

Knowledge Inequalities in Higher Education Equity in China

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ABSTRACT

In China, there is a high degree of consistency and overlap in most research on equity in higher education, mainly focusing on equitable access to higher education and the determinants of students' educational achievement, such as individual socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. This article, however, focuses on the long-neglected issue of knowledge inequality in China's higher education process. The history of American higher education demonstrates that the democratization of knowledge and curriculum is a necessary condition and an essential feature of the modern university, which has made an effective contribution to the equity in higher education. Therefore, knowledge and curriculum reform should be carried out in higher education in China to achieve the equity and quality of higher education.

Keywords: *higher education, knowledge inequality, diverse curriculum*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of fairness has existed since the beginning of human society. Discussions about fairness touch on every aspect of our daily lives and are discussed in almost all areas of human activity. Also, the idea of fairness is one of the earliest aspects of human social consciousness. Equality in education, which this article focuses on, is a crucial element of social equity, so exploring education inequality is a necessary and imperative thing to discuss. According to the latest government report, the gross enrolment rate of higher education has reached 54.4%^[8], and it can be argued that access to higher education in China has primarily been equitable. However, equity in access to education alone does not meet the demand for equality in education. In other words, equality in education is not an ultimate goal in itself, but a way and a means to better serve the purpose of education. Educators tend to focus on the educational equality of an era and society regarding social conditions, mainly political and economic conditions. However, suppose the economic and political development of a country has a direct impact on educational equality. In that case, the effect of knowledge development on equality in education is more implicit, which can help us determine equality in education and make the research on equality more meaningful.

2. THE ESSENCE OF EDUCATION EQUALITY IS KNOWLEDGE EQUALITY

Equality in education is an essential element of social equality. According to Rawls^[11], equality in education is an aspect of social justice, expressed as giving everyone what he or she deserves. Educational equality advocates that everyone enjoys equal educational rights and opportunities, which is rooted in the fact that modern education has become one of the necessary conditions for human existence. Educational rights equality means that everyone should enjoy the rights to education entirely and equally, and non-basic rights should be proportionally equal. Equality of educational opportunity is the presupposition value of universal education^[6]. One of the most basic requirements of educational equality is that all school-age youth should have equal access to education, which is generally measured by indicators such as the 'enrolment rate' and the 'transfer rate'.

However, equality of rights and opportunities in education is only an external form of equality in fact, which is more concerned with distributive justice^[1]. While it is undeniable that distribution is at the heart of contemporary discussions of educational justice, both in practice and in theory, it is not difficult to see a necessary link between distribution and content. For example, it is challenging to distribute education in the same way as

food. Once education cannot be quantified, the weaknesses of the purely distributive approach become naturally evident.

2.1. Knowledge inequalities - an internal resistance to equality in education

In essence, educational equality is not an ultimate goal but only serves the purpose of education. Moreover, there is no doubt that the purpose of education is inextricably linked to knowledge. As Newman^[9] states in his book *The Idea of the University*, university education has a very practical, authentic, and sufficient purpose, but it cannot be separated from knowledge itself. Knowledge is an end in itself, so the connection between education and knowledge is natural and equal. As an essential content and carrier of education, it is worth emphasizing that knowledge is the essence of equality in education. In practice, however, it is hampered by the internal form of educational equality.

Two points are worthy of our attention. The first is the secular nature of knowledge. In an age when education is increasingly linked to the economy, words of 'efficiency' and 'profit' have replaced that of 'spirituality', 'virtue' and 'mind' as the basic vocabulary to express modern educational concepts. A large number of scientists and researchers are no longer engaged in research in the pursuit of knowledge or human development, but determine what they research in the light of the commercial demand for knowledge in order to maximize profits. Lyotard^[5] noted that knowledge is no longer an end, as people will produce knowledge to sell it, or consume it to stabilize prices in new products. In both cases, it is for exchange, so the needs of social values determine most knowledge production. In contrast, knowledge that focuses on personal development and the spiritual needs of society is excluded. Dewey believes that the modern university still stands for truth and light, for the importance of knowledge and against darkness^[14]. Therefore, the unbalanced development within knowledge will significantly affect the advancement of education. Without this core of knowledge equality, our pursuit of educational equality will become more and more distant.

