mother was processing smoked pork on a stone oven in the front yard where her three children (a 7-year old, a 5-year old and a 4-year old) were playing and observing. Traditionally, meat is preserved for the cold winter months. The children were helping the mother to bring wood and observed the process eagerly. The mother explained:

'Every year we have to prepare ourselves for the winter. The children know about this too.' (Interview-8, 29.12.2009)

The sentences used by this mother sounded plain, but they were powerful evidence to show learning, or a kind of 'schooling', is certainly taking place in their very courtyard.

The learning process was similar to the ones portrayed in the literature section of this article. In another family, a mother was preparing hay for the animals by filling a bucket with hay. Her two young children (2- to 3-year olds) observed with full attention. Then one of them tried to put the pieces hanging outside the bucket into the bucket (Field note-4, 28.12.2009). This scene strongly suggests that learning, in the sense of offering help to family members and understanding the value of shared duties, could be learned from siblings and adults while at home.

Responses to the research questions reveal two key ideas. One is that even though kindergarten education is considered to be important for young children by the participant

teachers, contrary to their positive views, most children are kept at home by their parents until they are 5 or 6 years old, that is, when they are old enough to attend primary school. The other is that even though the teachers recognised that the curriculum for 4- and 5-year-old children should be play-based and focus on fostering children's thinking abilities, interests and learning through hands-on activities, the form and content of teaching and learning in pre-primary classes was designed for preparing children to enter primary education, rather than according to young children's interests, culturally and naturally. Many 4- and 5-year olds in the pre-primary classes are learning subject matter that is too difficult for them. Meanwhile, the ones who stay home are learning practical skills from adults and siblings.

Discussions and implications

Underestimation of parents' views of learning

This study examines the views of some *Han* and *Miao* teachers of the importance of kindergarten education to young children in the *Miao* settlement in villages of Guizhou. One of the main ideas is that while financial difficulty is often the reason for keeping children at home, it seems that according to the teachers, the *Miao* families do not consider education as a valuable aspect of their children's growth and development.

For these teachers and head teachers, learning was about going to school and attending classes for logical and abstract knowledge. They were taking a rationalistic approach and positivistic view to learning (Mishler 2012). Nonetheless, in the pre-primary classes observed, the kind of schooling that the 3- to 5-year olds received was not effective. On the contrary, the children at home were learning about the cultural traditions, for example, preserving food, a shared responsibility. As the cultural ecology theory explains, the values and beliefs of what is important for a culture and what should be passed down or continued are group specific (Ogbu & Simons 1998). The hay episode demonstrated that the family was an important arena where learning and social interactions took place. The young children were not only learning how to take care of farm animals but also offered help to the mother. The scene was full of serenity and love. The learning observed in the two families was collaborative and phenomenological in nature (Mishler 2012), which reflects cultural relativism and interactivity in the learning process. This helps to demonstrate that oftentimes the kind of learning that happens in rural communities was underestimated by others, in this case, the teachers with the *Han* ethnicity background.

The financial reason for not placing their children in any educational institutions could not be confirmed by this study. Some *Miao* parents want to keep their children at home to do farm work, yet this study reveals that other parents have some intentions of letting children acquire some academic knowledge and school-valued skills. A recent study conducted in Guizhou on *Miao* parents' expectations of their children's future revealed that the *Miao* peasants considered

themselves to have been marginalised by the social system, which to them is far beyond their reach (Wu 2012). It is possible that this has complicated the financial issue, as far as kindergarten education is concerned.

The history and culture of the *Miaos*, who reside in large numbers in Guizhou Province, are manifested through their superb craftsmanship in embroidery and silver ornaments. They are proud of their history, and this sensibility is expressed in the design of their embroidery artefacts. Moreover, learning from siblings, as Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1997) argued, would be a form of schooling for rural children. But at schools, which are distant from home, their children are acquiring knowledge and skills such as *pingyin* (i.e. a pronunciation system of the Chinese language) and mathematical concepts that are beyond the parents' comprehension and distant from their history and culture. The idea of cultural ecology can certainly be applied to the *Miao* community, but the environment for cultural ecology has been washed down, partly by the kind of schooling offered. There is certainly room to rework on the curriculum design for kindergartens to make them age appropriate, but more importantly, cultural specificity of schooling for the *Miao* children in Guizhou should be considered. The same idea might also apply to primary and secondary education in rural areas; yet these two stages of schooling are beyond the scope of this study. As Seal and Harmon (1995) pointed out, getting ready for city life might not be supported by the locals in rural China (Seal & Harmon 1995).

Rethinking about kindergarten education system for young children in Guizhou

There have been various suggestions to improve the kindergarten education scenario in rural areas of Guizhou. Guo (2008) offers a range of suggestions to counteract the undesirable conditions of the kindergarten scenario in rural areas of China. One is to change the parents' concept of education through family guidance and introducing the 'scientific ideology' of education to the *Miao* parents. Others argue that the Chinese government should increase the funding to subsidise kindergartens in rural areas. It is also strongly recommended that there should be ways to improve the benefits and earnings of kindergarten teachers working in villages. Zheng (2004) suggested that the management policies of the budget for kindergartens in rural areas should be modified. Li (2009) stressed that the status of kindergarten education should be improved through legislation.

