


Education

Can Educational Initiatives Help Achieve Social Justice in China?

By W. John Morgan and Bin Wu

There has been an increase in debates regarding the Chinese education system's inequality over the past years, relating it generally to China's social inequality. This article discusses how the Chinese government's educational policies can help develop a socially just system in China.

At the turn of the 21st century China was proud of two achievements in education policy: the universalisation of nine year compulsory education; and the so-called massification of higher education. The latter saw an increase in the enrolment ratio from only 3.4% in 1990 to over 20% by 2005. In recent years there has been an increasing debate about inequality in education and its relationship with social inequality in China more generally. Why does this matter to the Chinese public, media and policy makers, given the impressive achievements in general provision we have noted? The issue should be seen in the context of the emergence in China of a discernible public policy culture, with education policy providing an excellent example.[1]

In this short article we consider whether educational initiatives can help achieve social justice in China. Educational inequality in China can be described as the uneven distribution of educational resources by geographical region; by class or other social group such as ethnicity; and at different levels from primary and secondary to tertiary. Such unevenness has been aggravated by the stratification of higher education e.g. the classification of world-class universities and research-led universities; the shared economic costs of education with students and their families; and increasing competition in graduate labour markets. These have led to disguised inequalities. For instance, despite increasing opportunities for students from rural families to gain access to universities, there is a decline in the number of rural students entering national key universities which receive the bulk of the central government's research and development funding. The students who graduate from elite universities have distinct advantages in the graduate labour market, with many employers recruiting exclusively from such universities. In addition, the geographical distribution of elite universities is also very uneven with most concentrated in Beijing, Shanghai, and a few provinces of the eastern coastal region; while many inland provinces have no national key universities. This has resulted in a great variety of access to elite universities by region or by province.

This stratification of higher education has influenced the pattern of both secondary and of primary education as a response to the intense competition for access to elite universities. This has led to a stratification in practice of the state's public schools, reflected in an uneven distribution of educational resources which are skewed to key schools in urban areas. For example, there is a trend towards the centralisation of the best teaching resources to big cities and to a few "super schools" in support of those seen as the best student candidates, aimed at success in the *Gaokao* (the national higher education entrance examination). This may also explain the outstanding results achieved in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by the Shanghai region. Meanwhile, this is accompanied by the marginalisation of rural society, leading to the decline of schools in small towns and villages and to a drain of both qualified teachers and able students (so called "migration for better education").

As we have indicated, educational inequality in China is not confined to the uneven distribution of resources between regions, urban and rural, and between super and ordinary schools. Another example is the emergence of a new category of children whose parents are migrant workers living in urban areas either short or long term. The large scale of rural-urban migration (now approximately 277 million) and the lack of opportunities for migrant families to integrate into urban society have raised unexpected and challenging issues for the Chinese government, education authorities, and teachers. The problems include: lack of access to public schools in urban areas, lack of support from parents comparable with settled families in rural or urban areas;

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knowledge gaps and underdeveloped capacities compared with classmates from urban families; social discrimination; and associated psychological and mental health issues. It is estimated that there are currently nearly 100 million children in this category: of which 40% are migrant children living with their parents in urban areas; and 60% "children left behind", living with grandparents in the countryside. The decline of the countryside and social exclusion in urban areas make it very difficult for such children to complete compulsory education in practice; and to have an equal opportunity to access tertiary education, let alone elite universities.

The Chinese government has introduced a number of policies in recent years to meet these challenges. These include: (1) Ensuring that each province has at least one national key university, (2) providing financial subsidies or government sponsored loans for university students from rural and poor families to support entrance to and completion of tertiary education, (3) reforming the national higher education examination or *Gaokao* system to broaden student opportunity to compete, (4) increasing regional recruitment quotas to national key universities of students from poor counties and rural families, (5) providing more financial support for ordinary schools in general and for those in the peripheral areas (e.g. poor counties and rural towns) in particular. This is aimed at achieving a minimum standard of quality (6) exchanging staff at various levels from principals to new teacher recruits between key and ordinary schools, between urban and rural, and between big cities and county towns; (7) waiving of tuition fees for all students at local schools in rural villages or towns (8) changing the emphasis from key schools to provision for residential families within catchment areas.

