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What Causes the Disparities Between Urban and Rural Secondary Schools? Exploring the Failure of Curriculum Based on "Powerful Knowledge" in Chinese Context

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ABSTRACT

The disparities of educational development between urban and rural areas are a perennial social problem in the world. While there is some debate about the origin of educational disparities, there is tacit agreement that differences between urban and rural schools are significant and play a part in reproducing social inequality in China. schools are traditionally thought as places that can promote social mobility and enable students to move beyond their current circumstances to reduce overall social inequality. From the perspective of education equity, this essay explored the causes of disparities in Chinese context by discuss the concept of "powerful knowledge" proposed by western scholars and explained why it is failed in the actual Chinese education practice.

Keywords: Education equity; disparities; secondary schools

INTRODUCTION

The disparities of educational development between urban and rural areas are a perennial social problem in China. Some scholars have gone so far as to note that these educational disparities are the fundamental source of China's social inequalities (Qian & Smyth, 2008), while others have suggested the disparities between schools in urban and rural areas simply exacerbate existing inequalities (Wang et al., 2017). While there is some debate about the origin of educational disparities, there is tacit agreement that differences between urban and rural schools are significant and play a part in reproducing social inequality in China. Yet, Young and Muller (2015) have argued that schools are places that can promote social mobility and enable students to move beyond their current circumstances to reduce overall social inequality. If this is the case, then we must ask why this does not appear to be happening in the Chinese context. From the perspective of social justice and learning on Young's (2009a, 2009b) perspective of "powerful knowledge", This essay will explore how Chinese curriculum could be understood by the lens of "powerful knowledge" theory, and interrogate the curriculum to understand how the curriculum reflected the transmitting of powerful knowledge failed in making schools to play a positive role in promoting social equity in Chinse context. Young (2009b) argued that it is the mission of schools to transmit "powerful knowledge" to students especially in more disadvantaged rural areas if we are to

address disparities in economic and cultural life. However, the reality is that although Chinese national curriculum could be broadly understood through the lens of powerful knowledge (Li, 2012), many rural secondary schools in China have failed to achieve this aim and only focus on the "context-dependent" knowledge to pursue a good performance in the national test and promotion rates (Chu, 2014). This in turn makes students even more disadvantaged in their study life and further lead to deeper urban-rural disparity, which is contradictory to the aim of curriculum based on the "powerful knowledge" (White, 2018).

In this essay, I will first give an introduction about the aim and structure. This will be followed by describing the context of the disparities between urban and rural schools in China and giving my position to further illustrate why I have chosen this topic. Then I will discuss how "powerful knowledge" could be adopted to interpret this context, and explore why it is failed to promote equity in this context. Finally, I will conclude the whole essay and re-emphasize my core argument in this paper.

DESCRIPTION OF CONTEXT

In China, both the urban and rural secondary high schools follow the same national curriculum and relative demand issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In 2001, the MOE issued policy guidelines named "Guidelines for Basic Education Curriculum Reform (pilot)" which outlined the goals and standards of education reform within the whole country. One of the important items in these guidelines was about promoting education development in both urban and rural areas together. (MOE, 2001). However, Li and Yang (2013) found that despite this policy shift more than a decade earlier, inequalities in education between urban and rural areas continued to be significant. One of the most stark inequalities can be found in the proportion of rural vs urban students in higher education with students from urban areas "over-represented in higher education, while their share in population is the opposite." (Li and Yang, 2013 p.317). According to the large-scale study carried by Zhang (2014), the chance to get higher educational opportunities for students from urban area were 8.8 times more than rural students in national key universities; in provincial universities, this data for urban students was still 3.4 times higher than rural students. Fan's (2008) research also came to similar conclusions that urban students remain disproportionately more likely to attend top universities than their rural counterparts. It even led to a conclusion that "in China's long history, higher education belonged to high class. Birth origin determined an individual's social status" (Li and Yang, 2013, p.321), which highlighted the severe educational inequity in China.

There is much different literature (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Gong and Tsang, 2011; Lin *et al.*, 2011;) that have discussed the causes of this inequity in China, but the situation remains crucial because educational inequalities are still growing (especially at the top school) and cause many poor students remain disadvantaged throughout the whole study life, and even including their employment after graduation (Li and Yang, 2013). This situation is serious because failure to address educational inequalities may fuel

greater earnings inequality and perpetuate the economic inequalities between urban and rural communities (Wang et al., 2017).

