

# **Some issues faced by Chinese teachers in adhering to international human rights standards of child education in rural and urban communities**

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The delivery of education in any country is a complex business, which involves many contributing factors and influences. The delivery of effective education in countries such as China has dimensions that are foreign to most 'western' countries. Issues of remote and rural community development, trafficking of vulnerable and uneducated village women and children across borders, poverty and gender discrimination are only to name a few. To be educated to a standard where individuals can enjoy the rights and privileges of citizenship in their communities is a fundamental human right that has been recognised, and is being fought for, by international non-government organisations, such as Save the Children UK and likeminded governance bodies like the United Nations. In this piece of work, the concentration will be on examining the teaching profession in Chinese society in a rural and urban context and the response to train teachers to engage students to reach their full potential. It is recognised that the complexity of fully understanding where teachers fit into the labyrinth of Chinese society is beyond this limited piece of work. The approach is to contextualise current teaching methods in a Chinese province against international issues of education in 'developing countries' through examining a response by an international NGO, namely Save the Children UK (SCUK). Within this approach there is a need to reveal the social pressures and construction of teachers, students and parents in the modern Chinese education setting. Through doing this it will further contextualise current teaching methods, as well as see why and where a change in teaching methodology can be effective.

Arguably, the most influential body to examine and influence the direction of education globally is the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). What bodies like UNICEF do is give a macro view of education delivery globally and the often destructive and life altering factors for children who live in communities over which they have very little control, but in the future will take possession of. In 1999, UNICEF released its findings into the education of the world's children, the results revealed global issues of educational discrimination of female children, high rates of illiteracy and the alarming rate of non-attendance at school for children of primary school age. UNICEF claim that the total number of children in developing countries of primary school age in 1998 was 625 million (p15, The State of the World's Children 1999). Of this amount 130 million or 21% were not in school. UNICEF also estimates that 855 million people were considered illiterate in the year 2000. UNICEF highlights some complexity of reasons for these figures that include conflict, poverty and gender bias to name a few. In respect to China, UNICEF make some pointed observations and called for the national government to address the needs of some of the over two million children out of school, "assuring access for the estimated 2 million plus out-of-school children, many of them girls living in areas where the traditional cultural outlook places less value on girls, most of them living under disadvantaged circumstances in poor, remote

rural and/or minority areas, and a significant number suffering from disabilities. Another important step is to work towards improving and assuring quality education while maintaining access for all" (p3, Focus on China, The State of the World's Children 1999). T. Zhang (2003) highlights some figures from the 2000 National China Census that reveals the rate of illiteracy in urban and rural communities is 85.07 million people (15 years and above), of this amount 66.65 million are in rural areas. Only 11.6% of rural workers had completed 12 years of schooling and 88.4% only finished schooling up to the 9th year level. The enrolment rate for students in 1996 sat at 100% for primary level, 74% male and 66% female at the secondary level, and 7.3% male and 3.9% female at the tertiary level. What statistic like these reveal is the result of social changes and government interventions. A good example is the high rate of primary school enrolment; this has been a targeted goal of the Chinese government in recent years, which appears, at face value, to have been fulfilled. Illiteracy still remains high but hopefully with greater enrolment of children at primary school age this will fall over time.

