

Phan Thị Tuyết Vân

University of Gdansk

Email: pttvan@vlcc.edu.vn

Education as a breaker of poverty: a critical perspective

Abstract: This paper aims to portray the overall picture of poverty in the world and mentions the key solution to overcome poverty from a critical perspective. The data and figures were quoted from a number of researchers and organizations in the field of poverty around the world. Simultaneously, the information strengthens the correlations among poverty and lack of education. Only appropriate philosophies of education can improve the country's socio-economic conditions and contribute to effective solutions to worldwide poverty.

Keywords: poverty, education and poverty, worldwide

Introduction

In the 21st century, despite the rapid development of science and technology with a series of inventions brought into the world to make life more comfortable, human poverty remains a global problem, especially in developing countries.

Poverty, according to Lister (2004), is reflected by the state of “low living standards and/or inability to participate fully in society because of lack of material resources” (p.7). The impact and serious consequences of poverty on multiple aspects of human life have been realized by different organizations and researchers from different contexts (Fraser, 2000; Lister, 2004; Lipman, 2004; Lister, 2008).

This paper will indicate some of the concepts and research results on poverty. Figures and causes of poverty, and some solutions from education as a key breaker to poverty will also be discussed.

Poverty and its characteristics

Creating a universal definition of poverty is not simple (Nyasulu, 2010). There are conflicts among different groups of people defining poverty, based on different views and fields. Some writers, according to Nyasulu, tend to connect poverty with social problems, while others focus on political or other causes. However, the reality of poverty needs to be considered from different sides and ways; for that reason, the diversity of definitions assigned to poverty can help form the basis on which interventions are drawn (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006). For instance, in dealing with poverty issues, it is essential to intervene politically; economic intervention is very necessary to any definition of this matter. A political definition necessitates political interventions in dealing with poverty, and economic definitions inevitably lead to economic interventions. Similarly, Książopolski (1999) uses several models to show the perspectives on poverty as marginal, motivation and socialist. These models look at poverty and solutions from different angles. Socialists, for example, emphasize the responsibilities of social organization. The state manages the micro levels and distributes the shares of national gross resources, at the same time fighting to maintain the narrow gap among classes. In his book, Książopolski (1999) also emphasizes the changes and new values of charity funds or financial aid from churches or organizations recognized by the Poor Law. Speaking specifically, in the new stages poverty has been recognized differently, and support is also delivered in limited categories related to more specific and visible objectives, with the aim of helping the poor change their own status for sustainable improvement. Three ways of categorizing the poor and locating them in the appropriate places are (1) the powerless, (2) who is willing to work and (3) who is dodging work¹.

Basically, poverty is determined not to belong to any specific cultures or politics; otherwise, it refers to the situation in which people's earnings cannot support their minimum living standard (Rowntree, 1910). Human living standard is defined in Alfredsson & Eide's work (1999) as follows:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” (p. 524)

¹ Drawn from one of the lectures of Professor Maria Mendel for the course “Theory of Poverty” in March 2014

In addition, poverty is measured by Global Hunger Index (GHI), which is calculated by the International Food Policy Institute (IFPRI) every year. The GHI measures hunger not only globally, but also by country and region. To have the figures multi-dimensionally, the GHI is based on three indicators:

1. Undernourishment: the proportion of the undernourished as a percentage of the population (reflecting the share of the population with insufficient calorie intake).
2. Child underweight: the proportion of children under age 5 who are underweight (low weight for their age, reflecting wasting, stunted growth or both), which is one indicator of child under-nutrition.
3. Child mortality: the mortality rate of children under 5 (partially reflecting the fatal synergy of inadequate dietary intake and unhealthy environments)².

Apart from the individual aspects and the above measurement based on nutrition, which help partly imagine poverty, poverty is more complicated, not just being closely related to human physical life but badly affecting spiritual life. According to Jones and Novak (1999 cited in Lister, 2008), poverty not only characterizes the precarious financial situation but also makes people self-deprecating. Poverty turns itself into the roots of shame, guilt, humiliation and resistance. It leads the poor to the end of the road, and they will never call for help except in the worst situations.

