

Do Not Make Some Children Lose at the Beginning of Learning: A Critical Review of the Chinese Curriculum

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ABSTRACT The idea that “children should not lose at the starting line” is a commonplace in China. But Chinese children born in the lower classes come from rural areas and girls often become disadvantaged groups. This problem is closely related to the selection, organization and evaluation of the curriculum. In order to change the adverse status of marginalized and disadvantaged groups in schools, two strategies should be taken, which include consideration of the disadvantaged groups while selecting, compiling, and organizing the course content, and equal discourse right should be given to the disadvantaged groups to make sure they are able to participate equally in the school. To guarantee the disadvantages’ discourse right, two points should be noted, that is, eliminating the discourse hegemony of the advantaged group, and holding tolerant and grateful attitude to them.

INTRODUCTION

The words “do not make children lose at the beginning of learning” reflect the value that Chinese parents have given education over the past decades. Many parents treat “education” as the one true religion and flock to send their children to the crammed schools and training classes. In earlier times, there were Chinese, math and English training classes, but now many art classes have been added, such as music, painting and lyre playing. Parents have come to believe that children should not lose in more and more fields.

METHODOLOGY

The proposition upon which this paper is based, “Do not make some children lose at the beginning of learning”, suggests unequal education opportunities. One knows that education gives the impetus for the development of every person and is the precondition for social mobility. The modern social hierarchy is based, to a large extent, on the educational dimension. But in China quality education resources are grossly inadequate, which leads to a scramble for high-quality education resources, with the result that unequal education opportunities appear.

The idea of the so-called *opportunity equality* means that a value goal and enforced stan-

dard should be established by society. Equality of opportunity is a venerable ideal (Sreenivasan 2014). However, equal opportunity includes both *explicit opportunity* and *invisible opportunity*. Most attention is given to explicit opportunity, and there are remarkable gaps among different regions and schools, between urban and rural. The developed areas have put significant investments to education such as excellent faculties and advanced hardware. While schools, which are located in poverty-stricken areas do not even have the basic infrastructure for teaching.¹

As to *invisible equity*, there are two “hidden” factors that produce unequal opportunities inside the school, especially in coursework. One often finds that different students show different reflects after experiencing the same course content. Why does the same content produce the different learning outcomes for different students? How about when the learning content is same? Are there any hidden factors over and above intelligence and effort? The answer is “certainly yes”. The problems with the Chinese school education system are that the research and reflections are always some surface or unimportant questions, not the essential or practical matters really existing in school education.

As the American scholar, James S. Coleman (1968:13) has indicated,

The introduction of the new non-classical curriculum [in the U.S. high school] was sel-

dom if ever couched in terms of a conflict between those for whom high school was college preparation, and those for whom it was terminal education; nevertheless, that was the case. The “inequality” was seen in the use of a curriculum that served a minority and was not designed to fit the needs of the majority; the shift of curriculum was intended to fit the curriculum to the needs of the new majority in the schools.

In the paper, qualitative analysis is used; specifically it includes documentary method and text analysis. Documentary method is one basic and widely-used method, through looking up relevant articles; some problems in Chinese curriculum have been identified. And these issues further are conformed by analyzing the concrete texts. In this paper, some typical texts are chosen, such as *readers* which are published by People’s Education Press. In China, People’s Education Press is directly under the management of the Ministry of Education and most of the textbooks used by the students are published by People’s Education Press. So, if we choose the textbooks published by People’s Education Press to analyze, it will be typical as a convincing study material.

RESULTS

Which Types of Children Lose at the Starting Line in School Learning?

Children from the Lower Classes

Students from the advantaged urban backgrounds are able to learn through abundant materials and different methods when they are young. Their experiences with toys, food, and environments are likely to enter the curriculum. However, children from the lower classes including the urban and rural children do not have the very experiential base. Children could acquire appropriate cultural knowledge when they indeed participate in an environment in which they can access tangible artifacts arranged by their community, either intentionally or unintentionally (Hiroaki 2016; Peters et al. 2017).

