The Challenges of Running The World’s Largest Classroom
By Cheng Kai-ming

Under China’s ancient dynasties, the system of examinations for candidates for the civil service symbolized the role of education as a vehicle for social advancement. In modern China, examinations still play that crucial role.

But growing disparities in China’s vast educational system, some of which mirror other social inequalities that have come about with economic reform, present many young Chinese with a fresh obstacle to getting ahead, writes noted Hong Kong educator Cheng Kai-ming.

CHINA RUNS THE WORLD’S largest education system. Its primary and secondary schools enroll more than 204 million young people, while its system of higher education hosts a student body of 29 million, almost double that of the US, which is the world’s second largest.

The scale is not surprising given the country’s enormous population, but it is a demonstration of decades of hard work in extending education to more and more people. However, the sheer size of the system also lends itself to challenges and dilemmas perhaps unmatched elsewhere.

At the end of February this year, China announced a blueprint for education development and reform for the period to 2020. It is a comprehensive document that covers almost all sectors of education, from kindergarten to university. There are a few themes that are perhaps unusual for an official document in China. First, there is genuine analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the system, serious expressions of dissatisfaction with the status quo and policy indications to improve the system. Second, there is a strong flavor of individualism in the policy directions — for example, repeated emphasis on the need to foster students’ individual strengths, meet individual needs and accommodate diversity. Third, a call for social equity is conspicuously cited as necessary to address the various dimensions of disparity in education.
Significantly, the drafting and final revision of the blueprint is being handled by Premier Wen Jiabao himself, and it is commonly understood that the document will have to be approved by the State Council, and ultimately the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, both indications of the commitment to education of Chinese authorities. It is, therefore, a very serious document meant for substantive implementation. However, the document is also an exceptionally honest statement about the conditions of education in China today. It provides a very useful window to view the major conflicts, contradictions and dilemmas facing China in the realm of education.

THE EXAMINATION CULTURE
The widespread importance of education in China outweighs its economic status, if we compare China with other developing countries. This is underpinned by a strong cultural tradition that places great value on education, or formal education to be exact. In Chinese culture, formal education has been about moving up the social ladder, and little else. This is inherited from the examination system used since the seventh century to admit candidates to the civil service in the ancient dynasties. This proved the only path people could use to improve their social status. Since the Western school system was introduced into China early in the 20th century, that ancient tradition has been translated into a modern zeal among all Chinese families (even those abroad) to find a position in good schools for their children, and for them to perform well in the system. Still, it is taken as a way of climbing the social ladder, and little else.

While the civil service examination was abolished more than a century ago, the perceptions about formal education have not changed much. The strong urge for upward social mobility is now realized through competition in public examinations. School life is governed almost solely by cramming for exams. School days are long, but much time is spent on grinding preparations for examinations. It is not unusual to have after-class and weekend sessions to prepare for exams. This is more so in the latter years of secondary school, where the public examination determines which university a student can attend. However, the overemphasis on examinations has infiltrated schools at all levels, and has resulted in heavy student homework loads and private tuition after regular class hours. School lives are distorted as a consequence, and students are deprived of other learning opportunities. One might say that such a culture of exam cramming is common to all the “chopstick cultures” such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam, but the situation in China is so widespread and damaging that the need to reduce student workloads is one of the major themes in the education blueprint for 2020 that China announced in February.

However, there is little expectation that the situation will improve very much. The authorities and education reformers in China have long criticized “examination-oriented education,” and have appealed instead for “quality education.” That appeal has hardly brought about changes. Instead, school heads and teachers can do little but pay lip service to that idea. The culture of submitting to examinations continues to prevail.

Well-intentioned reformers and policy-makers may not have realized the duality in the matter: strong support for education and the obsession with examinations are two sides of the same coin.

MANPOWER AND HIERARCHY
The deep-rooted examination culture in China is somehow reinforced, unintentionally and unknowingly, by the notion of “manpower” in the education philosophy. China practiced perhaps the most rigorous manpower planning during the time when it operated a planned economy. The overall concept was that the output of the education system should match the manpower needs of the economy. Indeed, the education system was designed in such a way that enrolment numbers and the allocation among disciplines would feed the manpower requirements of the country’s economic plans. The planning was so rigorous that even junior secondary students were taught to abide by the needs of the nation and hence follow the allocation to specific tracks. Strict manpower planning has disappeared with the emergence of a market-oriented economy in the 1980s.
Nonetheless, there is still a strong underlying assumption in the discourse about education that the purpose of education is to train students for specialized and classified manpower categories (sometimes translated as “talents”). This also reflects the strong collectivism in the culture, where individuals abide by the will and expectations of the community.

The education blueprint 2020 uses a new term, “selected innovative talents,” to refer to top-notch people fit for the new economy. The notion explicitly sees education as a sifting machine, and bluntly assumes that it is justifiable to rank human beings. Likewise, the document also uses another term, “pragmatic talents,” which is a polite way of denoting people who are only suitable for activities-related application and implementation.

