



Spring 2018

Distance Education: Methods of Education for Students in Remote Areas of China

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Abstract

This paper illustrates that distance education is a useful mechanism of education for students living in remote areas or those who desire a native English-speaking teacher to improve their own language skills. However, it will also show the ways in which distance education is not the perfect solution. This paper will overall find that distance education improves future economic opportunities, causes changes in teacher/student power dynamics, and does, to some extent, increase access to schooling for children living in rural, remote areas.

Keywords

distance education, education, chinese education

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Education | Online and Distance Education

Comments

Written for GS-440: Globalization Studies Capstone. Presented at Gettysburg College's [Celebration](#) (Colloquium on Undergraduate Research, Creative Activity, and Community Engagement) in Spring 2018.

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Distance Education: Methods of Education for Students in Remote Areas of China

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GS 440
April 20, 2018

Introduction

Globally, there are about 57 million children who do not have access to a school. Factors contributing to this include: lack of money on behalf of the country, individual, or family, lack of educated and/or lack of willing teachers, and/or on-going conflict within the area.¹ Lack of resources then contributes to a number of other issues, such as underfunded schools, inability to construct schools for children residing in remote areas, and underpaid teachers. To combat these issues in the context of China, specifically, individuals and the government have been taking initiatives to expand the education system in alternative, modern ways.² One initiative has been implementing what is known as distance education, which refers to the utilization of technology to connect teachers with students inhabiting remote, rural areas.³

Distance education can be summarized to mean “educational communities which teachers, students and others are linked in discourse wherever they may be through networks appropriate to their circumstances.”⁴ Crucial aspects of this definition are the education communities, networks, and the concept of “wherever they may be,” which implies a decentralized, or disembedded, location. The ability of a society to transition to this type of education coincides with the rise of globalization. Eriksen defines disembedding as something that can be “moved from a concrete, tangible, local context to an abstract or virtual state.”⁵ Disembedding is exemplified through distance education because capable, educated, and desired teachers are now, more so than ever before, able to access students who are not

¹ "UN calls for change as 57 million children have no school - CBBC Newsround." BBC News. January 29, 2014.

² McQuaide, Shiling. "Making Education Equitable in Rural China through Distance Learning." *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning* 10, no. 1 (February 2009): 1-21.

³ Zondiros, Dimitris. "Online, distance education and globalisation: Its impact on educational access, inequality and exclusion." 1-11.

⁴ Ibid, 1.

⁵ Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. *Globalization*. 2nd ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

residing in the same location as them in order to provide a better education experience. In the context of China, this has been occurring mainly in two ways: either a city-based teacher who connects with students living in a more remote area, or a native English speaker (usually American or British) connects with students in China to teach them English. In either case, globalization has been a major contributing factor to this phenomenon due to the fact that distance education occurs when both teachers and students are “freed from the constraints of time and place...information and communication technologies bridge the gap between the two components,”⁶ which is disembedding.⁷

Research Objectives

Due to the increasing rates at which distance education is being implemented in China,⁸ this paper examines several different aspects of distance education. Throughout this paper I attempt to analyze the benefits and drawbacks of this form of education by incorporating students opinions based on the findings of multiple studies. I then examine the history of education in China, as well as how it is currently being implemented. Some main themes explored in this paper are student/teacher power relations and the desire to obtain a Westernized education system. Finally, I attempt to determine if distance education is really a practical mechanism to increase access to education for students in remote areas. To address these topics, I utilized research published in books, academic journals, and other sources that

⁶ Boubil, Ouanessa, and Kayleigh Carabajal. "Implications of Globalization for Distance Education in the United States." *Cairn.Info* 7 (2009): 699-711.

⁷ Eriskin, 19.

⁸ Carter, Deborah Joy. "Distance Education in China and India: Collectivism and Connectivism." *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning* 10, no. 3 (June 2009): 1-7.

increase context and an understanding of this topic. In addition, I incorporated my experience as an English as a second language (ESL) tutor to students in Shanghai, China to provide a primary example of distance education.