Education can help people escape poverty or make it worse. In fact, inequality in education has stolen opportunity for fighting poverty from people in many places around the world, in both developed and developing countries (Lipman, 2004). Lipman confirms:

“Students need an education that instills a sense of hope and possibility that they can make a difference in their own family, school, and community and in the broader national and global community while it prepare them for multiple life choices.” (p.181)

Bradshaw (2005) synthesizes five main causes of poverty: (1) individual deficiencies, (2) cultural belief systems that support subcultures of poverty, (3) economic, political and social distortions or

² IFPRI (n.d.). Global Hunger Index. Retrieved from: <http://www.ifpri.org/book-8018/ourwork/researcharea/global-hunger-index>.

discrimination, (4) geographical disparities and (5) cumulative and cyclical interdependencies. The researcher suggests the most appropriate solution corresponding with each cause. This reflects the diverse causes of poverty; otherwise, poverty easily happens because of social and political issues. From the literature review, it can be said that poverty comes from complex causes and reasons, and is not a problem of any single individual or country. Poverty has brought about serious consequences and needs to be dealt with by many methods and collective effort of many countries and organizations. This paper will focus on representing some alarming figures on poverty, problems of poverty and then the education as a key breaker to poverty.

Alarming figures and big problems of poverty

According to a statistics in 2012 on poverty from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), nearly half the world's population lives below the poverty line, of which is less than \$1.25 a day³. In a statistics in 2015, of every 1,000 children, 93 do not live to age 5⁴, and about 448 million babies are stillborn each year⁵. Poverty in the world is happening alarmingly. According to a World Bank study, the risk of poverty continues to increase on a global scale and, of the 2009 slowdown in economic growth, which led to higher prices for fuel and food, further pushed 53 million people into poverty in addition to almost 155 million in 2008.

From 1990 to 2009, the average GHI in the world decreased by nearly one-fifth. Many countries had success in solving the problem of child nutrition; however, the mortality rate of children under 5 and the proportion of undernourished people are still high.

From 2011 to 2013, the number of hungry people in the world was estimated at 842 million, down 17 percent compared with the period 1990 to 1992, according to a report released by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) titled "The State of Food Insecurity in the

³UNDP (n.d.) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Retrieved from:
http://www.undp.org/content/brussels/en/home/mdgoverview/mdg_goals/mdg1.html

⁴ UNDP (n.d.) Reduce child mortality. Retrieved from:
http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sdgoverview/mdg_goals/mdg4.html

⁵ Xuan Thu (n.d.). Thực trạng nghèo đói trên thế giới [Reality of poverty in the world]. Retrieved from:
<http://xuanthu.wordpress.com/2011/06/25/th%E1%BB%B1c-tr%E1%BA%A1ng-ngheo-doi-tren-th%E1%BA%BF-gi%E1%BB%9Bi/>

World 2013”⁶. Although poverty in some African countries had been improved in this stage, sub-Saharan Africa still maintained an area with high the highest percentage of hungry people in the world.

The consequences and big problems resulting from poverty are terrible in the extreme. The following will illustrate the overall picture under the issues of health, unemployment, education and society and politics

➤ **Health issues:** According a report by Manos Unidas, a non- government organization (NGO) in Spain⁷, poverty kills more than 30,000 children under age 5 worldwide every day, and 11 million children die each year because of poverty. Currently, 42 million people are living with HIV, 39 million of them in developing countries. The Manos Unidas report also shows that 15 million children globally have been orphaned because of AIDS. Scientists predict that by 2020 a number of African countries will have lost a quarter of their population to this disease. Simultaneously, chronic drought and lack of clean water have not only hindered economic development but also caused disastrous consequences of serious diseases across Africa. In fact, only 58 percent of Africans have access to clean water; as a result, the average life expectancy in Africa is the lowest in the world, just 45 years old (Bui, 2010).

➤ **Unemployment issues:** According to the United Nations, the youth unemployment rate in Africa is the highest in the world: 25.6 percent in the Middle East and North Africa. Unemployment with growth rates of 10 percent a year is one of the key issues causing poverty in African and negatively affecting programs and development plans. Total African debt amounts to \$425 billion (Bui, 2010). In addition, joblessness caused by the global economic downturn pushed more than 140 million people in Asia into extreme poverty in 2009, the International Labor Organization (ILO) warned in a report titled *The Fallout in Asia*, prepared for the High-Level Regional Forum on Responding to the Economic Crisis in Asia and the Pacific, in Manila from Feb.

⁶ FAO (2013). *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2013*. Retrieved from: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3434e/i3434e00.htm>.