As a student coming from rural secondary high school, when I finally entered into the province key university, I found out how different my educational experience had been compared to my peers from urban areas. I became interested in understanding what caused these differences and what could be done to reduce them. My rural secondary school forced us to be at school for 6 days a week rather than 5 days for students in urban schools. I followed the teacher's structure strictly, trying to keep memorize every point of knowledge demanded by teachers, but I still performed worse in the university entrance test compared with my counterparties from urban schools. Li (2012) suggests that I am not alone in my experience and that students who come from the rural areas perform less well than those from urban areas. His argument corresponded my experience hence I have begun to realise that individual students are not creating these barriers and I am interested to explore the reasons behind these disparities which seem to exist despite all students using the same national curriculum guidance. Social equity is a complex concept which involves many different entities and China's educational inequity may also be affected by different elements beyond the curriculum and school (Li, 2019). This essay will only focus on how curriculum could be helpful in promoting equity and some possible reasons why this failed in China's context.

DISCUSSION

Powerful knowledge in promoting equity

As I mentioned previously, to understand why these differences persist between rural and urban secondary schools in China, despite having the same curriculum, I am going to draw on the concept of powerful knowledge in this section.

According to Young and Muller (2015), knowledge differentiation is useful and one important classification they delineated were "context-dependent knowledge" and "context-independent knowledge" (p. 111). For "context-dependent knowledge", it means knowledge related to certain context to solve specific problems or achieve specific skills. It is usually isolated and deal with particulars, for example, a historical fact needs to be memorised in history class. Another type is "context-independent knowledge" which was referred by Young (2009b) as "powerful knowledge" (p.152). Young (2009a) described powerful knowledge as providing the generalizations, explaining the general rules to universality and combining different knowledge sources to construct the rationale for decision making (Young and Muller, 2015). It is specialist but is crucial for our thoughts, for example, the general mathematic rule behind the algorithm. Young and Muller (2013) suggested that it is the transmission of "powerful knowledge" makes school differentiate from other institutions because this concept distinguished the school knowledge and non-school knowledge. Therefore, they proposed that school education should aim to transmit "powerful knowledge" and defined it as a "sociological concept and as a curriculum principle" (p.229). They also further suggested that school should be the place to provide wider free access to the

powerful knowledge which students cannot access in their daily life especially for disadvantaged students who suffering inequity outside of school (Muller & Young, 2019). By doing so, schools provide the opportunities for disadvantaged people to get the "powerful knowledge" which may help them to move and hence promote the social equity.

Li (2012) argued that the curriculum in China can be broadly understood through the lens of powerful knowledge, because it prioritises subject knowledge and the role of schools in transmitting this specialist knowledge (Zhang, Ren & Chu, 2018). For example, according to Ministry of Education (2001), there are two explicit intentions: one is that incorporating more multiple integrative knowledge to improve cognitive and social skills, the another is to alleviate the workload and improve efficiency of school. These items showed that the new curriculum aim to promote powerful knowledge transmitting in schools and reduce the redundant work of "context-dependent" for students (Zhang & Liu, 2005). More specifically, it provided many detailed measures to raise the proportion of powerful knowledge. For example, in history lessons, it emphasized historical figures' meaning and reduce the requirement in memorising historical events (Wang, 2011b); similarly, in science lessons, it "integrates knowledge of multiple disciplines into comprehensive themes to break away from the traditional subject-centered knowledge structure" (Wang, 2011b, p.90). Furthermore, as Young (2009b) emphasized the knowledge differentiation between disciplines and equal opportunities to access the powerful knowledge. The MOE (2011) indeed strictly regulated the class schedule based on different disciplines and applied to all schools in urban area and rural area. For example, only 5 to 6 classes for Chinese and Math in primary schools, respectively, and only 8 or 10 classes for each in secondary school (Wang, 2011b).

For Young (2009b), powerful knowledge is the route to achieving equality and social justice through the curriculum because it provides opportunities for students from different backgrounds to access specialist knowledge. Namely, Young and Muller (2015) suggested that schools should aim to impart powerful knowledge that hard to be accessed elsewhere. Especially when considering the different financial statues and cultural background that already formed outside of school and the success of pupils heavily depended on their background (Young and Muller, 2015), "powerful knowledge" could be equally provided in the school curriculum is important because otherwise, it may be very difficult for students from poor background to access some knowledge which is disconnected with their life. For example, it is hard to let a student who even struggling for food to actively pursue the knowledge about how molecular motion works in daily life or imagine how prosperous cities are designed. Therefore, Young and Muller (2015) emphasized free access to powerful knowledge in school as the way to promote social justice. Because it is the school which can equally present the powerful knowledge to every student, and it might be the only opportunity for students from disadvantaged family to gain the powerful knowledge equally with privileged students and "be able to move, intellectually at least, beyond their local and particular

