

The Impacts of Neoliberal Ideology on Chinese Education System

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Abstract. This essay examines the notion that "choice, competition, and individualization are the best ways to raise educational standards." Neoliberalism seen via a Chinese perspective. The background details China's contemporary neo-liberal educational system and emphasizes the importance of the concept of education equity. The portion about option identifies the Chinese no need to choose solution, which is fair in light of Chinese ideology. The element of competition places public schools in competition with private schools. Diverged competition was suggested in this part, and China must bring it back to a sensible and manageable level. The final individualization section highlights the extreme Chinese embrace of shadow education while disregarding its role in advancing educational justice.

Keywords: Neoliberal Education, Chinese Education.

1. Introduction

"Choice, competition and individualization are the best way to raise educational standards." This paper assesses this statement. However, it depends on the situation of different societies. Most importantly, depending on a particular society's ideology, choice, competition, and individualization can be encouraged or discouraged. Therefore, this paper is not going to analyze the statement in general but put it into the context of China, which has become the second economy worldwide. The interesting point is that China is a communist economy that developed in a relatively short time and, meanwhile, it is a great participant in the global market. Therefore, China inevitably began to adopt neoliberal concepts national wide. Indeed, education as a public good cannot avoid this situation.

2. Background

Choice, competition, and individualization are the three main characteristics of neoliberalism. However, the three characteristics can only be adopted in a marketized environment. Davies and Bansel mention that the economic productivity of education comes from turning education into a product that can be bought and sold. Meanwhile, neoliberalism draws value from social good (Davies and Bansel, 2007). In China, until 1992, schools and education were still purely public resources; however, at that moment, the first private school, Yaguang School, was established. Private school was an advancing form of school at that time and contradicted communist ideology (He, 2004). Ever since then, individual capitals began to take part in the educational market, and neoliberal ideas began to spread in education. The choice is offered to the public. Competition is stimulated among students and schools. From 1990 to 2000, the Chinese New Curriculum Reform transformed test-driven education to quality education, and, in this period, individualization was brought up to the discussion table (Liu, 2020). At the end of 20 century, education began to get marketized, and the educational market started to develop in an unstoppable way. Therefore, neoliberalism gained its chance to be operated in education.

Besides, Chinese ideology believes that two essential characteristics of modern education are universality and democracy (Guo, 2006). Thus, though neoliberalism engages with education, China must maintain education equity. Three different tiers define education equity. They are: Start point equity, process equity, and result equity. However, through 2000 and 2012, most researchers focused

on start point equity. Only several researchers went to process and result equity (Wang, 2012). However, Chu identified that result equity is the final outcome of start point and process equity. Start point equity and process equity are the prerequisites of result equity (Chu, 2020).

However, with its significant feature, marketizing social goods, neoliberalism substantially impacts education equity. When education gets into neoliberal marketing, it will also involve choice, competition, and individualization. Certainly, the three characteristics seriously break the equity of education in China. Feng believes that the marketizing of education negatively impacts education justice since 1) Profit-based market can damage education equity and education's property of commonweal. 2) Market focus on the justice of process and efficiency and assumes individuals on the same start point, which is not valid in education (Feng, 2008).

Therefore, since last year, the Ministry of Education of the PRC (MOE) has published some policies against the neo-liberalization of education. After analyzing the policies, it is possible to find out China's alternatives to avoid the three characteristics.

3. Choice vs. No Need to Make Choice

The right of choice in education was introduced due to the development of the educational market. Right of choice in education is a reform trend in Europe and the US. It has three properties: 1) parents and students have the right to choose a school to enter, instead of the government assigning them. 2) Develop private educational institutions. 3) Cancel government control in education (Guo, 2006). However, it is obvious that this kind of reform, as Davies and Bansel mentioned, is pulling out the social good of education and turning it into a neoliberal way (Davies and Bansel, 2007); furthermore, it damages the property of commonweal. Meanwhile, pointed out by Davies and Bansel, educational choice based on individual and family demands is a form of represent of neoliberalism (Davies and Bansel, 2007).

The Education Law in China has restricted that the principle of compulsory education is the chance of getting educated is equal for individuals. Generally, the opportunity of getting educated is understood as the chance of going to school is equal. However, this understanding cannot apply to compulsory education since this includes competing for seats. Compulsory education is not elective education but all-covered education for every student. Besides, the principle of compulsory education is to be admitted to nearby schools with no tuition fee (Guo, 2006). Therefore, the uncontrolled education choice offense the principle of compulsory education in China. Guo also points out that the UK's third wave of education reform, which opened the educational market, is based on parents' property and expectations rather than student abilities (Guo, 2006). However, this reform is not feasible in China due to the restriction of regions and economic power differences among families. Therefore, the uncontrolled development of education choices offense the vulnerable groups' rights of getting educated.