The second point is the control of knowledge. The curriculum, the core of schooling, which implies specific educational opportunities and educational rights, can essentially reflect equality in education. Today's problem is the lack of connection between students' social and intellectual background and curriculum content^[3]. Curriculum content development is a process of asking what knowledge is most valuable, what kind of understanding can become knowledge, whose experience can be seen as knowledge, and who can define knowledge? These are the fundamental and primary

questions of modern universities and equity in higher education, respectively.

The significant difference between traditional and modern higher education is that the latter is inclusive and open to all, rather than selecting a few students based on their background. Dewey said that modern higher education teaches the classical humanities and pure sciences as well as cultivates humans' the character of the human mind. Still, it is irrelevant to real life and the careers of ordinary people. Besides, modern higher education is designed to break this phenomenon, and university knowledge should meet the needs of students' future lives and help them establish connections with the natural world and their careers. Martin^[7] believed that a liberal education could not ignore the needs of the natural world and is a requirement of modern society. So, in the pursuit of true equality in education, we may have to pay more attention to solving the 'control of knowledge' problem.

These two points are very problematic at the current pace of educational reform in China, although the Rawlsian principle of equity has been beneficial to the distribution of educational resources. For example, it must be acknowledged that many poor children who might not have been able to attend school before now have the same access to university as their urban counterparts. However, whether it is now or in the future, the pursuit of equity in education should be developed to pursue equality of educational outcomes. External equality is only formal equality, while internal equality is substantive equality.

2.2. Equality in knowledge – a way to transcend educational inequality

Although we still face many obstacles and challenges in the pursuit of true equality in education, Rawls^[12] expressed the controllability of social institutions which are not immutable beyond human control, but only a type of human activity, and argued that justice or injustice is determined by how that institutions deal with these facts. Thus, we can finally overcome and solve the deep-rooted problems of educational equality that we still have, which are caused by knowledge itself.

Firstly, equity is in the design of curriculum knowledge. It should be based on a vision of equity in education, and take the interests of the disadvantaged into account. We can think about the economy from the standpoint of the poor, the gender sequence from that of women, race relations from that of oppressed people, and the land from that of the landless^[13]. The design of the structure and content of curriculum knowledge reflects, to some extent, the inherent educational opportunities and developmental opportunities of educational designers. The selection and distribution of knowledge in the curriculum reflect more profound issues of

educational equality. This is because educational programs are designed to address the range of qualities that students can develop. If students can learn different curricular knowledge, their potential will be extended to various degrees. Contemporary social science recognizes the multiple structures of inequality: gender, class, race, ethnicity, and (in the world context) region and nation. Therefore, while understanding and pursuing educational equality and paying attention to the external equality of educational rights and opportunities, there should also be a greater focus on internal equality in education, with knowledge as the core.

Secondly, educational equality creates a diverse curriculum environment. This enables students to recognize, understand, and respect the diversity of knowledge to improve their understanding continually. To create a diverse curriculum environment, it requires to abandon a standard of knowledge that ultimately unifies all areas of expertise, so that people look at various types of knowledge from different angles, no longer regard a kind of knowledge as orthodox, quasi-knowledge or non-knowledge, and allows a fair competition and dialogue between among different types of knowledge. Because society needs a wide range of expertise to ensure its comprehensive and healthy development, it needs knowledgeable and innovative talents at many levels. However, due to the limitations of the school curriculum, our creative talents are often confined to a narrow range of subjects. Therefore, we should spare no effort to introduce all types of knowledge of all nature into the curriculum reasonably, so that students can learn according to their interests and constantly have a collision of ideas. Only through such equity can students enjoy the fundamental and substantial education fairness; Only in such an atmosphere of knowledge can we stimulate students' interest and creativity, and achieve educational goals.