Household registration is a central theme of governance in China. A major issue for China, and for many other countries who are seeing a shift from rural economies and societies to entry into an expanding global economy, is the shift of population from rural areas into major cities. China, like so many other countries, is seeing a shift in population from rural areas into the cities, the allure of wealth and opportunities being the major draw card (T. Zhang and Y. Wang, 2003). The common expression which identifies these people in China is 'migrant', but as can be seen there are definitions within this term, as described by Zhou Hao, "Generally speaking, the term "migrant" as it is used in China refers to those people who've changed their place of household registration, while "floating population" refers to people who stay at a given place temporarily with out changing their place of household registration" (2000, p1). Regardless of the terminology attracted to these people, they require a shift in thinking for governments to address the social trend of a shifting population. Reports from the Ministry of Agriculture number the total of rural-urban migrants in 2001 at 78 million, 16.3% of the total rural work force. This number represented a 5% increase from 2000 (p73). This shift in population not only sees a drain on social services in the urban areas, it also presents some major issues for 'migrant' parents and children; possibly the greatest issue surrounds the nexus between household registration and delivery of education to 'migrant' children. Where families are registered to be living has a direct impact on their children's educational opportunities. The responsibility of educating children falls to local government authorities; therefore, where people are supposed to be living is where the local government educates them. If people have migrated to the city from a rural area, their children's access to free State run education is problematic. In some circumstances, parents must pay for their children's education or return to the rural area. The result of this circular dilemma is a large number of children not receiving an education due to the poverty of their parents, which drove them to the cities in the first instant. China has recognised this issue and in an attempt to address it has engaged international non-government organisations (INGOs) and has organisation arrangements with UNESCO and UNICEF to explore solutions. To date the response has been to expand already over crowded urban classrooms and also to establish separate schools for the 'migrant' children. These schools are often located on the periphery of the cities where the 'migrant' people were drawn to and the quality of educational services questionable (Zhou Hao, 2000). This is leading onto further problems of ostracisation and labelling of migrant children. Migrant people are easy targets for 'registered urban people' to blame for all manner

of social ills ranging from rising crime rates to a drain on social resources, which is creating a subculture of mistrust and prejudice towards them.

How teachers are seen in society and how they see themselves as a result, gives an indication of who would be attracted to the profession. Unfortunately, T. Paine (2003) paints a rather gloomy picture of teachers in China. The reluctance to be teachers of those going through Teacher's University is a major concern and a problem that needs to be addressed if reform of the teaching profession is to be realised. Paine states most students are using their time in teacher's University to get into other courses or better their opportunities to get into favoured courses. Paine believes the current disdain for teaching and its place in society was constructed under Maoist ideology, this legacy and the discourse against 'elitism' knowledge has stood teachers in a non-favoured position in wider society. Under Mao, a culture of 'workers knowledge' over elitist 'bourgeois knowledge' was perpetuated. Moreover, government intervention in curriculum design saw teachers used as tools of the State. Often the teachers were responsible for party propaganda dissemination or correction, "Post-Mao teacher education programs are a product of layers of reforms implemented at different political periods. Each layer represents a "solution" that later was viewed as a "problem" that prompted additional, sometimes radical "solutions" (Paine, 1991, p223). Mix current problems of recruiting students interested in teaching with teachers being reluctant to teach in rural communities and it presents as a recipe for problems in achieving a good overall education standard in China. Add the further issue of low teachers salaries in a burgeoning economy and one can see why there is a decline of interest for students to enter the teaching profession. Furthermore, government leaders place unrealistic expectations on teachers and students to maintain a socialist doctrine based on moralistic servitude, while being pounded by 'western' standards of economic performance and influence.

Most 'western' teachers have a very good understanding of where 'competition policy' economies sit in relation to the delivery of education. Australia, like so many other 'global' nations, has seen a shift in the fundamentals of where education is seen in society and the development of 'education for sale'. Where this discourse is taking 'western' countries is one issue but the impact on 'developing nations', such as China, raises some vexing problems. H. Ross (1991) raises some interesting arguments surrounding the influence of economic considerations in Chinese schools due to a lack of funds by the State. China titles economic performance pressure, a 'system of 'commodification'', according to Ross this translates into economic pressures to perform and reward both students and teachers, "Merit pay schemes honoured by national leaders reward teachers not for superior instruction but for the perceived importance of the discipline and the students who are taught" (p60). Ross, using teacher's beliefs, further states that such 'commodification of schooling' not only subverts the educator's obligation to cultivate well-rounded students but also disenfranchises colleagues. Efforts to 'stream-line the school's organizational structure' leads to the dismissal of out-spoken teachers and slogans exhorting educators to 'believe in education, not in money' is hypocritical (p60). One interesting approach to achieve competition and performance is the ranking of schools in a hierarchical numerical order enforcing a position of power and privilege. This has created a bleak subculture in students towards their schools and curiously towards their teachers. The following words by a student reveal some social undercurrents:

"The sight of my school simply depresses me - a grey building squeezed like a scapegoat in between a bright yellow one and a snow white one. No one in the world would like my school. To be in it is my ill fortune. Even the teachers feel this way. They are assigned to work here, only because they are the losers of the competition or victims of fate. In us students they find their young counterparts. What do you get when you throw big losers and small losers altogether? In class a weird expression often shadows our teacher's face - a kind of disgust at the kids. We, being what we are, seem to have put them to shame" (p71).