⁷ Huu Cuong, Bui (2010). Thực trạng đói nghèo và những con số đáng báo động [Reality of poverty and alarming figures]. Retrieved from: <http://antg.cand.com.vn/vivn/doday/2009/7/73695.cand>

18 to 20, 2009⁸. Surprisingly, this situation also happens in developed countries. About 12.5 million people in the United Kingdom (accounting for 20 percent of the population) are living below the poverty line, and in 2005, 35 million people in the United States could not live without charity. At present, 620 million people in Asia are living on less than \$1 per day; half of them are in India and China, two countries whose economies are considered to be growing.

➤ **Education issues:** Going to school is one of the basic needs of human beings, but poor people cannot achieve it. Globally, 130 million children do not attend school, 55 percent of them girls, and 82 million children have lost their childhoods by marrying too soon (Bui, 2010). Similarly, two-thirds of the 759 million illiterate people in total are women. Specifically, the illiteracy rate in Africa keeps increasing, accounting for about 40 percent of the African population at age 15 and over 50 percent of women at age 25. The number of illiterate people in the six countries with the highest number of illiterate people in the world - China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Bangladesh and Egypt - reached 510 million, accounting for 70 percent of total global illiteracy.

➤ **Social and political issues:** Poverty leads to a number of social problems and instability in political systems of countries around the world. Actually, 246 million children are underage labors, including 72 million under age 10. Simultaneously, according to an estimate by the United Nations (UN), about 100 million children worldwide are living on the streets. For years, Africa has suffered a chronic refugee problem, with more than 7 million refugees currently and over 200 million people without homes because of a series of internal conflicts and civil wars. Poverty threatens stability and development; it also directly influences human development. Solving the problems caused by poverty takes a lot of time and resources, but afterward they can focus on developing their societies. Poverty has become a global issue with political significance of particular importance. It is a potential cause of political and social instability, even leading to violence and war not only within a country, but also in the whole world. Poverty and injustice together have raised fierce conflicts in international relations; if these conflicts are not satisfactorily resolved by peaceful means, war will inevitably break out. Obviously, poverty plus lack of understanding lead to disastrous consequences such as population growth, depletion of water resources, energy scarcity,

⁸ ILO (2009). The fallout in Asia: Assessing labor market impacts and national policy responses to the global financial crisis. Retrieved from: http://www.ilo.org/asia/info/research-and-data/WCMS_101730/lang--en/index.htm

pollution, food shortages and serious diseases (especially HIV/AIDS), which are not easy to control; simultaneously, poverty plus injustice will cause international crimes such as terrorism, drug and human trafficking, and money laundering.

Education as a key breaker to poverty

Among recognizable four issues above which reflected the serious consequences of poverty, the third one, education, if being prioritized in intervention over other issues in the fighting against poverty is believed to bring more effectiveness in resolving the problems from the roots. In fact, human being with the possibility of being educated resulted from their distinctive linguistic ability makes them differential from other beings species on the earth (Barrow and Woods 2006, p.22). With education, human can be aware and more critical with their situations, they are aimed with abilities to deal with social problems as well as adversity for a better life; however, inequality in education has stolen opportunity for fighting poverty from unprivileged people (Lipman, 2004). An appropriate education can help increase chances for human to deal with all of the issues related to poverty; simultaneously it can narrow the unexpected side-effect of making poverty worse. A number of philosophies from ancient Greek to contemporary era focus on the aspect of education with their own epistemology, for example, idealism of Plato encouraged students to be truth seekers and pragmatism of Dewey enhanced the individual needs of students (Gutex, 1997). Education, more later on, especially critical pedagogy focuses on developing people independently and critically which is essential for poor people to have ability of being aware of what they are facing and then to have equivalent solutions for their problems. In other words, critical pedagogy helps people emancipate themselves and from that they can contribute to transform the situations or society they live in.

