

Quality Education and Social Stratification: The Paradox of Private Schooling in China

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Since the opening of the first elite private school in June 1992, private schools have mushroomed in China. [1] By November 1996, there were more than 60,000 private institutions, hosting 6.8 million students (China Education Daily, 11/1/1996). Though the percentage of private schools is still less than 4 percent of all schools in China, the current boom in private schools, especially the primary and the secondary level, evokes many debates and concerns over their legitimacy, policy, implementation, problems, and effects (Kwong, 1996). Are these private schools pioneers for quality education or are they a result of an increasingly stratified society? What roles do they play? What are their potential effects?

This paper aims to explore what private schooling means in China today and includes discussions on context, definition, assumptions, and implications of China's educational market. It draws on library research as well as field research on private schools in China, in order to deepen the understanding of the restoration of private schooling. This analysis suggests that while the current revival of elite private schools might be a result of pursuit of social efficiency and reflects the intensification of social inequality, it also serves the interests of wealthy parents rather than the public. Though private schools pilot some education changes in curriculum, teaching, accountability, and school management, the sharp contrast between elite schools and their public counterparts indicates that elite private schools mainly serve the needs of economically privileged group. These private schools may widen the gaps that already exist among the different segments of population in China. This article questions the assumption that private schools only strive toward quality education for a public good and suggests that the emergence of private schools reflects on-going struggles between classes and groups in competition for values, resources, and power. Hence, the resurgence of private schools may have less an effect on quality and equity of education but more toward social stratification.

This analysis combined the data from library research and fieldwork. From 1995-1997, I collected data regarding private schooling, under the guidance and support of Brian DeLany, by reading government documents, newspapers, popular and professional journals, as well as talked to teachers about perspectives regarding the policy, strategies, and public attitudes about running private schools. Since the schools visited are called elite private schools in Beijing and Guangdong province, we realized the limitation of the data due to regional discrepancies on educational resources, policy and philosophy.

Context of educational reform and privatization

A shifted educational policy

As a result of the growing importance of a market economy, schooling in China has undergone remarkable changes. In the 1950s, basic education expanded for purposes like that of serving the children of workers and farmers, within a political reform associated with egalitarian hopes and the building of the nation (Cheng, 1996). The educational reform prompted by economic reform in the 1980s, on the other hand, is driven by the demands of modernization, which emphasize that science and technology are needed to increase productivity. In the central government's 1985 "Educational Reform Decision" the funding and authority of education were decentralized to the lower levels of governments. According to this decision, provincial governments are mainly responsible for funding education (the Decision, 1985). The "Law of Compulsory Education" in the following year promulgated the rights of individuals to receive nine years of schooling (the Law, 1986). This law also legitimated differentiated curricula for students beyond compulsory education. By decentralizing financial responsibilities to lower levels of government and connecting education with productivity of the market, the government shifted from its egalitarian goal of education to the goal of pursuing social efficiency (Cheng, 1996). In the latter goal, equal opportunities rather than equal access are stressed through sorting students into different curriculum tracks (Cohen & Neufeld, 1981).

The concept of "decentralization" is not new to China. It can be traced back to the 1950s when the government adopted the "walking on two legs" strategy--the combination of regular government funded education and the community-run schools with government subsidies. As many private schools emerged during this wave of decentralization in public education, the "walking on two legs" policy provided a convenient rationale for the acceptance of private schooling under market mechanisms (DeLany, 1997).

In the 1990s, educational reform is geared toward further opening the market. This creates opportunities for alternative funding of schooling in addition to financial decentralization in education. The "Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China" by the Central Committee in 1993 states that "the mechanism for financing schools will be reformed" in that the state as the only sponsor of schools will (...) be supplemented by a great variety of other sponsors in society " (the Outline, 1993, p. 22). This policy legitimates a market mechanism--an exchange between education and other leverages of the market like political, cultural, and monetary resources. The adoption of the market mechanisms in education shifted the driving force of educational reform from political dynamics to economic ones.

