https://doi.org/10.37420/j.cer.2025.1047

The pathway towards the sustainable development of education for school-age females in the mountainous areas of Yunnan, China

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Abstract
The main research focus of this paper is the educational problems faced by school-aged females in the mountainous areas of Yunnan, China. The paper summarizes these problems and explores how the educational level of females in these areas impacts themselves, their families, and society. In the study, multiple linear regression analysis was introduced to analyze four dimensions: social cognition, personal cognition, policy protection, and basic software and hardware. The aim was to quantitatively explore a variety of possible influences on the education of school-aged females in mountainous areas populated by ethnic minorities. A quantitative perspective was employed to explore the relationships among the dimensions that may impact the educational outcomes of ethnic minority women in mountainous areas. Based on the data analysis and theoretical research, we present an in-depth analysis of the development pathways to ensuring sustainable education for this group and propose specific implementation plans. This study will help to identify the educational challenges faced by school-aged females in ethnic minority mountainous areas, and to form sustainable countermeasures to promote the development of education in mountainous areas. By doing so, this study makes an important contribution to further promoting educational equity, narrowing the gap between urban and rural education, and achieving sustainable educational development in Yunnan.

Keywords:
ethnic mountainous areas; school-age females; sustainable development pathway

1 Introduction

China has a multi-ethnic population, with ethnic minority populations inhabiting mountainous and riverine areas. These areas face challenges relating to uneven ethnic, cultural, and economic development. In these areas, educational development is one of the main ways for ethnic minority females to get out of poverty and achieve self-development. However, attitudes towards female education remain challenging. For example, in traditional Chinese culture, well-known proverbs are “a woman without talent is virtue” and “a married daughter spills out water,” and there is neither demand for nor awareness of the importance of women’s education. The traditional Chinese culture’s religious beliefs, marriage system, family property inheritance sys-

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tem, farming methods, division of labor, and other gender value judgments about women's roles, identities, and status also largely influence family and community expectations and female access to education.

In the mountainous areas inhabited by Yunnan's ethnic minorities, women have a relatively low level of education and generally suffer from educational difficulties due to their geographic environment, cultural background, and historical legacy. The lack of educational resources, together with social and cultural constraints, have created significant difficulties for the education of ethnic minority females. At the same time, ethnic minority females often face heightened challenges relating to survival and social pressures due to the constraints of survival and cultural discrimination. The unequal access to education is more serious than in other regions of the country, which creates greater obstacles for their learning and development. Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province is a multi-ethnic border county that has been lifted out of poverty, and its population and level of economic development are relatively similar to those of other ethnic mountain counties in Yunnan. With economic development and the establishment of a high-speed railway, Funing County has experienced significant improvements to its external transportation. As a result, it has become more interconnected with neighboring areas, and local residents' lifestyles and cultural concepts have also changed significantly. Funing County was selected as the subject of this study because it reflects a typical ethnic mountainous area, and the location also enabled the survey team to understand the impact of social, economic, and cultural changes on women's educational status.

International research on female education has focused on gender inequalities in the educational process, gender biases in school curricula and textbooks, gender differences in teacher role expectations, partnership and interaction patterns between girls and boys, gender differences in family education, and gender differences in academic achievement and intellectual interests. Among the numerous studies on women's education in China, there is a growing emphasis on comparative research focused on how to challenge traditional concepts to enhance women's education in modern China (Wong Yin LEE. 2006), the relationship between educational attainment and intermediate social and family status (Yujing Lu et al. 2016), and the impact of Chinese educational policies on women (D.Y. Lin, 2019).

