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Providing equal access to education - a formidable challenge for China

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China has seen a dramatic growth in its economy in recent years. It has a rapidly increasing population of approximately 1.2 billion people, though the population is still a largely rural with about 80% of people living outside urban areas. China in its Education Law (1995) restated its commitment to universal education. In the last twenty years it has achieved considerable success in increasing its education participation rates. However, despite the rhetoric about equality of access there are signs that indicate not everyone has the same educational opportunities. This paper describes the current education system and outlines some of the disparities that exist and describes how Chinese Government policies are affecting universal access to education. The papers conclusions are largely optimistic in spite of the tremendous difficulties that policy makers face.

Background information

The People's Republic of China has seen a dramatic growth in its economy in the last ten to fifteen years. It is still classed as a developing nation however, and many of China's educational issues are still related to the lack of financial resources available to meet an expanding education system. With a rapidly increasing population of approximately 1.2 billion people (CIA World Factbook 1995), and the introduction of compulsory education, the government is under increasing pressure to provide a good quality education system with a budget that is not increasing by anywhere near the same rate as the demands made on it. Despite the Government's stated intentions, some educationalists consider the economy is unable to support the schooling of the approximately 200 million full-time students expected by the turn of the century and give them a high quality education (Ma Shu Chao 1994).

China still has a largely rural population with about 80% of people living outside urban areas (National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition 1991 p1). Economic development has been rapid in some areas and the disparity between prosperous, urban and poor, rural is becoming very marked. The mountainous and remote inland regions see little of the economic boom that is happening along the coast with its access to international trade and development of special economic zones. The

significant economic differences between China's regions is evidenced in the varying levels of educational services offered in those regions.

Recent Developments in Education

The *Education Law of the People's Republic of China* was adopted by the Chinese government to go into effect from September 1995. Included in this act were provisions regarding financing and future development of education in China. The *Beijing Review* quoted the Minister of the State Education Commission, Zhu Kai Xuan as stating that 'earnestly protecting the legitimate right of Chinese citizens to receive an education is an important principle of the Education Law'. He also stated the Law makes the following stipulations: 'Citizens enjoy an equal opportunity to receive an education, irrespective of their nationality, race, sex, age, occupation, property status or religious belief' and 'the state assists poor areas to develop education.' (Huang Wei 1995 p14) There is also a number of corresponding stipulations about the provision of various forms of financial aid to needy students.

Since the 1950s the Central and local governments have considered that universalisation of elementary education should be the basic target for the Chinese education system. The compulsory education act adopted in 1986, stated that universal elementary education should be provided in the whole country in the 1980s. After this, nine year compulsory schooling should be implemented in various areas according to their economic development. Four recommendations as to necessary action to be taken alongside the compulsory education act were considered crucial in seeing universalisation of elementary education achieved. These four recommendations were:

1. to publicise and abide by the act
2. compulsory basic education should become the responsibility of local government.
3. there would be an increase in government investment as well as the introduction of an educational tax. Government would encourage community support and fund raising.
4. to enlarge teacher training enrolments and provide in-service training for unqualified teachers. (Ma Shu Chao 1994)

The Current Education System

There are three major sectors in the current education system in China; basic (school) education, technical education and higher education. Separate schools are provided for minority ethnic groups, the disabled and students with special needs. There is also an extensive system of adult education.

The teaching curriculum is laid down by the State education commission at national level although individual provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities are allowed to make changes according to local conditions. Adult education is considered an area of great significance. Since the 1950s it has been considered essential to the development of the country to tackle problems of illiteracy across the nation. In 1989 the illiteracy levels across China had been reduced to 7% of men and 15% of women. Illiteracy in urban areas was only 1.2% with thus a much higher level of illiteracy in

rural regions (National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition 1991 p3). Adult education consists of the provision of a variety of courses at both primary and secondary general education levels, vocational education and technical training and higher professional and in-service training.

China has experienced marked success in lifting its education participation rates. The proportion of children attending school has increased from 93.2% in 1980 to 97.2% in 1992, while the dropout rate has decreased to 2.2%. As junior secondary schooling has been popularised the rate of primary school graduates moving to junior middle school has increased from 69.1% in 1987 to 79.6% in 1992. (Hu Ruiwen 1994) However, there are still considerable barriers to achieving equal participation amongst all China's peoples.

Problems in Achieving Equality of Access

The legacies of the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution led to a major disruption of education in China. Students missed significant amounts of time from their studies, and many teachers and academics lost and never regained their positions. Post-graduate study was minimal. Many students graduated with inadequate training and education standards were lowered. Government policy to increase the birthrate subsequently placed a further strain on the education system and exacerbated the need for more teachers and schools. Twenty years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, China is still dealing with its impact on education; inadequately trained professionals, low status of teaching as an occupation and a greatly increased population.