Facing this situation, Guo points out that the ideal way to restrict education choice in compulsory education is: 1) to generally increase the quality of education 2) reduce the difference between schools 3) to realize standardized education (Guo, 2006). With these in mind, the MOE has taken several actions.

First, the MOE published policies to decrease the privileges and strengths of private schools. Based on PISA 2015 report mentioned in Bi and Wang's research, in Beijing, Guangdong, Shanghai, and Jiangsu Province, private schools have three main strengths: 1) time advantage, proved by student time spent on science subjects is 0.7 hours more than public schools. 2) Parents of private schools are more engaged in school activities. 3) private schools have advantages in educational space and equipment (Bi and Wang, 2017). Besides, private schools have a huge privilege on student resources in China. They have the autonomous right of recruitment, which means they can set up examinations to select students they want (Huang, 2019).

Focusing on these gaps, the recently published double reduction policy commend as below. Schools must improve the quality of after-teaching service, which includes: 1) offering after-school

self-study room; 2) assigning teachers to help students on homework; 3) teachers must help weak students (China Central Government, 2021). The government tries to narrow down the time gap between private and public schools by these actions. Besides, China central government has published a policy to restrict private schools' privilege of recruiting students, which is the enrollment of privately-run compulsory education schools shall be subject to unified management of examination and approval places and be enrolled simultaneously as public schools. The number of applicants who exceed the enrollment plan will be randomly enrolled by computer (China Central Government, 2019). Once private primary and secondary schools cannot have the advantage of students compared to public schools, the overall competitive advantage of the school will be significantly reduced (Huang, 2019). Even though some of the gaps between public and private schools still exist. At least the student resource privilege and time advantage are decreased at the policy level. Therefore, the Chinese government has tried to assimilate private and public schools.

Second, the school district system running in China need to be adjusted as well. The development of schools in different is not balanced. Therefore, parents with economic power can buy properties in a better school district just to get better educational resources. Due to the limitation of the district system, the choice of property in famous school districts transformed into a legal way of school choice. However, a good school district property is much more expensive than an average district (Tian and Sun, 2019). One significant reason for the property-based school choice is the unequal distribution of education resources (Tian and Sun, 2019). One deeper reason is that the teacher development relationships and communication with other school districts are not fluent (Tian and Sun, 2019). Meanwhile, the cut in of property dealers drag education into the real estate market, which is another neoliberal market.

Facing this situation, the MOE published a policy related to teacher rotation. The policy mentions that, in principle, all public-school teachers who have more than five years to retire and have worked in the same school for six years or more should undergo exchange rotation (MOE, 2021). This policy is now tested in two districts in Beijing. The rotation period is three years. The purpose of teacher rotation is to ensure the teacher-resource balance distribution in the limited region and narrow down the gap of education resources between public schools in the same area (He, Li, Ye, and Lu, 2019).

Based on the policies, the Chinese government is trying to assimilate all schools into the education system. Suppose all of these come to reality; the difference between public and private schools is in the funding-based environment. The policy balances the differences in teaching quality to ensure education equity. Meanwhile, the rotation will construct a stream of education resources among different school districts. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the government does general assimilation among all schools. In the future, at the compulsory level, education equity can be ensured by reducing the right of choice among parents since there will be no need to make one. All schools hold a similar quality of education. Perhaps, this is the alternative presented by a communist country, saying that no need to choose is the best choice.

4. Neoliberal Competition vs. Proper Competition

“The public service and schools were early targets of this neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal management technologies that were installed included increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals in the contracts of management (Davies and Bansel, 2007).” Indeed, as the ideology leaks into the Chinese educational market, education competition is stimulated. Though, for public schools, there are not so many resources they need to compete for. The local education department has the right to define which schools are key schools (basically means their qualities are better than others). The definitions are preconceived ideas (He and Peng, 2006). Becoming a key school means getting more governmental funding, better teaching resources. Therefore, principals adopt neoliberal managements to recruit better teachers, absorbing more investment. The key school system itself directly impedes education equity; the

improper school-level competition enhances this inequity. In other words, the unequal distribution of education resources is the root of local schools' competition.

Researchers in China show different opinions on education competition. This time, researchers do not turn to one side, saying that there is no good of competing in education. On the contrary, many researchers believe that rational and proper competitions among schools and individuals can help develop education equity. Rational researchers support that competition should be encouraged in a proper way; however, right now, competition is out of control and dragged into a neo-liberalized and marketized way.

Wang believes that educational competition exists objectively and does not depend on people's will. Education without competition cannot produce competitive students. Educational competition plays an essential role in developing human beings and society. The critical problem of educational competition is to form a correct view of competition (Wang, 2002). Similarly, He and Peng believe that the competition between schools should be an incomplete open field, and the competition between schools needs a real and effective platform as the carrier (He and Peng, 2006). However, they both admit the advantages of education competition in a controlled way.

