



China

Competition for Places In Higher School Suffocates Young Children

BEIJING - It should have been a cause for jubilation but it made hundreds of Chinese parents worry when the Ministry of Education announced that primary school students were not going to get homework in the coming semester.

The announcement early this year that schools would boldly experiment with new teaching methods aimed at raising "well-rounded" individuals, caused scores of one-child couples to panic.

They feared their children might not get into high school and university. Moreover, they dreaded that new reforms would handicap their sole offspring for life, depriving them of the potential to get well-paid jobs. "It is easy for them (Beijing bureaucrats) to say 'we are going to ease educational burden on children'," grumbled Zeng Xiaoyan, mother of a 12-year-old girl. "But if they let children play now, who is going to take the high-school exams later?"

Zeng is opposed to the plan, forgetting how just a month ago, she was deploring the difficult situation school children face. Her daughter, Xiao Liu, was always exhausted and depressed because she could never finish the overwhelming load of homework. Instead of watching TV and playing with friends, she was staying up until 11 p.m. to write essays and do mathematical equations. "My heart was breaking just to watch her getting up at 6 a.m., not rested at all, and go to school," admits Zeng.

Despite pledges by communist rulers that mass education is one of their priorities, at the dawn of the new century and after 50 years of communist rule, China continues to be a country governed by a tiny educated elite while university education remains a dream for the greatest majority of the population. In a country of 1.3 billion people, there are just 2.5 million university places. Only three or four of every 100 Chinese pass the entrance exams.

This determines a child's future from an early age. Severe competition begins at primary school where 10-year-old children struggle to get the best grades, spending long hours over school lessons and homework.

Parental pressure on children to excel in school resulted in an ugly episode in the case of Xu Li, a 17-year-old secondary student from Zhejiang provin-

ce, who killed his mother with a hammer.

Like Zeng, Xu's mother wanted him to be one of the top 10 but he could manage only the 18th place. Angered, she refused to let him play football with friends and allegedly threatened to break his legs. In a fit of rage, the youngster swung at his mother's head with a hammer. The case triggered public concern and poignant debate in local newspapers. Educated in the Confucian virtues of filiality and respect, many parents were shocked by the violence and by the discovery of the amount of pressure their children were under. In early February, President Jiang Zemin made a widely-publicised speech on education that seemed to signal a turn in education philosophy. He called on schools to reduce homework and to teach courses that would create "a spirit of innovation". He talked also about the importance of creating "well-rounded individuals" with improved "moral, intellectual and fitness levels".



Eastern Europe

Economic Crisis Bites Into Education Gains in Eastern Europe

WARSAW, - The great upheaval in the politics and the economy of Eastern Europe over the last 10 years -- since the end of the Cold War -- has had a major impact on education, which was one of the success stories of communism. The system of education in Eastern and Central Europe has been brutally shaken, notes UNESCO in its review of the last decade. It has had to be reorganised to provide citizens with the knowledge to make democratic choices, while in the coming decade they will need to learn the skills that will keep them competitive in a wider European Union common market.

Overall, while basic education remains more or less accessible to all, its quality and functioning have been critically affected, says UNESCO in the review.

"Under communism, quality free education was a major success throughout the region. That is why its decline is all the more difficult to accept today," said the report presented at a regional conference in Warsaw in February in preparation for the World Education Forum in Dakar. The transition has meant large falls in production over the 1990s. GDP rates fell sharply during the 1990s, especially in the countries of the former Soviet Union. By 1998 only Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia recorded higher levels of GDP than in 1990.

"Most countries in the region have less money now than in 1990," said Albert Motivans, an expert on Eastern Europe who drew up the synthesis report for UNESCO. Governments therefore confront the challenge of revamping their economies with diminished public resources. In addition, growing differences in household income and greater inequality in income distribution means families have less money for education.

Now only the children of the rich benefit from a system which was previously free and available to all, says UNESCO. Teachers are unpaid for several months. "To continue teaching often resembles heroism," UNESCO notes. "Because their salaries are among the lowest of any professional category, most teachers are obliged to have a second job to have a decent income. Consequently they no longer have enough time to guarantee quality education."

Yet the demands on the school system have grown, and will only continue as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have applied to join the European Union. They have realised that to compete in a wider European economy they not only have to restructure their economies away from a concentration on heavy industry, they must revamp their education systems to "provide the relevant skills needed to support national and European competitiveness in a period of rapid technological change and globalisation of markets."

In addition young people have to be provided with the skills to find jobs in the changing labour market, and "for self-development and civil participation -- the latter is particularly important in

Eastern Europe." These changes would present challenges to governments in any circumstances, but for the countries in transition from communism, the demands are huge, and in the case of the weakest economies, have little chance of being met even with increased resources for education.

Moreover decentralisation of education, giving local authorities increasing responsibility, has meant that discrepancies between regions are beginning to emerge. Many local authorities, particularly in the rural areas, are not allocated the financial resources to meet their new responsibilities and have few means to raise additional funds.

At Dakar, governments in Central and Eastern Europe will have to commit themselves to rebuilding education.

Pakistan

Islam, a Pretext for Exclusion

The picture of illiteracy in Pakistan is grim. Although successive governments have announced various programmes to promote literacy, especially among women, they have been unable to translate their words into action because of various political, social and cultural obstacles.

Official statistics released by the Federal Education Ministry of Pakistan give a desolate picture of education for all, especially for girls. The overall literacy rate is 46 per cent, while only 26 per cent of girls are literate. Independent sources and educational experts, however, are sceptical. They place the overall literacy rate at 26 per cent and the rate for girls and women at 12 per cent, contending that the higher figures include people who can handle little more than a signature. There are 163,000 primary schools in Pakistan, of which merely 40,000 cater to girls.

Similarly, out of a total 14,000 lower secondary schools and 10,000 higher secondary schools, 5,000 and 3,000 respectively are for girls, in the same decreasing proportions as above in the four provinces. There are around 250 girls colleges, and two medical colleges for women in the public sector of 125 districts. Some 7 million girls under 10 go to primary schools, 5.4 million between 10 and 14 attend lower secondary school, and 3 million go to higher secondary schools. About 1.5 million and 0.5 million girls respectively go to higher secondary schools/colleges and universities.

The situation is especially alarming in rural areas due to social and cultural obstacles. One of the most deplorable aspects is that in some places, particularly northern tribal areas, the education of girls is strictly prohibited on religious grounds. This is a gross misinterpretation of Islam, the dominant religion in Pakistan (96 per cent of the population), which like all religions urges men and women to acquire education. The situation is the most critical in NWFP and Baluchistan, where the female literacy rate stands between 3 per cent and 8 per cent. Some government organizations and non-governmental organizations have tried to open formal and informal schools in these areas, but the local landlords, even when they have little or nothing to do with religion or religious parties, oppose such measures, apparently out of fear that people who become literate will cease to follow them with blind faith.

Unfortunately, the government has not so far taken any steps to promote literacy or girls education in these areas. It is even reluctant to help NGOs or other small political or religious parties do the job, because in order to maintain control, it needs the support of these landlords and chieftains who, as members of the two major political parties, are regularly elected to the national assembly. "I want to go to school to learn but I cannot because my parents do not allow me to do so," said 9-year old Palwasha, who has visited the biggest city of Pakistan, Karachi, with her parents and seen girls like herself going to school. She lives in a village located in Dir district (NWFP), where education for girls does not exist.