Differences between Regions

The growth in the economy has been quite uneven and while some areas have seen major development in recent years, others have seen very little. This has created inequalities in education funding. The difference in education expenditure per pupil (elementary and middle school) in different areas can be as high as five to ten times (Ma Shu Chao 1994). While the government aims to provide elementary education for all children and junior middle schooling for the majority, this difference in financing may make that target difficult to achieve. Particularly as more responsibility for funding has been given to local government, those who live in poorer areas and remote regions suffer in the area of funding and thus the level and quality of their education.

'Basic education is still noticeably backward in rural areas when compared to urban areas, with profound differences in terms of professional education' (Wu Nai Tao 1996). Even the primary school enrolment rate in mountainous and remote regions is not close to the national target of universalisation of elementary education. In these areas attendance is frequently below 90%, as opposed to almost 100% in urban areas (Hu Rui Wen 1994). The drop out rate and repetition rates of students in these regions are also significantly higher than in urban areas. Zhang Xue Ying, a staff reporter with *China Today* states that over 1 million children drop out of school each year because of poverty (Zhang Xue Ying 1996). Many of these students are girls from the mountainous regions and minority inhabited areas who suffer not only from poverty but also from social prejudice.

The number of students entering junior secondary schools increased by 12.7% to 81.1% in the period between 1987 and 1993 (Ma Shu Chao 1994). This is a significant increase but again there is a major imbalance between urban and rural areas. In six remote provinces and autonomous regions the junior secondary entrance rates are still below 60% (Ma Shu Chao 1994). Government education objectives include decisions to universalise senior secondary schooling in urban and the economically developed coastal areas. This is realistic as to what can be offered yet it emphasises once again the divide between urban and rural, rich and poor (Hu Rui Wen 1994).

Shortage of Adequately Qualified Teachers

The status of teaching and attitudes towards teacher education have fluctuated depending on the political direction prevailing at the time. In the pre and immediate post-war years there was a strong emphasis on education and thus teachers were seen as having a very important part to play in the development of China. However, teaching continually suffered from the contrast between the stated support for its role and the reality. In 1956 a delegate to the National Conference of the Union of Educational workers listed three grievances:

1. The political status of teachers was low.
2. The salaries and living conditions were inadequate.
3. The teachers worked so hard that many developed nervous illnesses.

(Price, 1979, p. 223).

During the Cultural Revolution teachers were often the target of criticism. Teachers were called the 'scum of the earth', 'maggots' and 'flies battenning on the morsels of stinking revisionist meat' (Cleverley, 1985, p. 217). Large numbers were sent to the country areas to be re-educated by the peasants, schools closed and there was a threat that teachers would be replaced by untrained personnel. The formal training that took place was very limited.

It was not until 1976 that teachers were readmitted officially to the ranks of the workers and mental labour was declared no less honourable than manual (Cleverley 1985 p225). During the Cultural Revolution a baby boom had taken place and there was recognition of the great need to increase the number of teachers and to improve both their pre-service and inservice training. In the 1980s there was an effort to convince teachers that teaching is a glorious profession (Billie 1984 p161).

This rhetoric was undermined by the low salaries and poor conditions that teachers faced and the generally low status in which the profession was held. While some improvements have taken place the problems of low status and poor conditions still mean that 'Many high school graduates that could not get into to university chose to be put on a waiting list rather than attend a teachers university' (Deng 1995a p12).

China faces a shortage of teachers particularly in the country areas and it also has a considerable number of teachers who lack the relevant level of qualifications required by law. In 1993 only 51.1% of senior high teachers, 59.55% of junior high teachers and 84.7% of primary school teachers had the required level of education (except in Beijing where the legal requirements are met) (Deng 1995a p11).

Government Initiatives to Enhance Access to Education

Project Hope

The China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF) started Project Hope in 1989 with the aim to help meet some of the education needs of China's rural sector. With around 1 million children leaving school each year because of poverty the project aims to give some the chance to return and complete their schooling. Project Hope not only provides financially for students and their families but also helps to update and equip rural schools so that they may better meet the needs of their students. Donations come from local and overseas businesses as well as from private citizens. Since its inception in 1989 the project has been able to help over one million children return to complete elementary schooling (Zhang Xue Ying, 1996, p. 10). The Spring Bud program is a parallel program specifically aimed at giving help for girl dropouts. As yet no similar scheme exists to encourage poor students in their secondary schooling.

Providing Educational Alternatives

Due to limited places in institutions of higher learning, some 10 million primary and middle school graduates each year lose the opportunity to continue with their education, their only option is to stay in the countryside and become farmers like their parents. In order to meet the shortfall in the education system, especially in the rural and remote regions of China, the government has implemented an extensive system of adult and correspondence education. This takes such forms as, 'short-term training in rotation, lectures on special topics, correspondence courses and radio/TV' broadcasts (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 1989 p 961).