Ross states the teachers and the students have become convenient scapegoats for misjudged and mismatched government policies, which aren't keeping up with a change in social structures and changes. Ross highlights the difficult connection between the direction of performance economics and how teachers are supposed to also be the moral guardians of Chinese society, and how these two streams of thought often do not coexist. Teachers are responsible for the 'moral education' of students and how teachers are expected to chart a moral course for the students is defined and handed down by the State Education Commission. The parameters are set by the State for the continuation and adherence to the socialist doctrine. The State promotes details such as hair length for students and getting teachers to pass on the messages for students to respect the elderly and foreigners, not to drink, smoke, curse, litter, gamble or pray to false Gods. Ross believes teachers have problems with this due to the modern Chinese society and have been chastised for a defeatist attitude, but as one teacher succinctly stated, "The day Mr. Business entered the school, was the day Mr. Morality came to grief (Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao 2/3/89, quoted by Ross, p 87)".

The pressure on teachers to perform in Chinese society is huge and their responsibility to produce the next generation recognised, but often they are criticised for failing. By way of example is B. Wang's (2003) advice and examination of the 'moral education of adolescents'. Wang provides some statistics, which he fails to reference, but he does reveal some interesting insights into his perceptions of teacher's failures in the education system in China. Wang believes his 'investigation of thousands of primary school teachers' in Beijing has interestingly revealed defects in teachers 'personalities, knowledge and capabilities'. Wang cited the following statistics as support: 12.6% - 22.1% of schools allowed teachers to dismiss the students from the class, 14.5% - 16.1% allowed teachers to criticize students in public, 11.1% allowed physical punishment in the class, 51.6% of teachers in primary school and 48.1% of high school teachers wanted information on science and technology and there were similar statistics provided where teachers also wanted to raise their 'innovative consciousness and capability' (p64). Wang's figures are somewhat ambiguous but what they do provide are some insights into teacher methodologies, the social pressures on teachers and what a multifaceted role teachers play in Chinese society. A further layer of understanding of education in China and Chinese society as a whole, is where Wang calls for parents to be educated at 'model parents' schools, "It is necessary to take energy and time to enhance the quality of parents and the proficiency of family education. The Ministry of Education and China Woman (sic) Association called for model parents schools, which is an important practice to be extended" (p64).

Paine, Ross, and Wang have provided some complex layers of expectation that are placed on teachers, students and citizens in a changing China. One major social control is the 'one child policy', which has been encouraged since 1979. Delia Davin (1991) highlights some relevant issues regarding the socialisation of Chinese children in context of the one child policy and its

impact on teachers, schools and parents. One of the interesting developments, according to Davin, is not on the children and their relationship with each other, but the expectations placed on them by parents and the wider society. The pressure to succeed for children is incredible; rigorous homework regimes, long schooling days, strict discipline and a greater role for grandparents, reflect the modern Chinese student's experiences. There is a strong public discourse surrounding the single child and the perception they are a generation of spoiled children. The term 'xiao huangdi' (little emperors) is widely used, as is the term "4-2-1" generation which translates into children having four grandparents and 2 parents which results in one 'arrogant and spoiled child' (Ross, 1991). As with Australia, there is an increasing parenting role being taken on by grandparents through both parents working to service debt. This leads to conflict in families over children's discipline and grandparents being seen to spoil the child, according to Davin. Some parents use kindergartens to remove the child from spoiling grandparents, plus the kindergartens are seen as being good for the child by getting them used to an educational environment as early as possible. It is not uncommon for an entrance exam to test coordination, verbal skills and recognition of shapes to gain acceptance and parents are not allowed in the room while tests take place (Davin, p51). Often guanxi or 'connections' with people get children into the 'best-ranked' kindergartens, regardless of these test scores. Some have boarding facilities and can see children removed from their parents from Monday morning to Saturday afternoons (p52), but the majority are day facilities.