Additionally, the children from well-off families can receive shadow education, which could increase their chance to succeed (Malik and Liu 2017) and make them perform well in content understanding, class participation and so forth,

while the lower class children may face many problems in comprehending and applying the study material. One reason for these phenomena is the connection between life and study materials for children who are in good living standard, and the other reason is the result of the first cause, that is the well-conditioned children will be more confident.

Children from Rural Areas

There are regional as well as class differences existing in China’s curriculum study of year 9 compulsory school *Readers* reports that:

1. In terms of content, the *Readers* for juniors are roughly the same in so far as the subject is concerned, that is, the number of selections focusing on urban life and those focusing on rural life are basically equal in number. For instance, in *Readers 1* and *Readers 3*, there are seven texts on rural life and five on urban life, respectively. In *Readers 13*, there are two on rural life and 19 on urban life. Furthermore, there exist clear cultural tendencies, as rural life is closely related to animals, landscapes, and history, while the contents about urban life are variegated, such as cityscapes, families, stories located in cities, and urban culture. The contents of rural areas imply a fixed, natural and past rural culture. Compared with rural culture, the urban life is presented as a modern and fast-developing way. This may be unintentional but it could cause an effect that encourages an admiration for city life among students from rural areas.
2. The content analysis of texts indicates that much of the content is “neutral,” that is, without bias or directivity. Typical Chinese content is constituted by a significant part of this ‘neutral’ content. Strangely, urban students are quicker to grasp these texts. A few such texts even dip into classical Chinese literature and require students to read selections from *The Dream of the Red Mansion*, *The Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, and *Travel to The West*.² Rural students are far behind in these aspects (Yu 2004).

The neglect of the characteristics, complexity of education of China and the great differences between rural and urban areas about educa-

tional environments and resources has led to schooling in rural areas having little relationship with students' lives. At the same time, because the lower practical value of the knowledge teachers have taught, schools nearly are unable to connect with real life, so those who feel no hope of entering college become uninterested in school.

Curriculum and teaching content are designed without taking school conditions in rural areas into account. There is, for example, a severe shortage of teachers and equipment for English and computer courses in rural areas. The introduction of such courses defeats many students (and teachers), and even made many students fear the two courses. In this regard, Hong (2006:137) noted that:

In the present compulsory education, there is actually a city-life orientation, which has led to the neglect of the demands of the rural students in terms of the choice and design of the curriculum. It has also led to a knowledge-selection and textbook layout that gives little consideration to the needs of rural areas and serious out-of-kilter with the lives of rural students. This has widened the educational differences between urban and rural students.

The urban-orientation of the curriculum has contributed to the large number of dropouts in rural schools.

Of course, the researchers do not contend that the curriculum should be rural-area-oriented, which would lead to the other extreme. This phenomenon results in the insecure connection between formal educational credentials and job-income in rural settings (Corbett and Forsey 2017). The key point is that, when designing curricula, one should pay attention to the educational reality of rural areas so as to safeguard the inherent equality between urban and rural education.

Girls

Gender bias in China's curriculum culture has existed for a long time. The curriculum mainly reflects male discourse. The primary manifestations are more male characters in textbooks, and females being treated as men's subordinates or as "footnotes" to historical events rather than as the active participants. Lu (2001: 563) has investigated 10 textbooks used in China from grades 1 to 5 and found that there are 132 male

roles and 23 female roles. Male leaders take up a large proportion of the male characters along with scientists, musicians, writers, and so on. Female characters are martyrs and fairies. The roles being presented are very traditional, with teachers are women, military images are male, farming is a male activity and weaving a female activity, and girls wash clothes, boys mend the fence. When boys and girls are characterized, girls are petite, beautiful, gentle and delicate, while the boys are tall, strong, wise, brave, active, tenacious and enterprising. The roles in textbooks make gender socialization, essentially, gender socialization is "role-playing" which means children learn to understand the expectations of others for them, and engage in the role's behavior according to the expectation (Wang and Li 2015; Ullah et al. 2014).

Why Do Some Children Lose at the Beginning of Learning?

Choice of the Course Content

Human knowledge is as wide-ranging as the open sea, but the knowledge taught in schools is limited, so one has to choose what is taught. As Lu (1991:9) has said, "one of the characteristics of education is to spread the culture selective".