The use of these terms in the blueprint is perhaps less a matter of deliberate choice than a slip of the tongue about what is taken for granted. This is perhaps not unexpected if one follows the writings of the Chinese sociologist and anthropologist Fei Hsiao-tung (1910-2005), who observed that Chinese see society in a “hierarchical configuration.” Society is a vertical structure and everybody has a position within it. Hence, in education, the aim is less a matter of gaining knowledge, as it is in the West, than in struggling to attain the highest status for one’s future.

Indeed, with the emergence of a market economy in China, where competition is the fundamental rule of the game, the education system is getting even more hierarchical. In primary education, there used to be different levels of so-called “key schools” — provincial key, city key, city district key, county key, and so forth. Key schools received privileged resources and better teachers. The notion of key schools was formally abolished more than two decades ago, but parents retain the idea of a hierarchy of schools. For secondary schools, the notion of key schools survived. Then there are also the general higher schools and vocational high schools, with differential allocation of students after an examination at the end of junior high school.

The differentiation of schools has created a hierarchical system where students are forced to compete. Such competition was not necessary during the era of a planned economy. However, the competition has become an obsession as China moves rapidly toward a knowledge-based economy, and education is essential even for front line workers. In a way, the whole nation suffers from the intense competition in education.

In higher education, the differentiation is even more explicit. There are various schemes to allocate valuable resources to selected institutions. Sometimes the selection is done through competitive procedures, as in the case of Project 211, which aims to sponsor 100 best universities for the 21st century. Elsewhere, substantial extra resources are given to institutions pre-selected by the authorities, as in the case of Project 985, where 11 institutions in three tiers were picked for development into “world-class universities.” The policies of differentiation are consistent with Deng Xiaoping’s anti-egalitarian philosophy of allowing “a few to become rich first.” The policies of differentiation are proving effective in positioning a few institutions to become reputable in the international arena in less than a decade. However, they have also widened the gap between institutions.
CHALLENGES OF DISPARITY

As with the inequalities in other sectors of Chinese society, the disparities in education are intrinsic and are beginning to challenge the nation. Before the adoption of economic reforms in 1978, the first three decades of the People’s Republic were marked by a period where the nation lived and worked as a single entity, and practiced almost absolute equality. All economic outputs from the entire nation were submitted to the central government, which re-distributed the income equally to all parts of the nation. The net result was what we refer to today as a situation of “equal poverty.” Economic reforms changed all of that. They allowed farmers, for example, to retain a major part of their output, and hence allowed some to become richer than others. In 1985, in a major reform in education, the financing and management of schools were devolved to local governments. In concrete terms, this meant school funding would depend on local taxes, special education levies, community contributions (as a kind of donation) and income generated by schools — which are expected to engage in economic activities. As a result, schools in richer localities have more resources than those in poorer localities.

Over the 30 years since the emergence of a market economy in China, disparities in the nation have grown to an intolerable extent, and education is no exception. The widespread appeal by authorities for a “harmonious society” perhaps hints at the social problems brought about by widespread disparities in society. This is perhaps the reason why the education blueprint has made “overcoming disparity” one of the main goals of education development over the next decade.

As demonstrated by the agenda of the education blueprint, education disparity is significant on several dimensions: between the prosperous coastal east and the underdeveloped west; between rural and urban areas; and between different ethnic groups. However, the most pressing problem lies with the education of migrant children.

Official statistics show that around 30 million students belong to migrant families. Their parents have moved from rural areas to cities for various reasons: as workers in factories or construction sites, as traders of agricultural goods, or to search for jobs. Of the 30 million students in migrant families, about 20 million went with their parents to cities. Many face difficulties attending public schools. They often have to attend private schools where the education is mediocre, or they receive no education at all. The central government stipulates that host cities are responsible for educating migrant children, and that public schools should admit them, but implementation has been difficult and slow. This is due in part to reluctance on the part of the community and even the parents to enroll these students from rural villages in school.

The remaining 10 million children are left behind in villages while their parents have moved to cities. They face problems of a different kind: lack of family support and care, and a shortage of money to support their education. Local authorities have come up with different measures to deal with these problems, such as introducing legal provisions on child safety, simulating home environments for the left-behinds, or designating proxy parents for these children.

The problems faced by migrant children are among the many dimensions of education disparity in China today. In a society that sees education as an essential social institution, such disparity is a major barrier to social equity. The seriousness of the conditions faced by migrant children may pale in comparison with the deterioration in education in remote rural villages. However, migrant children have essentially brought rural poverty to China’s developed cities, and thereby created a very visible symbol of the intolerable disparity within the nation.

Education is always a useful window to look into a nation’s development. The advancement of education in China, in terms both of the scale of the system and the quality of it at the high-end, is spectacular and is the envy of many other nations, both developing and developed. The disparity that such advancement has brought about, however, has also created formidable challenges for the nation.

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