Despite such efforts, which have made some progress, criticism of education policies has continued in the public media and at the annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's national legislature with 2,987 members in 2013. In recent decades the NPC has become a forum for resolving policy differences within the Chinese Communist Party and Government, and among civil society groups. Each spring, delegates from throughout China gather in Beijing to discuss important policy issues. Educational inequality has been one of the top issues of concern for over a decade, the others being housing and health care inequalities. A symptom considered by critics as evidence of the failure of government policy to deal with educational inequality is the continuing popularity and influence of the so-called "super schools". These focus on achieving entry to Peking and Tsinghua universities (the Chinese Oxbridge) in particular and to elite universities in general. Hengshui High School, a "super school" in Hebei province, is an example. In the 2016

Chinese students at a Middle School in Anxian County. Photo courtesy: Reuters.

provincial *Gaokao* 90% of the top twenty students came from this school, eighteen in the humanities and social sciences and seventeen in the natural sciences and engineering. The percentage of its graduates entering national key universities was as high as 92.44%.[2]

The dominance of such "super schools" has undermined government efforts at educational equality. Well-off families are willing to pay more for their children's education and skills development, leading to advantages in access to high quality schools at both primary and secondary levels and, subsequently, to elite universities. Such families have also the capacity and influence to deal with local authorities and school principals to enhance their children's access to high quality schools. This includes contributing financially to improvements in the school infrastructure and equipment and to the working conditions and pay of teachers.

There are two further social groups that we should note, although we do not have the space to discuss them in detail. These are China's ethnic minorities; and people with physical and mental disabilities that affect their learning and ability to access education. In addition to the Han majority, there are fifty-five other ethnic minorities comprising a combined population of more than 110 million, often in remote areas of the country. Educational initiatives in support of ethnic minorities are considered by the Chinese government to be important to the country's aim to be a Harmonious Society. As for those with special learning needs, China has now joined the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This obliges it to provide education to those with disabilities on an equal basis with others, within an inclusive system. These are further challenges which the Chinese government must meet if it is to ensure social justice in education.

The emphasis on equal opportunity and the right to access to public education at its various levels means that current debates have paid less attention to inequality in graduate labour markets.

The Chinese government does emphasise educational equality as an important factor in overcoming social inequality in China. However, such an approach is misleading about the cause-effect relation as educational inequality in China is a consequence of social inequality. Furthermore, the latter cannot be reversed by government initiatives in a particular public policy sector. Critics call, instead, for radical thinking about the principles and mechanisms of educational equality including the participation of local communities in decision making and for the participation of teachers in a more autonomous education management. This rejects the top-down approach (so called *dingcheng sheji* in Chinese) which is heavily dependent upon central government policies and interventions. Instead there have been a number of new initiatives at the community levels. For example, some non-governmental organisations have initiated projects enabling teachers and students in poor inland areas to access educational resources via the Internet and other digital means. Again, although at a very early stage, few parents are considering the feasibility of home-schooling instead of using the public schools. However, such a venture is likely to face official discouragement and opposition. It may also be seen as a mirror-image to private tutoring or "shadow education" which is growing in China and which again favours the economically well-off. Such families also may have the means to send their children abroad for secondary and even primary education. For instance, the number of young students (under seventeen years of age) going to study in the USA reached 40,000 in 2015, an increase of 5,000 compared with 2014.[3] This trend has seen a decline in the average age of Chinese international students.

The emphasis on equal opportunity and the right to access to public education at its various levels means that current debates have paid less attention to inequality in graduate labour markets. According to a survey made by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2014, there is a significant difference between graduates from urban and from rural families in terms of both employment rate and average salary. These were 87.7% and 3,505 yuan per month for the former compared with 59.5% and 2,851 yuan per month for the latter.[4] Such differences may also be explained by reports that many employers consider family background an important criterion when selecting and recruiting graduates.

What are our conclusions? First, considering the extent of social inequality in China, there are competing interpretations of the relationship between education and social inequality. On the one hand, there are those who emphasise the positive impact of government initiatives addressing inequality in education and their contribution to social justice in China. On the other hand, there are those who believe educational inequality is caused by social inequality; and that nothing meaningful can be achieved in education unless significant progress is made regarding economic and social inequality more generally. Secondly, despite the emphasis on administrative measures to redistribute education resources, there are conflicting opinions about the effectiveness of such a top-down approach. Beyond the policy debates there are tentative experiments at the grassroots level or "voting by foot" as we have shown. The alternatives available depend yet again on socio-economic status and capacity. Finally, the focus of attention has been on achieving distributive equality according to geographic location and social group. However, we argue that the contribution of education through developing citizenship awareness, extra-curricular activities, and social volunteering in partnership with civil society organisations is also of value in promoting and facilitating social justice in the wider community.[5] This requires a broadening in the understanding of the relationship between education and social justice that has been missing from current debates. ■

Professor W. John Morgan is Emeritus Professor, School of Education, and Senior Fellow, China Policy Institute, University of Nottingham; and Honorary Professor, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, where he is based at the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data. He is the editor (with F. Li and Q. Gu) of a *Handbook of Education in China* to be published by Edward Elgar Publishing in 2017. He has published extensively on the comparative political economy, history, and philosophy of education.

Dr. Bin Wu is senior research fellow at Nottingham University Business School and a co-editor of the *International Journal of Diasporic Chinese Studies*. His recent publications include *Chinese Higher Education Reform and Social Justice* (Routledge 2016, edited with W. J. Morgan) and Chinese overseas students' integration and engagement in host societies (special issue of *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 12(1), guest editor with Stig Thøgersen).

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