Davin also raises some interesting points about the educational practices in the urban schools she used in her studies and in particular the approach and thoughts of parents and teachers to issues like homework and classroom discipline. Davin outlines how primary school classes are large with a formal atmosphere and the discipline very strict, "Children are no longer required to sit with their hands clasped behind their back as they were in the 1970s, but they sit in straight rows, stand up to answer the teacher, and recite much of what they are required to learn in unison" (p 56-57). Davin also layers within this strict discipline a culture of beating children to ensure compliance with parental wishes, "Most parents, however, seemed to believe that they had to hit their children. The reasons given were that the child wouldn't do homework, played too much, was disobedient, or, most commonly of all, received low grades in school. A Beijing teacher who surveyed her class of thirty found only one who had not been beaten" (p50). This is not surprising considering the common Chinese expression, 'I love you, therefore I beat you'. In respect to homework, primary school students are set between 2-3 hours per night and the common thought that to succeed in life they need to be committed to study and homework gives some indication of dedication and commitment. Davin states some parents have questioned this approach and raised alternative activities such as sport, socializing with friends and family as being as important. These same parents also highlight the issue of bonuses the teachers receive if their students do well, "A small minority of parents take a contrary view and complain that the excessive burden of homework deprives the child of time to spend outdoors, engage in leisure pursuits and even sleep. They argue that teachers place too much pressure on the children because they get a bonus if their pupils do well enough on tests" (p57). The construction of curriculum sees that 40% of the class should be devoted to learning Chinese language and writing, 24% to arithmetic and the remaining time divided among physical education, music, art, natural science, politics, geography, history and from the third grade on, labour. Labour is described as assisting with school activities such as loading coal into the boiler and cleaning classroom. A discussion with Qi Tao (May, 2004), a

project assistant with SCUK, revealed that for her, labour included working at the school's tea plantation picking tealeaves for one day. This activity was seen as a duty to the school and the entire class participated in it for no wages and during school holidays

Davin provides further layers of complexity to the delivery of education in the Chinese context and within this paradigm a call is made to better equip teachers to address the changing society to include and educate students on the periphery of the system. One of the most powerful and influential articles to come out of the United Nations in respect of education for children was the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This convention became binding international law on the 2nd of September 1990 and has been ratified by all countries globally except for two, Somalia and the United States of America. These rights have at their core the basic children's human right of having access to education. One of the identified issues by UNICEF has been the need to better train teachers. The empowerment of teachers is at the 'heart of the education revolution'. UNICEF calls for increased salaries and better working conditions for teachers worldwide, but they also see that teachers need to reform their methodologies, "teachers must reform their educational practices to be more in keeping with a child-centred, rather than a teacher-dominated, classroom" (p8, *The State of the World's Children 1999*). It is with a foundation in the CRC that SCUK commenced the Yunnan Minority Basic Education Project to enable access to quality education for the most vulnerable children, namely ethnic minority children.

Yunnan Province sits in the southwest of China and it shares borders with Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. The total population is approximately 42 million, 35% of which are recognised as being of ethnic minority heritage. Seventy-six of Yunnan's 108 counties are officially defined as poverty-stricken and 94% of the total terrain mountainous (Zhang, 2003). The Yunnan Minority Basic Education Project (YMBEP) is a project designed to 'train the trainers' in international standards of teaching methodologies and to deliver education to those most in need, "The combination of pedagogy, child-rights and child protection - in their broadest senses - is the ideology behind the YMBEP teacher training methodology" (p15, *Yunnan Minority Basic Education Project Modular Manual for Trainers*).

SCUK also use an inclusive methodology of change called 'participatory action research' (PAR), it is described as, "encouraging children, young persons and their community to define their concerns and responses themselves with some guidance and support" (*Breaking Through the Clouds: a Participatory Action Research Project with Migrant Children and Youth along the Borders of China, Myanmar and Thailand, 2001, p10*). In broader terms the principles of PAR are for communities to find solutions to economic and social issues through self-empowerment based on knowledge relative to their own context.