Throughout this paper, I will work to illustrate that distance education is a useful mechanism of education for students living in remote areas or those who desire a native English-speaking teacher to improve their own language skills.⁹ However, I will also show the ways in which distance education is not the perfect solution.¹⁰ This paper will overall find that distance education improves future economic opportunities,¹¹ causes changes in teacher/student power dynamics,¹² and does, to some extent, increase access to schooling for children living in rural, remote areas.¹³

Education in China: A Brief History

China has the largest population in the world, with a total of 1,384,688,986 residents. Of that number, about 30% of the population is below the age of 24, indicating an especially large amount of youths inhabiting the country.¹⁴ With a youth population that large (approximately 415,406,695), special considerations should be taken into account to ensure successful development for the future of the country. One of the main factors to consider is education.

⁹ Yang, Gaixue, and Shuyu Yu. "An Exploratory Study of the Application of Modern Distance Learning Resources for Rural Elementary and Middle Schools in Western China: The Case of Three Cities in Gansu Province." *Frontiers of Education in China* 5, no. 1 (March 2010): 37-49.

¹⁰ Zhang, Xiuyuan, and Gang Cui. "Learning beliefs of distance foreign language learners in China: A survey study." *Elsevier* 38 (2010): 30-40.; Zondiros, 1-11.

¹¹ Boubail, 699-711.

¹² Gu, Yingling. "Research on English Language Teaching Practice in Open Distance Learning." *International Journal of English Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (2011): 247-252.

¹³ McQuaide, 1-21; Carter, 1-7.

¹⁴ "U.S. Census Bureau Current Population." Current Population. <https://www.census.gov/popclock/print.php?component=counter>.

Education is a necessary component in development, as it encourages cognitive development and better prepares individuals to enter the workforce in the future, which is essential for the overall development of a country with a capital-based economy.

Historically, China has been a country that has maintained an emphasis on the importance of education and valued the idea of learning. However, education has also largely been a privilege of the elite, rich classes. Being able to master classical Chinese was a process that required a large amount of time and resources, which the lower and working classes in China could not commit to. This resulted in the extremely high illiteracy rate of 80% prior to 1900. From 1900 to 1905, China tried to implement a new educational system, quite similar to what exists in the United States today. This includes primary or elementary school, secondary or middle school, and higher education, which was then divided into preparatory schools, specialized colleges, and universities. However, this only lasted for a relatively short period of time before the Nationalist Republic gained control politically. This led to a drastic transformation of the education system in China, which can be further explained from an excerpt from the *World Education Encyclopedia's* section on China:

“The search for modern nationhood and economic prosperity created the first golden age of education in modern China. Education in China enjoyed a rare interval of uninterrupted growth as the Beijing government enthusiastically pursued educational development in both the public and private sectors as an essential component of the Nationalist’s building program.”¹⁵

This quote demonstrates the way in which education was further transformed by Nationalists to become a method of increasing China’s internal development and cultivate social capital. The Nationalist Republic acknowledged education as a crucial factor for the

¹⁵ Ni, Ting. "China." In *World Education Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., edited by Rebecca Marlow-Ferguson, 236-255. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2001.

development of the entire country, and not just as a privilege of the rich as it had been viewed previously. Governmental financial focuses shifted to improving education. Several protocols were put into place for the establishment of private and public schools nationwide. During the civil war, which lasted from 1946-1949, Nationalists and Communists fought for political control of the country. During this time of turmoil throughout the country, education suffered greatly.