Research by Chinese academics addressing women's education has focused on two key aspects: educational poverty alleviation and social support. For example, Huang Xianying (2016) conducted a livelihood analysis of poor ethnic minority females (aged 3–22 years) in the mountainous areas of Guangxi Resources County, analyzing the poverty status of students from preschool to higher education in Resources County through a case study method. The results suggested that the key to addressing poverty among poor females in ethnic mountainous areas lies in stimulating the important role of their human resources. This can be achieved by understanding the effect of policies aimed at alleviating educational poverty on poverty reduction and ensuring the cultivation of talent in poor families. Moreover, Niu Qinqin and Xu Li (2018) argue that only by giving full play to the cultural function of education by improving the quality of education, changing the culture of poverty, and truly implementing the basic state policy of gender equality can we break free from the shackles of the culture of poverty on education, improve the quality of the population, and achieve an anti-poverty goal. Ruan Lijuan and Lai Shaohui (2013) propose important ways to promote the realization of the right to education for rural ethnic minority women. These include the formulation of local education regulations with regional and ethnic characteristics, clarifying the content of ethnic women's right to education, promoting the

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fulfillment of state obligations for the realization of the right to an education, and constructing a public interest litigation system for education.

Ensuring that school-age females and males in ethnic mountainous areas have equal rights to education not only represents an intersection of gender and education issues, but also serves to address the complex contradiction between the inheritance of the ethnic traditional culture and the development of modern culture, as well as how to change the status quo and conduct research to explore development solutions. The current research on sustainable development strategies for improving the educational attainment of school-age females in ethnic mountainous areas will help in formulating innovative countermeasures for promoting the development of education in mountainous areas. It will make an important contribution to raising awareness within the whole society regarding the importance of the education and development of females, in order to fully recognize the importance of education for ethnic minority females and the construction of a harmonious society, and to gradually realize the ultimate goal of educational equity.

2 Analysis of the factors affecting the sustainable development of education for school-aged females in the ethnic mountainous areas of Yunnan County in China

2.1 Multiple linear regression analysis to screen the indicators of each dimension

Based on the research data, 21 indicators were analyzed in this study to investigate the internal dependencies between variables. Dimensionality reduction analysis was conducted, using the principal component method to extract factors, maximum variance to rotate factors, and extracting components with eigenvalues greater than one. A total number of four components were extracted: social cognition, personal cognition, policy protection, and provision of basic software and hardware.

Table 1 Correlation analysis of each dimension

	Social Awareness Level	Personal Perception Status	Policy Assurance	Basic Condition Guarantee
Social Awareness Level	1			
Personal Perception Status	0.415**	1		
Policy Assurance	0.242**	0.398**	1	
Basic Condition Guarantee	0.107*	0.164*	0.214**	1

** Significant correlation at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

* At the 0.05 level (two-tailed), the correlations are significant.

2.2 Multiple linear regression analysis of social cognitive factors and the other three factors

Multiple regression analysis with social cognitive factors as the dependent variable and personal cognition,

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policy protection, and infrastructure status as the independent variables yielded the data shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Multiple linear regression coefficients

	Non-standardized coefficient		Standardization factor			Covariance statistics	
	B	**Standard error**	***Beta***	***t***	**Significance**	**tolerances**	**VIF**
(Constant – Social Cognition)	−0.174	0.267		−1.024	0.307		
Policy Assurance	0.237	0.082	0.251	3.403	0.001	0.566	1.768
Basic Security	0.125	0.07	0.134	2.144	0.003	0.793	1.26
Personal Perception Status	0.29	0.085	0.365	5.633	0.001	0.735	1.36

As shown in Table 2, the three independent variables of personal perception, policy security, and infrastructure status are significant (P<0.05), indicating that they can significantly affect the level of social perception (the dependent variable). Finally, the following regression equation was derived between the variables:

Y = -0.174 + 0.237*X policy security + 0.125*X infrastructure security + 0.29*X personal cognition

Conclusion: Social cognitive factors are influenced by policy, educational basic security, and personal cognitive factors. The three factors are closely related to each other and influence each other.

2.3 Multiple linear regression analysis of personal cognitive factors and the other three factors

Using personal cognitive factors as the dependent variable and policy guarantee, social cognition, and infrastructure status as the independent variables for multiple regression analysis, the data shown in Table 3 were obtained.