The above recommendations can be described as 'formalising' kindergarten education in rural areas, which is expected to narrow the gap between kindergarten education in the rural and in the urban areas (Early Education 1999). But the school system, kindergartens included, in rural areas should be as flexible as possible so as to match the different farming seasons throughout the year (Early Education 1999). Given that the minority groups' culture and history are distinct from that of the *Han* people who make up most of the Chinese

population (Introduction of the *Miao* ethnic group; Pan 2004), educators should emphasise the importance of communication between the two groups in order to provide education to meet the *Miao* people's expectations.

The general opinion on improving the quality of teachers in rural areas focuses on increasing their salary and benefits, as well as providing them with in-service training. However, most of the teachers are not native to the area, and they do not necessarily have the passion for the mountainous rural areas and their inhabitants. The government should find ways to create opportunities for children from the villages to pursue teacher training so that they will return to teach in their villages of origin. Meanwhile, bilingual teachers who can communicate with children in both the *Miao* language and *Han* language are much needed to facilitate their learning.

In year 2011, Guizhou Provincial Government launched a 3-year action plan to raise investment for the establishment and improvement of kindergartens. A total of 1044 kindergartens, of different scales and sizes, have been built. Deliberate effort has been made to increase teacher supply. About 30 000 teachers and head teachers have received training. However, in comparison to the population of children, which has almost reached the two million mark in rural areas, it is questionable whether the existing investment is enough. Also, the 'software' of the kindergartens is established, it remains to be improved and to undergo quality assurance procedures. As far as the authors are concerned, quality kindergarten education for the *Miao* children has not been carefully considered and most challenges and problems remain unresolved.

The needs of underprivileged villages in China are still unmet

The above discussion has addressed some big questions about kindergarten education in remote villages in China. However, at its very best, could kindergarten programmes be culturally specific in villages of Guizhou Province while there are already successful stories in other Chinese villages? The Anji Play Curriculum, now known as AnjiPlay, was established in the Anji County of Zhejiang Province (one of the richest provinces in China) some 15 years ago. Now, AnjiPlay is well recognised and considered a model for other villages and counties. It is known for its use of local resources (such as bamboos, large wooden blocks), teachers' observant and supportive roles (rather than teacher-directed teaching) and children's outdoor play, especially risk-taking play, which challenges not only the children themselves but also their Chinese teachers' traditional concepts of play and learning (Yang 2015). While the success of AnjiPlay deserves recognition, its success has in fact been supported by the local government at different levels.

Most kindergartens in the county, including those in the villages, are public kindergartens (which is unusual in China) supervised by the county's administration (Wang 2015).

The Anji County decided to campaign for the title of 'The Prettiest Village in China'. Therefore, much resources were poured into improving the conditions of Anji kindergartens, especially their curricula. Foreign experts form their board of advisors (AnjiPlay 2016). The teachers at Anji are entitled to pay scales that are comparable to government officials in order to maintain a low turnover rate (Wang 2015). In order to change the teachers' deep-rooted ideas of teaching, the Education Commission of Anji enforces regulations to monitor teachers' implementation of the Anji slogans (Wang 2015). Moreover, the Anji tradition of child rearing is to encourage training of the body; therefore, parents expect children to be physically active.

In sum, while parental engagement and recognition of education is crucial in children's learning, there are immense differences between privileged and underprivileged villages in terms of educational resources and support. In this regard, the inequality of distribution of government resources and support still exists; hence, the link between poverty and opportunity to quality kindergarten education remains resolved in China's remote villages.

Limitations of the study

In this study, local head teachers and teachers were interviewed for their views on setting up kindergartens and the kind of curriculum suitable for young children in rural areas of Guizhou. This is a small-scale study and is not generalisable. Also, because of the limited time and the language barrier, the *Miao* parents' perspectives have not been fully explored. The argument that the *Miao* history and culture are unique and should be considered as important elements in education for children of the *Miao* ethnicity is based on literature instead of the *Miao* parents' personal expressions. Future research should include the opinions of the *Miao* parents, which should shed light on establishing the appropriate kind of education, especially regarding kindergarten education, for the young children of the *Miao* ethnic group in Guizhou. Finally, researchers interested in studying the *Miao* people should spend more time in the villages, as rapport and trust needs to be built between the researcher and the villagers for a full ethnographic study, which would yield more insights into their lives and culture-specific perspectives.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

K.P.V. was chief investigator of this piece of research. She designed the research including interview questions, conducted the actual data collection process and finished writing up the article. M.Y.L. was a research assistant to this

piece of research. She assisted in literature review, data collection and sourcing of references.

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