In this sense, in his most influential work titled “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1972), Paulo Freire carried out his critical pedagogy by building up a community network of peasants- the marginalized and unprivileged party in his context, aiming at awakening their awareness about who they are and their roles in society at that time. To do so, he involved the peasants into a problem-posing education which was different from the traditional model of banking education with the technique of dialogue. Dialogue wasn’t just simply for people to learn about each other; but it was for figuring out the same

voice; more importantly, for cooperation to build a social network for changing society. The peasants in such an educational community would be relieved from stressfulness and the feeling of being outsiders when all of them could discuss and exchange ideas with each other about the issues from their “praxis”. Praxis which was derived from what people act and linked to some values in their social lives, was defined by Freire as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p.50). Critical pedagogy dialogical approach in Pedagogy of the Oppressed of Freire seems to be one of the helpful ways for solving poverty for its close connection to the nature of equality. It doesn’t require any highly intellectual teachers who lead the process; instead, everything happens naturally and the answers are identified by the emancipation of the learners themselves. It can be said that the effectiveness of this pedagogy for people to escape poverty comes from its direct impact on human critical consciousness; from that, learners would be fully aware of their current situations and self- figure out the appropriate solutions for their own.

In addition, equality which was one of the essences making learners in critical pedagogy intellectually emancipate was reflected via the work titled “The Ignorant Schoolmaster” by Jacques Rancière (1991). In this work, the teacher and students seemed to be equal in terms of the knowledge. The explicator- teacher Joseph Jacotot employed the interrogative approach which was discovered to be universal because “he taught what he didn’t know”. Obviously, this teacher taught French to Flemish students while he couldn’t speak his students’ language. The ignorance which was not used in the literal sense but a metaphor showed that learners can absolutely realize their capacity for self-emancipation without the traditional teaching of transmission of knowledge from teachers. Regarding this, Rancière (1991, p.17) stated “that every common person might conceive his human dignity, take the measure of his intellectual capacity, and decide how to use it”. This education is so meaningful for poor people by being able to evoking their courageousness to develop themselves when they always try to stay away from the community due the fact that poverty is the roots of shame, guilt, humiliation and resistance (Novak, 1999).

The contribution of critical pedagogy to solving poverty by changing the consciousness of people from their immanence is summarized by Freire’s argument in his “Pedagogy of Indignation” as follows:

“It is certain that men and women can change the world for the better, can make it less unjust, but they can do so from starting point of concrete reality they “come upon” in their generation. They cannot do it on the basis of reveries, false dreams, or pure illusion”. (p.31)

To sum up, education could be an extremely helpful way of solving poverty regarding the possibilities from the applications of studies in critical pedagogy for educational and social issues. Therefore, among the world issues, poverty could be possibly resolved in accordance with the indigenous people’s understanding of their praxis, their actions, cognitive transformation, and the solutions with emancipation in terms of the following keynotes:

First, because the poor are powerless, they usually fall into the states of self-deprecation, shame, guilt and humiliation, as previously mentioned. In other words, they usually build a barrier between themselves and society, or they resist changing their status. Therefore, approaching them is not a simple matter; it requires much time and the contributions of psychologists and sociologists in learning about their aspirations, as well as evoking and nurturing the will and capacities of individuals, then providing people with chances to carry out their own potential for overcoming obstacles in life.

Second, poverty happens easily in remote areas not endowed with favorable conditions for development. People there haven’t had a lot of access to modern civilization; nor do they earn a lot of money for a better life. Low literacy, together with the lack of healthy forms of entertainment and despair about life without exit, easily lead people into drug addiction, gambling and alcoholism. In other words, the vicious circle of poverty and powerlessness usually leads the poor to a dead end. Above all, they are lonely and need to be listened to, shared with and led to escape from their states. Community meetings for exchanging ideas, communicating and immediate intervening, along with appropriate forms of entertainment, should be held frequently to meet the expectations of the poor, direct them to appropriate jobs and, step by step, change their favorite habits of entertainment.

Last but not least, poor people should be encouraged to participate in social forums where they can both raise their voices about their situations and make valuable suggestions for dealing with their poverty. Children from poor families should be completely exempted from school fees to encourage them to go to school, and curriculum should also focus on raising community awareness of poverty

issues through extracurricular and volunteer activities, such as meeting and talking with the community, helping poor people with odd jobs, or simply spending time listening to them.