circumstance" (Young and Muller, 2015, p.111). This point seems likely to be persuasive to demonstrate why providing powerful knowledge should be the aim of school education and could play a main role in promoting social justice. If, as Young (2013) suggested, all children are given access to the same knowledge then they will be given equal opportunities to succeed. However, the persistent inequalities in the context of education in China suggest that a curriculum built on the principles of powerful knowledge alone cannot achieve equality (Yang & Lou, 2020). Therefore, we must explore (a) what other factors might be confounding this pursuit of equality via powerful knowledge? And (b) whether there are any other conceptual ideas that be better at supporting the pursuit of equality in my chosen context? These two questions are quite important for this essay because they further lead us to know how Young's perspective about "powerful knowledge" was failed in promoting education equity between urban and rural communities in China.

Why powerful knowledge failed to promote equity in this context

To address question (a), it is meaningful to explore what factors have disturbed the achievement of the equal transmitting of powerful knowledge in both urban and rural areas. Although national curriculum reflected the emphasizing of "Powerful knowledge" and aimed to implement across the whole country (both urban and rural area), there were still many factors prevent it to be effectively transmitted (Wang and Li, 2009). One of the factors might be the tension between stress of covering the fundamental content and teachers' negative stereotype about rural students. It is frequently reported by the teachers in rural schools that students had bad achievement in the fundamental knowledge test (Wang et al., 2017). Many schools in rural areas have tried to rectify this perceived and real underachievement by emphasizing the covering of basic content in the class. This decision appears to be based on the assumption that rural students are already disadvantaged before entering school and simply need more time to learn fundamental knowledge to catch up with their urban peers (Wang, 2011b). For meeting curriculum requirements and standards about the basic knowledge, many rural teachers began to repeat the basic knowledge rather than focusing on the specialist knowledge, and force students to memorise the knowledge rather than understand them within the limited class' time (Ma & Yang, 2015). As a consequence, in this process, rural schools seemed to failed in transmitting the "powerful knowledge" which was the original intention of national curriculum reform. Furthermore, pedagogy also was affected by this tension (Wang, 2011b). Dello-Iacovo (2009) found that rural teachers gave up the "student-centred" teaching strategies like group work or project-based inquiries (which the curriculum recommended), and continue to follow traditional lecturing and teacher-oriented teaching in classes. Wang (2011a, p. 157) echoed his conclusion and further found rural teachers did this not "necessarily because they disagree with the reform ideals, but for protecting themselves from potential blames for their failure to cover the necessary content within the fixed timeframe". This decision, again impeded the teaching methods which were helpful in attaining "powerful knowledge" like critical thinking, team working or self-management (Wang, 2011a). With this depressing causal

relationship, it is not hard to understand why teacher-centred didactic pedagogy is still prevalent and remained unchanged in rural schools even after the curriculum reform (Chu, 2014). Because of the stress from the curriculum reform and heavily test score-related educational assessment (Wang, 2006), rural teachers hard to meet the requirement hence decided to give up transmitting the powerful knowledge and relative teaching strategies for transmitting it (Chu, 2014), which against the original intention of curriculum reform. As a consequence, students who have already come from disadvantaged backgrounds lost their chance to get powerful knowledge in school, and performed worse than their counterparts from urban schools. Their bad performance reinforced the negative stereotype of rural students and made teachers further gave up the transmitting of powerful knowledge.