The heart of the choice of course content is the selection of the most valuable knowledge. But if the knowledge used in class seems to be more valuable than that is not included, who determines this value? Is it valuable for all students or for special classes or groups? It is evident that it is the ruling class that has the power to determine, control and make people accept "the most valuable knowledge", that is, "the knowledge worth having". In this regard, Foucault (1979) clearly stated the relationship between power and knowledge, and all knowledge and all discourses are embedded in networks of power, and under certain conditions, they can be changed into power. There is no pure discourse but only discourse enveloped with power.

In other words, knowledge and power are two sides of the same process. Knowledge cannot be neutral and pure. In Foucault's view, in particular power relations, knowledge can be "legal" or "illegal" rather than "authentic" and "false". He (Foucault 1979: 27) said,

We should admit that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it

because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful), that power and knowledge directly imply one another, that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

In school education, the choices and the arrangement of the curriculum are decided by man of power. It is the result of the choices of the dominant classes, and their world-views are built into the curriculum. As Apple (2000: 9) has pointed out,

The means and ends involved in educational policy and practice are the results of struggles by powerful groups and social movements to make their knowledge legitimate, to defend or increase their patterns of social mobility, and to increase their power in the larger social arena.

Put another way, the dominant class selects the knowledge that caters to their class interests and tastes. This selected knowledge becomes abstracted, focalized, idealized, and politicized, and ultimately becomes the “legitimate” knowledge of the society as a whole.

Organization of the Curriculum

Along with the growth of knowledge, knowledge is constantly in change. The increasing differentiation is a necessary condition for ruling class to be in the ruling position to legitimize their knowledge as superior or of high value, which is completed by the formal education. Just as Young (1971:34) has said,

Academic curricula involve assumptions that some kinds and areas of knowledge are much more ‘worthwhile’ than others, and that as soon as possible all knowledge should become specialized and with minimum explicit emphasis on the relations between the subjects specialized in and between the specialists teachers involved. It may be useful, therefore, to view curricular changes as involving changing definitions of knowledge along one or more of the dimensions towards a less or more stratified, specialized and open organization of knowledge.

In other words, the curriculum can be divided into “academic” and “non-academic”. Young (1971: 38) believes that the *academic curriculum* is organized along four dimensions of liter-

acy, or an emphasis on written as opposed to oral presentation, and *individualism*, or avoidance of group work or cooperativeness. This emphasis derives from the ways academic work is assessed and is a characteristic of both the “process” of knowing and the way the “product” is presented. It is *abstract* knowledge and its structuring and compartmentalization are independent of the knowledge of the learner. Finally, and linked to the former, there is the “*relatedness* of academic curricula,” the extent to which they are “at odds” with daily life and common experience. These four dimensions are also the characteristics of the so-called “high” knowledge. They are characteristics of the organization of non-academic courses or “low” knowledge with its oral presentation, group activities and assessment, concrete knowledge and relatedness to non-school knowledge.

Young (1971: 38) points out that these characteristics can also be seen as social definitions of educational value, and thus become problematic. He persists that knowledge is not best made available according to the criteria it represents, but reflecting unconscious cultural choices that accord with the values and beliefs of dominant groups at a particular time. It is these choices that decide educational success and failure. Bernstein (1971) and Ball et al. (2015) think the organization language of curriculum knowledge could be divided into *public* and *formal*. The *public language code* is used for the exchanges and communications of everyday life, it is not suitable for conveying knowledge with a precise structure and is not conducive to the analysis and discussion of deep meanings. The *formal language code* has a complicated conceptual structure. It is the code of written communication, and its relevance and openness facilitate analysis and reasoning.

In China, there are differences between Mandarin and the dialect, so do the written and the spoken language. Shulei Li, a Chinese scholar, has affirmed that there are two language systems in rural communities- literary and spoken. The literary system, Mandarin, is characterized by a written vocabulary and a complete syntactic structure, while the latter is constituted by dialects (there are many dialects in China) and words that are used every day and everywhere. Schools demand that students change their language from the spoken to the literary. The process can be difficult, just as Li (1999) has described,

During the conversation with me for half an hour, Chunlei Wang, the monitor of Grade 3, always tried to use the literary language. However, it seemed to be not easy for him and he was in a state of tension with careful word-choices and slow speech, and even a continuous dry cough. When a large number of students came back to the classroom to join us, the conversation resumed in the colloquial language. The free and relaxing atmosphere returned. Wang relaxed.