3. INTRINSIC EQUITY FOR EXTRINSIC EQUITY

In addition to the institutional, policy issues and recommendations outlined above, we cannot ignore the role of individual justice. Justice in terms of equity in social institutions is undoubtedly important, and Rawls, Marx, Weber and others were all committed to exploring the inequality of social institutions. Much of contemporary equity research appears to be about personal experience, but it is actually about the family's socioeconomic status. Even Bordieuan's self-analysis and cultural capital studies are merely an institutional analysis of capital. Social system analysis cannot explain many inequities in a fair system, some equity in an unfair system, or the co-existence of equity and inequity in the same system. The key here is that social system analysis mostly ignores individual justice.

Returning to equity in higher education, equity in the higher education system is essential, but even more important and necessary are the members of society: students and teachers. Aristotle was right when he identified justice as human beings' most critical virtue or quality^[4]. He believed that the person with the virtue of justice is contagious to himself and others.

Thus, it is suggested that the primary virtue of any society lies, first and foremost, in the justice of its rulers. When a just system is in the hands of an unjust person, everything is unjust, while an unfair system in the hands of a just person may still have the power and effectiveness of justice. What is more, justice is felt and experienced by the individual members of society and groups. Only when ordinary people are treated fairly in various contexts of everyday life will they develop a sense of justice, identify with society and the system, and be prone to consciously and voluntarily defend and practice righteousness. Through this long-term virtuous circle, community will become harmonious, well-ordered, unprejudiced and fortunate.

4. THE ROAD TO EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

There have been successful experiences and lessons of equity in higher education in China. When New China was founded, it advocated the opening up of higher education to workers and peasants, and developing national, scientific, and popular cultural education, which led to the best level of higher education equity in China's history. The expansion of higher education since the late 1990s has only increased the number of students in higher education, without any upward or downward shift of knowledge, nor has it resulted in a movement of new knowledge, new curricula, new majors, and new colleges.

The most critical aspect of higher education reform is what we are repeatedly discussing today - knowledge reform. It is necessary to bring real-world knowledge, daily life knowledge, techniques, personal and social vocational skills into the university's lecture hall, and construct knowledge, curricula, professions, and higher education colleges. To equip students with the knowledge and skill they need for their personal lives, careers and development, higher education provides students with practical rather than useless knowledge. Any reform of higher education without knowledge innovation and knowledge reform is, in personal view, a reform without real progress. Therefore, knowledge equality is a political and educational requirement and an essential characteristic of the modern university. This is because only through knowledge equality, can we genuinely achieve the equality of higher education and realize the fairness of higher education fundamentally

5. CONCLUSION

This article analyses the hidden dangers of inequality of knowledge in higher education and tries to put forward some suggestions. In China, where the distribution of educational resources is exceptionally unequal, we can achieve equity in access to education. Even students with significantly different starting points can get the same educational opportunities through preferential policies. However, the real sense of educational equity is about institutional justice and individual perception. Without improving the personal experience of equity in higher education, any systemic reform will be significantly compromised. What exactly is equity to the average person? It should not be the high-sounding rhetoric of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* or a political manifesto that all men are created equal; it should be a personal feeling in its simplest form, a sense under comparison.

Equity in education has never been an issue of education, but a political one, which reflects people's social status and interests and the mechanisms of social production of value in education^[10]. A review of research on equity in higher education can be highly fruitful, and it is good that we have placed them in a broad social context and a multidisciplinary perspective. However, the conclusions of these studies are predictable and repetitive, essentially demonstrating that socioeconomic and cultural contexts constrain individual educational performance and achievement^[2]. From previous conclusions, education appears to be a determined and useless factor. Indeed, to achieve equity in education, it is necessary to review education itself, especially its essence, explore its core content and purpose, and think about the design of curriculum and knowledge to maximize the power and usefulness of education.

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