Another factor could be seen as the imbalance of educational resources (Li and Yang, 2013), both the teachers' quality and the material resources. Specifically, the lack of experienced and qualified teachers in rural areas because of the low salaries (Li, 2012). As Young and Muller (2013) stated that it was teacher in school responsible for transmitting the "powerful knowledge", lack of sophisticated and responsible teachers to understand the intention of national guidance and impart this kind of context-independent knowledge might be one of the factors causing the school failed in its purpose. Rural teachers are usually those who need the professional development most but only received brief guidance and insufficient training (Chu, 2014), which may to some extent frustrate them to impart "powerful knowledge" (Young and Muller, 2013). Similarly, Li (2012) indicated that the shortage of material resources was also a manifestation of unbalanced educational refocuses. Some rural schools in southwestern part of China were still suffering from the shortage of material resources (Wang,2017) while the urban schools in developed cities like Shanghai usually do not need to concern about the material resources and educational equipment due to the huge financial investment (Wu, 2020). Although Chu (2014) argued Chinese government increasingly responded to the necessary needs of equipment and initiated many projects to help to upgrade the facilities in rural schools. the few efforts were put into how to use these technologies (Wang, 2017). Therefore, many material resources were still not well-underutilised in rural areas (Wang, 2011a). As consequence, "powerful knowledge" failed to be freely transmitted in these rural schools (Li, 2012). In this essay , I have argued that the principles of equal opportunity (Rawls, 1971) and the non-exclusivity of social reproduction (Kurt, 2015) might be achieved only when the national curriculum guidance and standards can be strictly and effectively followed and implemented throughout all schools within the country (Young and Muller, 2013), which means both urban and rural schools. While I believe this should remain an important aspiration for education policy in China, it is not currently the case in practice. Regretfully, Young's (2009) perspective of powerful knowledge does not provide solutions to overcome these problems relating to the tension of the pedagogy, teacher's quality and educational materials (White, 2018). I have argued that a curriculum that relies on powerful knowledge alone has not been successful in promoting social equity in China and I have

explored the ways in which "powerful knowledge" might be flawed when applied to a real-world curriculum scenario (White, 2019).

To address question (b): whether there are any other conceptual ideas that are better at supporting the pursuit of equality in my chosen context? I will first discuss some critiques against the conceptual perspective of powerful knowledge. In fact, White (2018, p.330) argues that "powerful knowledge should be at the heart of the curriculum is flawed" because it is hard to absolutely differentiate the powerful knowledge with other kinds of knowledge (Hordern, 2021), and the curriculum based on powerful knowledge may cause controversies to its intention in promoting equity (Alderson, 2020). This is important as it further explained why powerful knowledge failed in my chosen context and lead to a consideration about alternative ideas in structuring school curriculum for better social equity. Although Young's perspectives about powerful knowledge have slightly changed and developed in past decades compared with his earlier articles (e.g. Young, 2009a; 2009b) especially in a process when responded to others' critique. In the literature, there are still many different existing critiques about Young's perspective of powerful knowledge (Beck, 2013; Reiss & White, 2014; Whitty & Furlong, 2017; Rudolph, Sriprakash & Gerrard, 2018; White, 2007, 2010, 2018, 2019; Wrigley, 2018; Alderson, 2020). For example, White (2018) critiqued that it is flawed in explaining some disciplines like geography, history or language which do not "consist in getting inside schemes of concepts" like science and math; Zipin, Fataar, and Brennan (2015) noted its' neglect of ethic aspects and Beck (2013) specifically focused to the tensions of how to extend powerful knowledge to disadvantaged students; Catling and Martin (2011) emphasized the value and importance of experiential knowledge and the pluralist epistemologies. In this essay, I will only focus on certain aspects of critiques relating to social equity which are most relevant to my topic (understanding why disparities continued between rural and urban schools).

Young *et al.'s* (2014) perspective that schools should aim to transmit powerful knowledge was usually critiqued as focusing only on the cognitive rather than ethical purposes of schooling. Furthermore, the articulation of social justice was weak (Zipin, Fataar, and Brennan 2015). This critique is crucial as it indicated that the argument powerful knowledge has significant neglect and curriculum based on powerful knowledge may undermine the schools' role in ethical aspects like promoting social equity (Alderson, 2020). As response, Young and Muller (2015) argued that "if school are to play a major role in social equality" (p.111), then it should seriously take powerful knowledge as the base of curriculum even more, because it was this kind of knowledge that could help students from disadvantaged background to move on. However, there is a problem within this argument. Namely, if a socially just education system is one that provides students with equal access to a certain kind of knowledge (e.g. powerful knowledge) through the curriculum, then it is presumed that "some knowledge offers an objectively better basis for understanding the world than others" (Rudolph, Sriprakash and Gerrard, 2018, p.23). These kinds of knowledge, "both theoretical and practical…can empower individuals or groups…to manipulate others in

ways that are not in their best interests"(Beck, 2013, p. 184). Therefore, it raises questions especially: What is defined as powerful knowledge? and who decides the powerful knowledge to be taught in school? (White, 2018; Alderson, 2020). If it is the case that always the people who control the power to decide what counts as powerful knowledge based on their interest, then the interests of minorities and people from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be under-represented or omitted entirely (Rudolph, Sriprakash and Gerrard, 2018). As consequence, the definition of "powerful knowledge" may lose its meaning in promoting social justice and school may just become an inferior form of educational institution for "reproduction of dominant ideology" (Freire, 2001, p. 91) and to teach working-class children rural children, and those from other minorities to accept their place within society and not to disrupt the status quo (Willis, 1977). From the perspective of social justice, it might make people from disadvantaged backgrounds remain disadvantaged throughout the whole study life and harder to move on, hence reproduce and even accelerate the social inequity (Li and Yang, 2013). This implicated conceptualizing powerful knowledge as the base of curriculum indeed has some flaws especially from the perspective of social justice (Rudolph, Sriprakash and Gerrard, 2018) and hence the alternative approaches may worth to be explored.