Mandarin and the written language are both used in schools. The language of textbooks is highly normative and has a firm logical structure. There are logical and systematic links between single sentences and contexts. The language of school texts is abstract and rich in cultural connotations. The examination requirements for language and writing are standardized, and completely exclude the rural and spoken language.

The social class attributes language codes to an important cause for discrepancies in children's school achievement. Different family backgrounds have brought about different language habits, vocabulary, and language types. Upper and middle-class families use Mandarin to communicate with their children more often, focusing on the standardization and enrichment of children's language, emphasizing children's language skills and their understanding of abstract concepts. Rich vocabularies are beneficial to logical thinking and interpersonal relationships. Upper-middle class children go to kindergarten at a very early age (generally at 3 years of age) and, they accept and use Mandarin, take special language courses, and they have intensive contacts with the written language. But for lower class and rural families, many parents do not understand Mandarin or the written language and seldom use this language to communicate with their children. Due to the family economic conditions, some lower-class children cannot go to kindergarten. Even if they could enter the kindergarten, teachers may still use dialects. The outcome is that Mandarin and the written language are foreign and unfamiliar to rural children. In other words, language is not only a teaching tool but also an important part of the cognitive world of the school. With the help of language children accept the teaching

content as well as learn the language itself, and this is especially true for children from lower class.

Assessment of Curriculum

In China's school system, the assessment depends mainly on examinations. Open, unified and objective formal examinations in China are generally accepted as a fair approach to the assessment. Is this the real case? As one knows, the fundamental role of assessment is to monitor, confirm and improve student learning (Maureen 2014; Hwang et al. 2015).

The content of examinations is drawn primarily from what has been taught in school. But, as the researcher has been narrating before, the background knowledge of the to-be-educated is not equivalent. Students with different cultural capital respond differently to the curriculum. For children in advantaged positions the school experience is the continuation of their family life. But for disadvantaged children, almost everything in school is new, and school is "a land of strangeness" and school knowledge, its values, and its organization are very different from the families', many disadvantaged children inevitably experience a disjunction between the school's curriculum and family life. They must make more effort than culturally advantaged children if they want to achieve the same school success, and high grades in exams. As Liu (2006:19) and Chen (2015) have pointed out,

In this sense, the curriculum is no longer a simple teaching medium, and the main function of it is selective. It intrinsically chooses the people who could be successful and who may fail. Obviously, this selection is not objective and neutral, but favors the ruling class. However, this unfair and unpublicized selection has been legitimated through another open, fair, impartial selection mechanism- the examination.

Except examinations, local or national education departments maybe release the reports of evaluation, but regardless of Chinese reports or some other countries' reports, there is the same problem. Both heads and teachers felt that reports of evaluation were never made available and neither was the discussions of these held at the school level (Kurebwa et al. 2014). Needless to say, uselessness and unfairness in curriculum evaluation will be surely mitigated with the

reform of curriculum, the diversification of course assessments, and the reform of assessment itself.

From the above analysis, one can see that the formal curriculum is not an equalizer of opportunity for all students. One should strive to let the students stand at the same starting line.

DISCUSSION

From the above analysis, and referring the works of Chen (2015), Wang (2015) and Peters et al. (2017), one can see that in contemporary China's curriculum, there are indeed many problems, and some need to be solved immediately. The selection of textbook content, the structure of the curriculum and the assessment lead the children from lower class, rural areas and girls into adverse conditions. In China curriculum remains play a very important role for children's studies success and failure. Many children who are in disadvantaged environments are not clumsy or lazy to study, but they just start a little late than those who live in better situations. Zhou (2017) argues that China needs to improve in distributing the power and responsibility of curriculum management explicitly at different levels of departments especially emphasizing school autonomy. Curriculum diversity is a crucial idea in Ontario' education in which the study of Canadian Aborigines is included