Table 3 Multiple linear regression coefficients

	Non-standardized coefficient		Standardization factor			Covariance statistics	
	B	**Standard error**	***Beta***	***t***	**Significance**	**tolerances**	**VIF**
(Constant - Personal Perception)	0.14	0.262		0.534	0.594		
Basic Security	0.108	0.072	0.095	1.509	0.003	0.757	1.321
Social Perception	0.426	0.077	0.351	4.995	0.001	0.602	1.661
Policy Assurance	0.386	0.067	0.235	3.944	0.001	0.837	1.195

As shown in Table 3, the three independent variables of social cognition, policy protection, and infrastructure status are significant (P<0.05), indicating that they can significantly affect the level of individual cognition measured by the dependent variable. Finally, the following regression equation was derived between the

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variables:

Y=-0.14+0.386*Xpolicy guarantee+0.108*Xinfrastructure guarantee+0.426*Xsocial cognition

Conclusion: Individual cognitive factors are influenced by policy, educational basic security, and social cognitive factors. The three factors are closely related and influence each other.

2.4 Results of the analysis of influencing factors

Based on the data analysis and theoretical research, we conclude that at the level of social cognition, women need to continue to receive education in alignment with the national policy guarantee and local government regulations (including education costs) and basic guarantee conditions according to the actual situation. The influence of individual and social factors on women's continuing education in the ethnic mountainous areas has a mutually reinforcing effect. Social cognition has a very strong influence on individual cognition, which enhances women's recognition of school-age education at the social level. It also enhances their perception of access to school-age education at the individual level, thus creating external motivation for participation in educational activities and internal motivation to meet future expectations through continuing education. The increased awareness of access to school-age education for girls is conducive to improving the efficiency of the government's relevant guarantee investment and the implementation of beneficial policies, thus forming a closed-loop system of "optimized awareness – policy implementation – demonstration of effectiveness." At the same time, given that policy drivers are the entry point to influencing social awareness, the development of a more grounded policy portfolio, the strengthening of its implementation, and the establishment of a special monitoring department will be conducive to improving the educational situation of school-age females in the mountainous areas of Yunnan.



Figure 1 The cycle of "optimization of perception – policy implementation – demonstration of effectiveness"

3 Study on the pathway towards the sustainable development of education for school-age females in the mountainous areas of Yunnan, China

3.1 Individual cognitive change

In the context of the national policy advocating a vocational education and training system, we do not

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regard basic education students entering further education as the only goal. Instead, we recognize the importance of considering individual students' circumstances, enabling them to select vocational education pathways so as to overcome the limitations of individual cognition and giving them more options for education and training. Increasing the proportion of educated school-age females in the ethnic mountainous areas, so that more school-age females have equal access to education, also promotes the possibility of sustainable development. By focusing education on economic growth and social development, and providing training for local applied talents, we can not only ensure the basic needs of ethnic minority mountain families are met, but also nurture a variety of talents for local economic development.

3.2 The driving force of the policy

(1) Increasing special school aid efforts

According to the "Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan of Yunnan Province (2010–2020)," Yunnan is focusing on improving the conditions of education in minority areas. This involves gradually realizing free education at the preschool and high school education levels; expanding the construction of boarding schools for all age groups and improving maintenance subsidies; and allocating education donations from all channels of society to ethnic mountainous areas.

(2) Continuously promoting the rural revitalization strategy and follow-up support for poverty eradication

There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the continuous promotion of the rural revitalization strategy, the follow-up support for poverty eradication, and educational support for poverty alleviation. The education system has an increasingly urgent role in achieving the goal of helping to eradicate poverty, empowering individuals with self-survival and developmental capabilities, and promoting the revitalization of rural talents, industries, culture, ecology, and organizations. It is necessary to clarify the changes in the talent pool required for rural revitalization in the new era, and to cultivate subjects to drive the development of rural revitalization. At the same time, the functional attributes of education, such as breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, promoting social equity, passing on valuable cultural heritage, and cultivating human capital, also determine its important position in China's rural revitalization strategy.