One particularly successful provider of agricultural training is the Central Agricultural Broadcasting and Television School (CABTS) which was established some 15 years ago and now operates in most provinces in China. It aims to equip those in the rural sector with knowledge and skills that will allow them to move into the forefront of China's agricultural development. CABTS helps farmers by removing the need for them to leave their farms while they are training. They use broadcasts on radio and television, as well as providing audio and video cassettes. At the completion of their studies, students may sit exams and receive recognised qualifications. Students also receive other benefits such as priority access to pesticides, fertilisers and improved varieties as well as obtaining land contracts (Wu Nai Tao, 1996).

Inservice Teacher Training

Because of the restricted training during and immediately after the Cultural Revolution China has recognised the need for inservice training for teachers. In particular there are three groups who are targeted. The teachers who have certain knowledge but who are unqualified for teaching receive training in pedagogical studies so they can receive the required record of formal training. There are teachers who need to update their knowledge and study new teaching methods to increase the quality of their teaching. There are also teachers who are considered to be outstanding and who are provided with theoretical training and the opportunity to undertake educational research and sum up their teaching experience (adapted from Price 1979 p167). Training in educational administration is also provided for administrators of primary and secondary schools in half year or 1-2 year training courses.

Considerable success has been achieved in the improvement of the qualifications of teachers: between 1980 and 1993 there was an increase of 34.9% in primary teachers who had qualifications of higher secondary education or above and in secondary teachers having a two year higher education qualification or above there was an improvement from 1987 to 1993 of 46.8% (Ma 1994).

There are incentives given to encourage students to enrol in teaching courses. The student subsidies for teaching are the highest in the country and teachers' salaries have been indexed with a bonus for every class. The 'Teachers Law' and 'The Program for Educational Reform and Development' state that teachers' incomes should be greater than government employees, that average living space should meet local averages and that public health services for teachers should be the same as government workers (Deng, 1995b, p. 15). However in reality, teachers still receive a lower income than that received by most government workers (Deng, 1994b, p.14). It is readily admitted that teachers' salaries are low, '... the shortfall of educational resources and low teachers' salaries make it difficult to maintain a stable team of qualified teachers, and still constitute the biggest problem for educational development in China' (Hu Rui Wen, 1994).

Education Funding

Funding for education in China comes predominantly from the Central and local governments. Since the compulsory education act was adopted in 1986 the responsibility has rested more heavily with the local government, as outlined by recommendations that ran alongside the act. This funding is supplemented by fund-raising through various channels including educational taxes, the development of industries operated by schools, the payment of tuition fees and public fund-raising and donations. Since these additional fund-raising measures were introduced, finance for education has been significantly increased (Hu Rui Wen, 1994).

A new policy is being introduced that states: 'the State encourages the use of financial and credit means to support the development of education' (Huang Wei, 1995, p. 15). While the government will continue be the major provider of education in the nation, it will also encourage enterprises, institutions, mass organizations and individual citizens to operate schools and other educational facilities according to the Education Law.

State Enterprise Run Schools

In the past forty years, an important part of the education system in China has been the provision of schools by state run enterprises (eg Railways, government steel works and other factories etc.). China's state owned firms have traditionally provided schools, clinics and housing for employees and their families rather than paying higher wages. Some of these firms are struggling with large debts and with the current prevailing attitude in China of economic advancement, they now feel that the schools are burdens to them achieving their financial potential. While these schools are not always highly regarded when compared to local government run schools, in many poorer areas they are the only education opportunity (Yojana Sharma, 1995). In these poorer regions chronically underfunded local government authorities are not in a position to take on responsibility for continuing these schools. Although the Central

government has said that they will not allow this situation to occur, there is the potential that this could leave some poorer regions with no schooling facilities at all.

Higher Education

In 1994 the State Education Commission decided to change the policy that had been in existence for 45 years that all university education should be free to the students. With the change in policy the decision was made that parents should be financially responsible for any of their children's non-compulsory education. For most Chinese university students that meant having to find on average 3,500 yuan (approx. A\$600) per year to cover tuition fees, living expenses and books. 'Compared to the average annual income of 2,800 yuan for urban employees- and even lower for poor rural workers, the level of fees and costs meant that some outstanding middle school students from poor families could not afford to study at key universities in 1994' (Yang Ji, 1995, p.25).

The government has however, made available a number of options to assist poorer students so that they may attend university. Many universities offer a large number of scholarships, some also offer employment on campus to assist students with paying fees and many provide interest free 'study-loans' to help students meet their financial needs. According to a *Beijing Review* article 'Financial support has meant that not a single university student has ever dropped out because of monetary difficulties' (Yang Ji, 1995, p. 26).

Conclusion

China is a rapidly developing and changing country but it is still struggling with many of the issues that are common to developing economies. While the Chinese government recognises the importance of education and that it should be equally available to everyone it is finding it difficult to provide high quality education on a limited budget. The Government's stated aim is universal elementary education but in reality the urban and developing coastal regions have greater access to higher quality education than the remote and rural sectors of China. Government and non-government bodies are attempting to meet this discrepancy in the provision of education through a number of measures but it is obvious that a significant divide still exists between the urban 'rich' and the rural 'poor'. The decision to introduce fees for non-compulsory education is likely to widen that divide even further.

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