The advent of a market economy in China makes it possible for some parents to choose alternatives to public education for their children. Problems with public schools such as rigid curriculum, exam-oriented instruction, lack of autonomy, and unequal access under the traditional two-track system secondary schools, have troubled many parents and students. To compound this, the government has traditionally identified several "key schools" which received supplemental support in terms of funding, facilities and teachers, but were very selective of which students could attend. However, under the previous centralized educational system, it was difficult for parents to choose schools for their children thus, limited space in public key schools meant that only a few parents are able to send their children to these schools. The tension between the demands of parents and the limited accommodations of key schools has led parents to seek alternative

resources for quality education. According to James (1994) this demand for alternatives to public schooling is known as differentiated demand. Recent studies have shown that differentiated demand exists in both developed countries and developing countries (Cummings & Riddle, 1994; Tilak, 1994; Bray, 1996). Parental choice via charter and private schools in the United States is a prime example of mechanisms used elsewhere to accommodate and rationalize this demand.

Definition of private schools

In China, private schools are those run by individuals, privately owned enterprises or non-governmental organizations. This definition is insufficient because some non-governmental schools are run by social forces (such as the Democratic Party or other legally approved groups), some by people (minban are operated by the people), and some by individuals. It is easy to blur their distinctions if we call them all "non-governmental" (Lai, 1996). The definition of a private school is therefore complex. Three criteria are adopted here to distinguish different types of schools: ownership, funding, and management (Lai, 1996). Among these three criteria, ownership is the most important to distinguish private schools from other non-government schools (Cheng 1994). Schools owned, funded, and managed by all levels of government are called public schools. Schools are funded by state-owned enterprises or rural communities. In terms of ownership, schools that are either owned by all the people or are collectively owned like villages are considered "run by the people" (minban) (Lai, 1996). Schools wholly-owned, funded, and managed by private entities and citizens are called private schools. Though many schools in the last category are still under the supervision of the government in terms of policy, curriculum and evaluation, the private ownership distinguishes them from other types of schools (Cheng, 1994). In this article "private schools" refers to those "elite" private schools that charge high fees.

Internal management

Private schools are relatively autonomous although they are still under general supervision of the state. Some schools have a school board to supervise principals' responsibilities, while other schools form school committees composed of investors, principals and parents to supervise the school management (Zhu, 1996). In private schools, principals are in charge of admitting students, hiring personnel, choosing material, attracting funds and managing schools. They enjoy more freedom, but have more responsibilities. In this sense, private schools may be fully decentralized in terms of responsibilities and this new management style may be more adaptable to the market economy. In this respect, it has the potential to pilot management reform in public schools.

Assumptions

The following is a list of assumptions that have led to the growth of private schools in China:

1. Private schools will provide quality education to students for their academic and holistic human development (Xi, 1996, Qu, 1996, Wu, 1996). By providing better conditions, diverse curricula, and experienced teachers, private schools promise quality education for their clients.
2. In an ideal market, it is assumed only quality products will succeed. In a sense, success in the market place defines quality, though we may argue over this market-

- driven definition.
3. Parents believe that quality education in private schools will enable their children to succeed in competition (Bi, 1997).
 4. As additional families send their children to private schools, public education expenditures for these children can be reallocated to those schools underfunded by government (Bray, 1996, Qu, 1996).
 5. Private schools are considered to better serve the educational needs of parents and children (Zhang, 1996). There are "high-priced" students (students who are admitted to a particular school on their parents' ability to pay school fees rather than on their test scores) in public key schools.
 6. Private schools are regarded as laboratories for public school reform because they are believed to be able to mobilize funds and human resources, develop educational philosophy, create their own management styles, seek a connection between school and society, and improve curriculum and teaching. In this way and because private schools offer increased competition, they may force higher standards among public schools and in both senses "make up for the deficiency" of the state-run educational system (Zhang & Sha, 1996).