In another direction, under the policy guarantee and implementation of rural revitalization and continuous assistance, the income level of families in the mountainous areas of ethnic minorities has increased, and more resources can be invested in education. According to the results of the questionnaire survey conducted by the research group, the number one obstacle to whether females of school age in Fuling County can continue to receive education at all levels is the "family economic status." Therefore, the most fundamental measure to improve the education situation of women in the ethnic minority mountainous areas would be to establish a strong link between rural revitalization and poverty alleviation. Funing County can seize the great opportunity of being designated as a key county for rural revitalization at the provincial level. It should proactively seek support from the central government and Yunnan Province to integrate rural revitalization subsidies and projects. By continuing to promote initiatives such as infrastructure construction, industry support, and rural habitat improvement, Funing County can substantially improve the income level of local people. This would ensure a high level of stability for local people, employment opportunities, and gradual prosperity, while at the same time minimizing and eliminating poverty. The families in the ethnic mountainous areas have con-

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cerns about the investment in education.

(3) Guaranteeing the introduction and investment of education resources through multiple channels

On the one hand, the single source of education funding and high reliance on local county-level finance has led to a serious shortage in education funding. On the other hand, private funds are lacking, but there is no mechanism to encourage private investment in education. There is thus an urgent need to explore and establish a multi-channel education funding system under the guidance of higher authorities that is in alignment with the local reality.

By capitalizing on the opportunity of the Shanghai–Yunnan cooperation mechanism and the implementation of Shanghai–Yunnan educational cooperation, we have broadened the field of local educational cooperation and exchange with the outside world. This has allowed us to introduce advanced teaching concepts, management ideas, and teaching models from outside regions for application to local school teaching. In particular, we can focus on learning from the work experience and practices of outside regions in promoting equal access to education for school-age females, thus mitigating any shortcomings in local practices. The mutual linkage with the Shanghai Hongkou District has achieved remarkable results, not only promoting the basic balanced development of education, but also moving in the direction of quality and balance, laying a solid foundation to help rural revitalization and the subsequent consolidation of poverty alleviation. Shanghai Hongkou District has supported the construction of 35 primary and secondary schools and kindergartens in Funing County with a total of 14.92 million yuan. In 2018, Zhejiang Xinhu Charity Foundation donated 1 million yuan to support the construction of kindergarten buildings in Dongtang Mountain Village, Dongbo Township, and in 2019, Zhejiang Xinhu Charity Foundation donated 250,000 yuan to support the construction of kindergarten buildings in Naye Mountain Village, Huajia Township, both of which have been put into practical use. By strengthening the foundation of schooling in Funing, we aim to address the shortage in local financial resources and the reliance on a single source of education funding. By exploring different donor funds, such resources could be directed to enhancing education in the region. In addition, teacher training has been strengthened, alongside advancements in education and teaching. We have conducted 12 two-way training sessions for teachers through observation and learning, job shadowing, and online training. A total of 882 people were trained as school (garden) directors, middle-level cadres, and teaching backbones for Fuling County. The implementation of this two-way training initiative further deepens the cooperation of Shanghai and Yunnan in terms of education support and also enhances the effectiveness of the support provided. By fostering a friendly twinning relationship, the exchange of talents and cooperation can be strengthened, so that teachers in Fuling County can learn newer teaching and management models.

In addition, the technical advantages of "Internet+Education" and the advantages of combining information technology and modern media with education offer potential for ensuring sustainable development. Through micro-classes, catechism, distance learning, and other forms of instruction, local teachers and students can gain quicker and more intuitive access to high-quality teaching resources and methods. This will improve teachers' teaching concepts and skills while also stimulating local students' interest and enthusiasm in learning and reducing the influence of negative emotions such as boredom. Another initiative would be to create a public welfare education service platform and encourage college students to actively participate in education poverty alleviation. The educational advantages of colleges and universities should be leveraged, alongside

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strengthening the interaction and cooperation with local governments, and primary and secondary schools in ethnic minority areas. Schools could be jointly run with some colleges and universities in the city and county areas. Finally, the balanced development of compulsory education in ethnic areas should be better promoted.