Moreover, in a holistic approach, the project is multi faceted with a view to community empowerment and sustainability. The model includes teacher training, with an emphasis on inclusive methodologies, income generation, health and hygiene under the umbrella of PAR. An example of the income generation aspect is where communities develop small enterprises to supply funding for issues such as the poorest families' school fees and for teaching requirements like chalk, books, tables and chairs. A good example of this is a small fish farm located in a remote rural community where fish are raised to be sold at the local market (Zhao Zhong Hua, interview April 2004). What most students and teachers take for granted, such as chalk, the students and

teachers of rural communities cherish as a real achievement to obtain through community funded enterprises. Simple enterprises can allow children to attend school, instead of parents keeping them in the fields, due to the money it can bring to communities (Zhao Zhong Hua, interview April 2004). Furthermore, there are gender issues around female children being kept home to help mothers with domestic duties, but in response there are village education programs to teach better 'life skills' practices to parents and to get parents to see the value of education. The government of the local counties are very supportive and without their support the project would not be as successful. In China this has a flow on affect due to the hierarchical structure of society, if the leaders at the top want change it will happen and have a huge impact on village communities. What village and rural communities often lack is the knowledge and skills of 'how to'. This is where the philosophy of self-awareness based in PAR principles and the YMBEP project comes in, namely, to provide practical and sustainable skills to teachers and communities.

One of the main objectives is to develop teachers to a standard where they can identify individual student's needs and adopt 'learner centred' training methods. Janet Jamieson (2004) introduces practical means to deliver effective teaching to students, called 'learner centred teaching'. Jamieson articulates a commonly held position that active participation in one's own learning is the best method. Jamieson takes teachers through the various methods of 'teacher thinking' about delivering knowledge and objectives. The five nominated are content coverage, activity, involvement, process and mastery. The first, 'content coverage', which Jamieson describes as her first years of teaching, is where 'the teacher has the book of knowledge and gives the sermon from the front of the classroom'. Teachers have the knowledge, deliver it and along the way explain the knowledge to students. This style is very popular in Chinese schools and one of the mandates of the YMBEP is to displace it and develop alternative methodologies. The problem with the content delivery style is that teachers do not really know what the students have learnt. The testing methods attached to this style is examinations where students regurgitate learnt material, but does it sink in and become contextualised for students? Jamieson does not think so. The second method is 'activity objectives'; this is described as teachers wanting the students to engage in activities to learn. The problems with this method is that it centres on the teacher's desires to deliver knowledge through fun means but students might centre too much on the activity and it could lead to not meeting learning needs. Jamieson uses an example in a physics class where students play with a 'slinky' but do not understand why it moves and where this fits into a broader knowledge base. The third methodology covered is 'involvement objectives'; this is very similar to 'activity objectives' where the teacher wishes the students to be involved but cannot control what knowledge is being learnt through a lack of direction. The fourth is describes as 'process objectives', Jamieson describes this as developing 'thinking skills' such as study and/or social skills. Jamieson highlights that some times teachers forget that these important skills are not automatically learnt and need to be integrated into learning. The final objective is 'mastery', which is described as what students know and/or will be able to do after the lesson is over. The combination of these and the recognition of the pitfalls involved with the concentration on one or two over and above the balance between the five is Jamieson message to teachers. By way of articulating this in a different way, Jamieson states there are five questions that need to be considered when planning learner centred lessons:

- What knowledge, skills or concepts am I teaching?

- What do I want students to know and be able to do when the lesson is done?
- What activities can students do to gain understanding or to develop these skills?
- How can I get all students really engaged and responsible for their own learning?
- What thinking, study and/or social skills are involved and what processes do I need to teach?

Jamieson is also quick to point out these are not the only considerations in the larger plan of teaching; coupled to these questions are homework schedules, testing of knowledge themes, monitoring of student's progress, identifying learning materials needed and understanding differences in individual student development.

Possibly the greatest skill any 'western' based organisation such as SCUK has to possess in a country like China is the ability to analyse and understand social structures. To effectively deliver change to teachers, you first need to understand where they sit in society, what pressures are upon them and what is expected from them. As has been described, the lot of a teacher in China is rather complex and difficult. The difficulties are compounded by the rapidly changing economic and social paradigms within the maintenance of the socialist doctrine. Understandably, parents have a strong desire for their only child to succeed and they look towards teachers to facilitate it. Projects such as the YMBEP project have a huge task to displace strongly held beliefs towards teachers and education in Chinese society. What stands out, at least in Yunnan, is the common held view that children from poor and remote ethnic minority communities should have access to good quality education. Thankfully, local authorities can see the benefits of education for the future of their society and embrace projects such as these.

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