Traveling Through Private Schools

Funding, fees and facilities

Funding sources of private schools consist of tuition fees, financing fees, school construction fees, contribution fees or other types of fees. Though different schools charge different types of the above fees, some of which they return to students upon graduation, those fees are always high. For example, the annual average income of an employee in a state-owned enterprise is 3,000 yuan (\$375 USD) and tuition can range from 13,500 yuan (\$1,700 USD) to 15,000 yuan (\$1,900 USD) annually (Zhu, 1996). Other school-related expenses can range from 18,000 yuan (\$2,200 USD) to 40,000 yuan (\$5,000 USD) (Xia, 1996).

Many private schools have a market-driven mechanism. According to Deng (1997), private investors are given favorable prices on valuable land if they set up schools on it. In addition, the government grants tax-exempt status to school run enterprises. Some entrepreneurs attempt to evade taxes by attaching their business to a private school and thereby attaining non-profit status (Deng, 1997). This pattern is not exclusive to China. Private schools that are categorized as commercial ventures are found in other countries (Bray, 1996).

Beautiful campuses, comfortable and even luxurious living conditions, and advanced teaching and learning facilities make many private schools appealing. Taking Guangya Elementary School in Sichuan province as a case study, all classrooms have colored walls and roofs. Classrooms are equipped with pianos, TVs, VCRs, and computers (Hou, 1996). Other schools considered in this study have central air conditioning, fitness rooms, and language labs, as well as student dormitories equipped with ultra-violet sterilizing lamps and child care teachers and nutritionists. Principals and teachers are in charge of students' extracurricular activities, and in one of the elite private schools visited, a big stadium and swimming pool were under construction. These conditions and equipment are only fantasies to schools in poor rural areas where it is still difficult to find safe classrooms, desks and chairs, and textbooks for children.

Curriculum

Many private schools claim that they provide curricula with diverse content and teaching methods. Besides courses on computer and foreign languages, some schools offer music, dancing, and art courses, taking students' special talents into account (Hou, 1996). Other schools design their own syllabi according to their own conditions. Most provide extracurricular activities. They also incorporate teaching methods from developed countries and regions such as the US, UK, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong. (Hou, 1996). However, private schools share a dilemma created by the emphasis on the state curriculum. There is concern about the evaluation methods of students who still need to compete with their public counterparts. It would be hard for them to reconcile the gap. Teachers in private schools usually find themselves short of class hours necessary to balance the gap between the state curricula and school curricula (Zhang, 1996).

Parents, students and teachers

According to a 1994 Xinhua survey, of the parents who send their children to private schools, 39 percent of the parents are heads of companies and factories or senior executives of high-tech enterprises; 17.9 percent are employees in Beijing firms and institutions of other provinces; 14 percent have been abroad; 8.6 percent work in foreign-funded ventures; 5.5 percent are self-employed. According to one parent, "It is worth paying such a large amount to let my child study here. It is a very nice school. I hope my son can become a university graduate in the future and help my business to succeed" (South China Sunday Morning Post, 1994, p 7). In addition, many parents do not have enough time to take care of their own children and many are divorced. To these parents, private schools are ideal places for their children because they enjoy a small teacher-student ratio and are cared for by teachers, counselors and school nurses (Zhang, 1996).

Although some schools still select students based upon their previous academic performance, most private schools are open to anyone who can afford them. Many private schools attempt to foster in these students good living habits and self-independence (Zhang, 1996, p. 81). Parents seem satisfied with the progress their children make in academic learning, singing, dancing, typing, calculation and playing chess and musical instruments. However, positive comments about students from principals and parents fail to assess the overall development of students in private schools. There is no long-term assessment plan and students' voices are generally not heard.