3.3 Extensive education on gender equality in all aspects

(1) Government policy-making as a guiding direction

In accordance with the "Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan of Yunnan Province (2010-2020)" and the actual situation of Funing County, we will improve policies, regulations, and systems to guarantee equal access to preschool education, nine-year compulsory education, high school education, vocational education, and higher education for women of school age. At the same time, the policy is targeted at developing and improving policies and countermeasures to help and support the education of school-age females belonging to special groups, such as those in remote areas, ethnic minority families, left-behind girls, and girls with disabilities.

(2) Make school education the main front for implementation

Ethnic minority areas should fully seize the opportunity of the national rural revitalization strategy and implement the "Opinions on Accelerating the Revitalization of Rural Talents," which proposes "continuing to implement the support program for talents in ethnic areas," "increasing the training of backbone teachers in rural areas, and precisely training localized excellent teachers." Teacher continuing education schools and teacher education reform and innovation experimental zones should be established to bridge the gap between teacher education training in higher education institutions and the demand for teachers in compulsory education within ethnic minority areas. In addition, practical teaching reform should be implemented that integrates internship-teaching-exchange training. The reform of practical teaching, combined with internship-teaching-exchange training, will enhance the development of practical teaching skills among college students majoring in teacher education. This strategy will effectively address the challenge of balancing teaching and further training of teachers in ethnic minority areas, while also promoting the professional development of teachers in ethnic minority areas.

Given the reality of ethnic, mountainous, and frontier conditions in Funing County, education on red revolutionary culture and Chinese national community awareness can be combined with education on gender equality in school education to enhance gender equality awareness among local school-age girls. In particular, we should incorporate the spirit of Zhang Guimei, a teacher who worked at the grassroots level at Huaping Girls' High School in Lijiang and who channeled her faith and strength of character to encourage local girls to transform their destinies through education. The concept of gender equality should be included in teaching activities.

Relying on the "Adolescent Girls Education Support Project" carried out by the County Bureau of Education and Sports in cooperation with Plan International, we will gradually expand the number of pilots and the scope of the target population. We will establish typical figures for school-age girls, introduce and use external high-quality resources, while teaching to a high standard in schools. This will be combined with continuously providing education on life planning, comprehensive capacity enhancement, and thematic lectures on

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typical figures for local school-age girls.

(3) Bringing the role of the family and society into full play

To enhance the education situation of school-age females in ethnic mountainous areas, it is necessary for education authorities and schools to fulfill their main responsibility for education development. However, of more importance and urgency is for family members of school-age females to enhance the concept of gender equality and strengthen their awareness of the importance of female education. Local government resources such as women's federations, civil affairs, human resources, health and health, social organizations, voluntary groups, and other social forces can be integrated. Additionally, grassroots organizations such as community and village committees can jointly deliver gender equality education on a long-term basis, alongside public awareness campaigns for families and individuals. The aim is for more people to truly understand the importance of female education for personal growth and for changing their own and their families' destiny. This would mean they would thus more firmly support school-age females receiving a complete education at all levels. The government will continue to educate and raise awareness of the importance of women's education for their personal growth and for changing their own and their families' destinies. For women who have interrupted their education and entered society early for various reasons, it is recommended that local realities be combined with social, school, and corporate resources to explore the construction of institutional mechanisms for continuing education and training for girls of school age, and to protect the rights and interests of girls of school age to continue to receive education and improve their abilities. The social environment of education should be further enhanced, promoting the main responsibility of family education, and creating a good atmosphere for education.

(4) Demonstration of effectiveness

Under the new model of education system development, it is important to actively explore the demonstration role of "excellent cases" in the sustainable development of education poverty alleviation.

