Is Boarding Education Good for Children’s Development?

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At present, the rural boarding school is regarded as the best alternative to solve the problem of lack of family education for rural children, especially left-behind children. However, it is still debatable whether its educational function can be brought into full play. A study published in Education Research, focusing on the impacts of boarding education on children’s cognitive and non-cognitive abilities, tracks fourth and fifth graders students from 137 boarding schools in poverty-stricken rural areas in five counties of Hebei and Sichuan Provinces over a three-year period. This study adopts stratified cluster random sampling method, takes children’s boarding state (boarding age and boarding duration) as the core independent variable, measures children’s cognitive ability with reading performance, children’s non-cognitive ability with self-esteem, depression and stress resistance, and establishes a regression model for empirical research.

Research findings are as follows:

- From the external perspective of boarding children, the cognitive ability of boarding children is significantly lower than that of non-boarding children. Their reading scores are relatively low and they are less likely to enter the middle and upper ranks of the grade. Boarding children also have poor scores for depression, self-esteem and stress tolerance, and are at higher risk of depression.

- From the internal perspective of boarding children, both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities of young boarding children are weaker than those of school-age boarding children, and with the extension of boarding time, their cognitive and non-cognitive abilities develop worse.

- From the perspective of both parents, the impact of boarding on un-left-behind children is significantly lower than that of children with both or one parents out, and the family substitution function of rural boarding education has not been effectively played.

- From the point of family environment, the negative impact of boarding on rural children’s development has obvious phenomenon of “elite capture”, which is manifested by the fact that boarding has a greater negative impact on rural boys, rural children from better-off
family, rural children whose mothers are better educated and those in areas with relatively good level of economic development, which is bound to widen the polarization among rural children.

It can be seen that the education boarding system in the poverty-stricken rural areas of China is not conducive to the formation and accumulation of rural children’s human capital on the whole at present, and it has a negative impact on the cognitive and non-cognitive abilities of rural children.

Therefore, the author puts forward three measures to solve the dilemma of rural boarding schools:

- Expanding financial input in education: We will take into overall consideration the differences between boarding schools and non-boarding schools, strengthen the standardization construction of boarding schools, and give proper preference to financial investment and subsidies in order to improve school conditions.

- Strengthening the development of teaching staffs: Increasing the proportion of public teachers will have an adverse effect. On the contrary, increasing the number of per-student teachers is the most effective way to alleviate the negative impact of boarding education, which is especially important for increasing the positive effect on non-cognition of children.

- Increasing household investment: Frequent communication between parents and children can effectively reduce the risk of depression in boarding children, and this kind of children’s self-esteem and resistance levels are not significantly different from those of non-boarding children.

We should re-examine the effect of rural boarding school education, and carry out a reasonable policy mix design on the implementation of the dual strategy of rejuvenating China through science and education and rural revitalization. In addition to creating an educational environment and strengthening the construction of teaching staff, it is also necessary to build a “home-school-society” linkage training mechanism and education support system, in which the government takes the back, schools are the main body, parents are the main responsibility and the society participates. Only through policy synergy can we effectively break through the dilemma.