The quality of teachers and teaching is another selling point of private schools. In most elite schools, the teacher and student ratio is 1:5 compared to 1:10 in the public schools (Xi, 1996, p. 12). Most private schools either hire high-ranked and experienced teachers, or outstanding young teachers from teachers' colleges. Generally speaking, their salary is much higher than those in public schools. Private school teachers' salaries range 20,000 and 30,000 yuan (\$2,500 to \$3,700 USD) a year (Survey, 1996, p. 52), considerably higher than those of their counterparts in public schools. In addition, teachers in some of these schools did express that they enjoyed more flexibility in teaching than they used to do in public schools (Xia, 1996). Yet my interviews revealed that there are also drawbacks to teaching in private schools. Some of the teachers did not feel that they were prepared for

the demanding workloads of private schools. Others expressed tension between their visions about teaching and pressure from school boards or the State. In addition, the comparatively high credentials of teachers may not necessarily lead to effective teaching as when teachers are forced to adapt to alternative content and methods of teaching, they change from experienced to inexperienced and in-service teacher training has not been regarded as a formal agenda for private schools.

Conflicts and Challenges of Educational Reform

Trade-offs

Despite some of the positive aspects of private schooling discussed above, there are also trade-offs in China's current educational reforms. Values of quality, efficiency and equity are likely to be traded-off depending on the goal of the educational reform (Cummings & Riddle, 1994). As pointed out earlier, in China the goal of educational reform is to improve productivity not to realize egalitarian ideology. Efficiency is best judged by productivity. Improving productivity requires that students pursue different curriculum tracks. The tracking that results is inequitable and there is a difference in educational quality between urban and rural areas. This inequity is compounded by an increasingly stratified society and forces the redistribution of educational opportunities. The placement of "high-priced" students in public key schools reveals that children from families with power and money obtain better opportunities, while students from poor rural families are more likely to drop out of school (Cheng, 1996).

For many parents in China the pursuit of social mobility is preferred to that of equity in private schools. According to Bi, "the majority [parents] wanted their children to excel among their peers" (Bi, 1997, p. 28). In the increasingly stratified Chinese society most parents want to provide their children with leverage over other children so family resources are transferred to elite private schools. As a result, private schools have to cater to the needs of wealthy parents who expect their children to outperform their peers. Therefore, accountability to parents is crucial to the market mechanism. Labaree (1997) argues that "parents see private schools as a mechanism for adapting students to the requirements of hierarchical social structure and the demands of the occupational marketplace" (p. 46). Interestingly, because it is parent-initiated, private schools are considered bottom-up rather than top-down reform, as is often the case in the public sector, even though the effects of this reform may not be equitable. However, many private schools still claim that they pursue the public good by targeting the all-round development of students. The shifted values in educational reform in both public and private sectors suggest that equity of education is irrelevant (DeLany, 1997).

Conclusions

In reality, education is not an independent variable for social change. Instead, schooling reflects the continuous conflicts outside schools that shape educational process. "From a conflict perspective, educational change occurs through conflict and competition between social class, ethnic, national, religious, and gender groups, whose interests are incompatible, or when structural contradictions are unsuccessfully mediated" (Ginsburg, Cooper, Taghu, & Zegerra, 1990). Thus, schools become a social arena for political, economic and social power to compete for values. In the pursuit of social mobility, individual gain may create conflict among private school clients and may have

repercussions within society at large. The values that will shape and be shaped by education largely depend on the result of competition (Carnoy & Levin, 1985).

To a large degree, the current trend of private schooling in China breaks the traditional monopoly of state-run education, diverting it to a pluralistic system, and challenging the traditional curriculum, teaching methods, educational philosophy and school management. Despite these features, the problems and potential effects of privatization cannot be ignored. The roles that private schools play are still unclear. The possibility that these schools will only serve a few, the trade-offs of educational goals and the intensification of social stratification temper what remain unexamined assumptions favoring support for the boom in private schooling. Governments should bear the responsibilities for setting goals and supervision and school professionals should be responsible for curriculum, teaching and internal management. Policy frameworks must not overlook the demands for quality education by parents as a whole. Moreover, policy makers must be cautious in regulating and evaluating private schools. In many ways these short-run visions for efficiency may damage long-term goals of education in pursuit of the public good.

Notes

[1] Guangya Elementary School in Sichuan province.

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