Conclusions

Not a matter of any individual country, poverty has become a major problem, a threat to the survival, stability and development of the world and humanity. Globalization has become a bridge linking countries; for that reason, instability in any country can directly and deeply affect the stability of others. The international community has been joining hands to solve poverty; many anti-poverty organizations, including FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), BecA (the Biosciences eastern and central Africa), UN-REDD (the United Nations Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), WHO (World Health Organization) and Manos Unidas, operate both regionally and internationally, making some achievements by reducing the number of hungry people, estimated 842 million in the period 1990 to 1992, by 17 percent in 2011- to 2013⁹. The diverse methods used to deal with poverty have invested billions of dollars in education, health and healing. The Millennium Development Goals set by UNDP put forward eight solutions for addressing issues related to poverty holistically:

- 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
- 2) Achieve universal primary education.
- 3) Promote gender equality and empower women.
- 4) Reduce child mortality.
- 5) Improve maternal health.
- 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
- 7) Ensure environmental sustainability.
- 8) Develop a global partnership for development¹⁰.

⁹ Thi Trung, Đoàn (2011). Thế giới chống đói nghèo: Cuộc chiến cam go [Anti-poverty world. A real battle.] Retrieved from: <http://vov.vn/The-gioi/Quan-sat/The-gioi-chong-doi-ngheo-Cuoc-chien-cam-go/188967.vov>

¹⁰ UNDP (n.d.). Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Retrieved from: http://www.undp.org/content/brussels/en/home/mdgoverview/mdg_goals/mdg1.html

Although all of the mentioned solutions carried out directly by countries and organizations not only focus on the roots of poverty but break its circle, it is recognized that the solutions do not emphasize the role of the poor themselves which a critical pedagogy does. More than anyone, the poor should have a sense of their poverty so that they can become responsible for their own fate and actively fight poverty instead of waiting for help. It is not different from the cores of critical theory in solving educational and political issues that the poor should be aware and conscious about their situation and reflected context. It is required a critical transformation from their own praxis which would allow them to go through a process of learning, sharing, solving problems, and leading to social movements. This is similar to the method of giving poor people fish hooks rather than giving them fish. The government and people of any country understand better than anyone else clearly the strengths and characteristics of their homelands. It follows that they can efficiently contribute to causing poverty, preventing the return of poverty, and solving consequences of the poverty in their countries by many ways, especially a critical pedagogy; and indirectly narrow the scale of poverty in the world.

In a word, the wars against poverty take time, money, energy and human resources, and they are absolutely not simple to end. Again, the poor and the challenged should be educated to be fully aware of their situation so that they can overcome poverty themselves. They need to be respected and receive sharing from the community. All forms of discrimination should be condemned and excluded from human society. When whole communities join hands in solving this universal problem, the endless circle of poverty can be addressed definitely someday. More importantly, every country should be responsible for finding appropriate ways to overcome poverty before receiving supports from other countries as well as the poor self-conscious responsibilities about themselves before receiving supports from the others, but the methods leading them to emancipation for their own transformation and later the social change.

Bibliography:

Alfredsson, G. and Eide, A., (1999). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: a common standard of achievement*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

- Barrow, B. & Woods, R. (2006). *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education* (4th ed.) London: Routledge
- Bradshaw, J. (2005) Child poverty and deprivation, in J. Bradshaw, and E. Mayhew (eds.) *The well-being of children in the United Kingdom*, London: Save the Children.
- Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review* 3. 107-120
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Freire, P. (2016). *Pedagogy of Indignation*. New York: Routledge.
- Ife, J. and Tesoriero, F. (2006). *Community Development: Community-Based Alternatives in an Age of Globalization*. 3rd Edition. Australia: Pearson Education
- Książopolski, M. (1999): *Polityka społeczna. Wybrane problemy porównań międzynarodowych* [Social Policy. Selected problems of international comparisons]. Wydawnictwo Śląsk, Katowice
- Lipman, P. (2004). *High stakes education*. RoutledgeFalmer New York and London. ISBN 0-203-47260-8.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty and social justice: recognition and respect*. Third Bevan Foundation and Annual Lecture.
- Lister, R. (2008). Inclusive citizenship, gender and poverty: some implications for education for citizenship. *Citizenship Teaching and Learning*. 4(1). 3-19
- Munroe, M. (2003). *The Principles and Power of Vision: Keys to Achieving Personal and Corporate Destiny*. New Kensington, US: Whitaker House.
- Nyasulu, G. (2010). Revisiting the definition of poverty. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 12 (7), 147-158.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Stanford University Press. California.
- Rowntree, B. (1910). *Poverty: a study of town life*. London: Macmillan.
- <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2014/05/14/education-key-role-women-girls-communities-reportmetadata>