In He and Peng's theory, public and private schools should not compete on the same level; they should be measured with different standards. Certainly, key public schools should compete within their group (He and Peng, 2006). They posed the idea of tiered education competition; however, in compulsory education, all schools should not offend the principle of compulsory education, which is to maintain the general equity of education. The reality is that these three tiers automatically distribute educational resources unequally. In compulsory education, governmental policies are pushing schools to assimilation. Therefore, to get along with ongoing policies, the government needs to promote actions to control the diverged education competition and lead it back to the right track and maintain the general equity of education.

Diverged education competition, defined by Yan, takes scores as the sole criterion for evaluating students, teachers, and schools. The reason for diverged competition is the outer competitive environment in the society, which transfers the real education goals in schools from developing students' abilities in multiple areas to scores only (Yan, 2017).

To correct the competition, Yan suggests that the value of education should shift from the score is all to a "virtue-based" assessment. The action can include assessing students' moral performance to distract students' concentration on scores (Yan, 2017). Besides, Wang points out that the diversity of contents for education competition should be enriched. If one student is not good at a particular subject, it is irrational to put them into the competition. Therefore, education should give credits to none teaching subjects (Wang, 2002). The core concept of these two suggestions is to get students to focus on some moral areas rather than on tested subjects.

Meanwhile, the autonomy of recruiting students in private schools also causes problems on fair competition among schools. With this autonomous right, private schools were able to select top students in school districts, which can cause the unequal distribution of student resources among public and private schools.

Focus on the current situation, the MOE have regulated the autonomy of private schools as mentioned in the discussion of Choice vs. No need to make choice. This policy makes the competition between private and public school compete in a relevantly fair environment. However, there is still no published policy that concerns the diverged competition in China.

5. Individualization vs. controlled individualization

The individualism that marks neoliberal systems is related to freedoms of autonomy and choice. These individualized choices come from ones' naturalized desires or their rational calculations (Davies and Bansel, 2007). This neoliberal idea can easily apply to education. Weak students desire to catch up. Meanwhile, good students desire more competitiveness. 24.6% of the compulsory education students investigated take shadow education (Xue, 2015). The demands of students in

different levels directly stimulate a submarket of education, the shadow education market, which is the most competitive educational market.

The marketing property of shadow education decides that this particular education resource can only serve a specific population. Out of the mainstream education system, the shadow education resource tends to be gained by students in developed areas, mid or big cities, and a good social-economic background (Xue, 2015) (Li and Hu, 2017). Though shadow education enhances the inequity of education resources distribution (Xue, 2015), it is still the most convenient way to satisfy individual educational demand.

In mainland China and Taiwan, students with better grades tend to participate in shadow education (Li and Hu, 2017). The higher the students ranks in the class, the more possible they attend shadow education (Xue, 2015). However, research shows that low-performance students taking part in shadow education can benefit much more than high-performance students (Hu, Fan, and Ding, 2015) (Li and Hu, 2017). Besides, high-performance students participating in shadow education only exacerbate their educational burden and occupy their time to explore other potentials (Hu, Fan, and Ding, 2015). Clearly, current shadow education resources are grabbed by those with no emergent demands. High-performance students also need extra education; however, the low performance and students with low social-economic status should have the priority.

However, if shadow education is well controlled or under the control of the Chinese government. It is possible to ensure education equity and promote proper educational individualization. The government control should start with the qualification of shadow education beneficiaries. Xue mentions that if students from different social-economic statuses have the same chance of getting shadow education, participating extra curriculums can reduce the impact of social status; furthermore, promoting education results in equity (Xue, 2015). Shadow education has more positive effects on students with low performance than high-performance students (Li and Hu, 2017). Based on these facts, the government should first qualify students with low social economic status and/or low academic performance and ensure their priority to get extra resources. Besides, as a prerequisite, Xue recommends that government should promote an after-school education plan, using the after-school time to offer additional educational support to qualified students. And this service is supported and sponsored by local and central government (Xue, 2015).

Unfortunately, ignoring the advantages of shadow education, the Chinese government shut down all shadow education institutions in China with the double reduction policy (China Central Government, 2021).

6. Conclusion

This paper analysis the statement, “Choice, competition, and individualization are the best way to raise educational standards.” Through the lens of neoliberalism under the context of China. The background shows the current neo-liberal education status in China and points out that education equity is a significant idea. The choice part identifies the Chinese no need to choose solution, which should be considered reasonable under Chinese ideology. The competition part places the competition between private and public schools among public schools. This section posed the idea of diverged competition, and China has to drag it back to a rational and controllable way. The final individualization part points out the extreme Chinese refusal of shadow education, ignoring its function to promote education equity.

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