Excellent cases can help promote advanced educational poverty alleviation concepts, experiences, and technologies, thus improving the quality and efficiency of poverty alleviation work and enhancing the sustainability of educational poverty alleviation. Sustainable development means having a long-term vision and strategy, as well as a stable source of funding and human resource guarantee. Excellent cases can provide governments and related institutions at all levels with educational poverty alleviation policies to learn from and financial support to promote deeper and wider development of educational poverty alleviation work. China's Ministry of Education published a list of excellent regions and excellent schools recognized for their application of online learning spaces in 2021 (40 excellent regions; excellent schools: 39 universities and vocational schools, 157 primary and secondary schools). Funing County of Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture became the only region to be selected as an excellent region in Yunnan Province, while Rida Town Central Primary School of Funing County was the only school selected as an excellent school in Yunnan Province. In September 2021, the Central Museum of Electronic Education issued a "Notice on the Publication of Typical Cases of Online Education Application Innovation," publishing typical nationwide cases of online education application innovation. The two typical cases selected by Funing County, "eNet Gathering Countryside - Education Quietly Waiting for Flowers" and "Say Pathfinder," were successfully selected as national typical

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cases of online education application innovation, and were the only districts (counties) and schools in Yunnan Province to be selected.

In addition, outstanding graduates returned to the ethnic mountainous areas to set up typical cases, which has had a positive impact on improving the situation of school-age females' education in ethnic mountainous areas. On the one hand, graduates who return to live and work in ethnic mountainous areas play an important role, especially female graduates who can serve as role models for girls in their hometowns, encouraging them to persevere in their education, expand their horizons, and strive to achieve their aspirations. On the other hand, outstanding graduates returning to ethnic mountainous areas can inject new vitality and resources into local education and bring with them advanced educational concepts and technologies. At the same time, graduates will also bring new ways of thinking and social resource support, thus effectively improving the level of local education and the construction of the education system. Outstanding graduates who return to ethnic mountainous areas can also take up the responsibility and mission of fighting for educational opportunities for local ethnic minority females, making a positive and far-reaching sustainable contribution to improving the educational situation of school-aged females in ethnic mountainous areas in several ways.

In our case study, we focused on one such girl among the school-age girls in the mountainous minority areas of Funing County, who represents the millions of individuals to have benefited from state policies to complete their education. Lu Zhixia, a student at Naeng Village Primary School in Agyong Township, Funing County, Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, was born in the deepest mountains of Yunnan's most remote regions. She lost her mother at a young age, and her father died when she was in fifth grade after an accident. Luckily, the township government stepped in promptly and set up a village support group to send her a living allowance on a regular basis. After completing her compulsory education, Lu Zhixia was admitted to a key county high school, and the county waived all her high school fees. Within this environment, she remains self-reliant and helps her teacher to take care of the students in the lower grades while diligently completing her studies; she has won the "Three Good Students" award of Funing County and the "Star of Self-improvement of Avail Township" many times. In the interview, she said: "Without the government's care and help, I don't know where I would have gone as a little girl in the mountains; it would have been impossible to finish my education, let alone get into college and get out of the mountains. When I return from my studies, I want to return to my hometown, to make a contribution to the construction of the hometown, so that more girls do not lose the right to choose life because of poverty." This year she is about to take the college entrance examination. As a poor female student from a mountainous area, may Lu Zhixia's persistence and struggle bring hope and courage to more females from the ethnic mountainous areas.

4 Conclusion

We are fully aware that the development of education is of great importance to the economy and society of a region and is the basis for sustainable development in the future. Moreover, the education of school-age females is related to the fate of women, who represent half of the population. Education is an even more important aspect for school-age females in the mountainous areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. In the face of many problems in China's own development, the whole society should pay more attention to the education and development of women in the ethnic mountainous areas, starting with changes in personal awareness,

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policy drive, and extensive education on gender equality in all aspects to promote a comprehensive approach. Transforming the individual cognitive level is an important support for gender equality education, and it is necessary to raise people's awareness and consciousness of gender equality through various means such as public awareness campaigns and education, cultural development, and other initiatives. Policy drive is the guarantee. Fully recognizing the importance of ethnic minority women's education and promoting the rural revitalization strategy, together with the resulting consolidation of poverty eradication and the construction of a harmonious society, the further development of ethnic minority women's education in mountainous areas should be taken as an important task for governments at all levels. At the same time, through implementing comprehensive and extensive education on gender equality, boosted by excellent and typical demonstration cases, we can collaborate at the government, school, family, and society levels to form a virtuous cycle of a fair educational environment, gradually realizing the ultimate goal of education equity for the whole society.

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