Malik and Liu (2017) suggest that girls show a higher tendency of receiving shadow education. Is it linked to girls' internalization of curriculum and being obedient, not as smart as boys? The most important point in the paper is finding out the reasons of these problems and providing some solutions to these issues. In addition to consider the curriculum reforms and the interests of invulnerable groups, one should also take into account the actual situation of China and give some rights of curriculum decision to regions, schools, and teachers. One must offer courses with local color and develop school-based curricula so as to meet the demands of students, teachers, schools, and regions.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to the knowledge and understanding of China's curriculum's problems, mainly including the imbalance of curriculum content selection, some bias in curriculum structure and the stiff curriculum assessment. It also

comes up with a few suggestions to promote people to think about the curriculum problems and help educators, curricula designers and administrators better discern the real facts of present Chinese curriculum.

Paying Attention to the "Margins" and Striving for Equal Opportunity of Education

Contemporary China is at a critical stage of transition to a socialist market economy. However, within all kinds of social relationships, the binary social structure of "center" and "margin" still exists. But, because the margins are not included in decision-making and their contribution to the discourse is absent, the marginal zone is at risk of further marginalizing.

To realize equal opportunity of education both for and in education, the followings must be addressed:

1. One must consider fully the interests of disadvantaged groups while selecting, editing, organizing, and accessing curriculum content. Their interests should be represented in the content of the curriculum, and be balanced.
2. In school education, different interest groups should be given the equal right of discourse. There must be room and probabilities for everyone to contribute to both classroom and policy discussion and debates, such as distribution of education resource, course-offerings, and allocation of teachers.

Realizing Equal Dialogue and Negotiation among Multicultural Subjects

To create a curriculum is to choose a kind of culture as the course content. During the dialogue and communication, an equal conversational environment must be established to achieve cultural fairness and promote curriculum justice. Otherwise the advantaged group will impose their dialogue upon the disadvantaged. The following must be observed in order to make conversation effective:

1. Eliminating or reducing the discourse hegemony of the advantaged groups so that all the parties, particularly the disadvantaged, can express their viewpoints. The apparent purpose of conversation is to express one's ideas and listen to the other's ideas. However, in reality conversation is closely related to power. Due to the

superior position of the advantaged, they invariably control the conversation in order to show their own wealth, power, and success. In such conversation, it is impossible to communicate equally. Because of lower social position, the disadvantaged tend to be retiring, and unwilling to voice their viewpoints in public. In order to change the situation, the basic speech rules need to be remade in order to regulate the length, order and content of speech.

2. Treating others with tolerance and appreciation. As one group puts forward incorrect opinions, other groups should point out the errors, but in a roundabout way. It is also essential that one is appreciating the different ideas of different groups due to the differences in family backgrounds, living conditions, and knowledge construction.

Maintaining the Proper Knowledge Balance of Knowledge Within Different Curricula

China's current curriculum is still elite, urban and male-centered. The concerns for the minority-rural children and women are far less. *This is a curricular injustice*. One also needs to absorb the perspectives of different interest groups and social classes into the curriculum to welcome curriculum diversity. To this end, one should do the following:

First, an end of the franchise of the elite in curriculum content selection, scheduling, and organization is needed, and a wide range of people should be invited from different social and economic classes to participate in curriculum decision-making. People who are in charge of curriculum development should consider the culture of the disadvantaged to prevent the selection of content from implying a choice exercised on the basis of power and value. To this end, curriculum development should shift its focus from cultural homogeneity to cultural heterogeneity, from elitism to pluralism, and should acknowledge curriculum conflicts and contradictions.

Second, more attention should be paid to rural areas. One must increase the investment in rural education and improve school conditions in rural areas. During the process of curriculum development, one must attach importance to the

exploring, sorting, and absorbing indigenous knowledge of rural villages.

Last but not least, one must pay attention to gender differences. All women must fully participate in and accommodate the educational system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that measures can be taken by attaching the equal importance to rural and low class children, removing the discourse hegemony and allocating the proper proportion of different cultures in textbooks. Curriculum designers and administrators need to go to the real teaching scenarios and visit the rural or underdeveloped areas schools to listen to the children and teachers' real discourse and watch the real teaching scenes.

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NOTES

1. Because educational resources are unbalanced, parents want to make up for the lack of balance in the school by way of all kinds of training classes.
2. These are classical Chinese novels.

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