These critiques about Young's powerful knowledge sparked the "ethical discussion" about how curriculum could be structured to better support social justice (White, 2018, p.329). As one of the alternative perspectives, White (2007) proposed that school should promote human happiness and well-being. After that, Reiss and White (2014) further argued that the fundamental aims of education are to equip individually flourishing, and also morally help others to do so. These core aims are vital for the conceptualizing of the aim-based curriculum, because they ensured curriculum based on these aims has ethic consideration (White, 2019) and they could be translated into many specific aims in structuring the actual curriculum through considering what flourishing require, such as "the acquisition of a broad background understanding, moral education, a life of imagination and reflection, and preparation for work" (Reiss and White, 2014, p. 76). Following these arguments which more emphasize the ethical aspects of school's aim, Reiss and White (2013) alternatively proposed a way to structure the curriculum which is "aim-based", for helping students from different backgrounds to better achieve flourishing in their future. For aim-based curriculum, it means curriculum "begin with overarching aims, then fill them out in greater specificity" (Reiss and White 2013, p.1). Specifically, once the centre aims were defined and relative framework was structured, "the remaining task of curriculum construction passes to the schools. It is they who fill out the general, nationwide scheme with activities suited to their students and their circumstances." (Reiss and White 2013, p.1). This method is significantly different with the subjected-based curriculum (Reiss and White 2013) which are largely constrained by the teacher's quality (as I discussed in 3.2) (Reiss and White 2013), and also other types of educational resources (at least in my chosen context). Therefore, to some extent it has advantages in overcoming some deficiencies of curriculum aiming to transmit powerful knowledge, especially from social justice perspectives like helping students

from rural area to achieve flourishing because it focuses more on ethical aspects of curriculum and the disparities between different areas (White, 2010). It may have significant implications on Chinese situation, especially within the situation that implementing "powerful knowledge" failed in reducing rural and urban disparities (Wu, 2020). Although it is "a radical change in the way we think of school education" and "very different from how a national curriculum is often planned" (Reiss and White 2013, p. 1), it could be still useful to consider the alternative conceptual ideas like aim-based curriculum which may better support schools to play their role in the pursuit of social equity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the conceptualizing of powerful knowledge might be valuable and useful to some extent, but in this context transmitting "powerful knowledge" as the aim of schools (Young & Muller, 2015) has largely failed as an approach to education in rural schools. As a consequence, from the perspective of social justice, it did not solve the disparities between urban and rural schools in China (Wu, 2020), and may even exacerbate pre-existing disadvantages of rural students because students from rural areas continue to be disadvantaged even within whole of their learning life (Li & Yang, 2013).

I discussed Young's (2009) perspective about "powerful knowledge" in this paper, but also critically challenged some aspects of it and considered alternative perspectives about curriculum. There are many different conceptual ideas about structuring curriculum, the detailed discussion of them beyond the scope of this essay. What I want to argue is that although it might be the case that every theory has its own merits and demerits, it is still important to consider alternative approaches (Reiss and White 2013), especially when current situation is unsatisfactory (like in my chosen context). I argued this by demonstrating how curriculum in China could be interpreted through powerful knowledge and how it failed in promoting urban-rural equity in China's context. However, this does not mean that the failure of "powerful knowledge" is the only reason causing the difference between rural and urban schools, but to show it is one possible reason to explain this inequity. Social equity is a complex concept and could involve many different institutions (Miller, 1976), but it is still important to analyse this topic from the perspective of the aim of school just as I argued in this paper, because school as an unique and unreplaced institution is playing a crucial role in the process of reproducing human societies just as families (Young & Muller, 2015). From my perspective, school education could be counted as successful only when it can effectively provide powerful knowledge (Young & Muller, 2015) for both rural and urban students to enable children from disadvantaged background have more equal opportunities to achieve flourishing (Reiss and White, 2014) in the future.

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