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the newly established government run by the communist party made it a priority to ensure that education was more like that of the Soviet Union and entirely different from the education systems that existed in the West, which the country had been emulating for the previous several decades under Nationalist rule. This was seen specifically through the abolishment of American-style liberal arts colleges. Another distinctive factor of China's new communist learning system included "nationally unified teaching plans, syllabi, materials, and textbooks."¹⁶ This attempted to ensure that every student, regardless of which school they attended, would be learning the same content. While this may sound like a productive method of ensuring that all students are receiving the same level of education, this has proven to not be the case due to a high disparity between the quality of education depending on physical location, something which continues to impact education today.¹⁷ Communist influence resulted in a focus on productive labor as well, meaning labor that emphasized the production of goods and services. This led to the development of "half-work/half-study schools,"¹⁸ which could be self-supported, requiring no financial aid from the government. In addition, these types of schools required a focus on

¹⁶ Ni, 237.

¹⁷ McQuaide, 1-21.

¹⁸ Ni, 237.

guaranteed work post-graduation, emphasizing the idea that education is a necessary first step to ensure a job, which then leads to positive economic development for the country as a whole, as seen through a communist mindset.¹⁹

Another major shift in the state of education in China came after the death of leader Mao Zedong. In 1978, the country had abandoned the previous education goals that were closely associated with communism and class struggle, and instead shifted towards modernization as the priority for educational development. Other goals included ensuring that college education became a prerequisite for all government officials (which ultimately guarantees elite and rich membership in the government) and the advancement and integration of a free-market economy. This growing initiative to modernize China, coinciding with the increased integration of the free-market economy, has led to the radical reformation of the education system yet again. This time, to an increasingly privatized system. The privatization of education has also included the introduction of student fees, loss of guaranteed jobs post-graduation, localization of institutions (to mainly within cities), and the focus on the development of private educational institutions, rather than public.²⁰

Education in China: Present

While privatization has been steadily increasing throughout China, education as a whole is still largely state-run. With almost 260 million students, over 15 million teachers, and about 514,000 schools throughout the nation, China is home to the largest education system in the

¹⁹ Ibid, 235-237.

²⁰ Ibid, 237-238.

world, which is reflective of the views many hold about the value of education. It is widely believed that education is the key to national development and modernization, which are important factors for ensuring national success in the future.²¹ Education is compulsory for all students for at least nine years. After that, students may then continue on to a general senior secondary, a technical or specialized secondary, adult secondary, vocational secondary, or a craft school. General senior secondary requires a high score on the *Zhongkao*, which is a public examination that determines admissions. All of the other types of schools mentioned are forms of vocational or trade schools, which are more focused on entry into immediate work.²² As of June 2017, it was reported that 9.4 million students were taking the National Higher Education Entrance Exam, which further indicated the public's interest towards a thorough education.²³

Power Dynamics within Education

An interesting factor to consider when analyzing education in China is the student-teacher relationship within the particular cultural context. Typically, in China, there is an obvious separation of power between teacher and student. Teaching and learning is usually teacher-centered. The teacher is clearly the leading role and in charge of the learning process.²⁴ Students are expected to adapt to their teacher's methods rather than the teacher adapting to the student's way of learning. Student-centered teaching is more commonly found within the education systems of the United States and European nations. However, when an American teacher is paired with a Chinese student, their expectations and experiences with education do

²¹ Pan, Yuanyuan. "Education in China: A Snapshot." OECD. 2016.

²² Ibid, 10.

²³ "China Education." China Education Center Ltd. <https://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/cedu.php>.

²⁴ Gu, 247-252.

not necessarily align. This is especially true when considering foreign language learning. Gu explains, “because the foreign language teaching should be student-centered, students are internal and external through the internal functioning. As a foreign language teacher, finding ways to get students through the eyes, ears, hands, brain and other organs of the activities of access to knowledge, arouse the desire of students to acquire new knowledge, strengthen their motivation to learn.”²⁵ Therefore, Chinese students may not be accustomed to the interactive teaching practices of American-trained teachers.

The integration of differing power dynamics in education is a strong example of mixing; which is a prominent dimension of globalization. Eriksen explains that mixing is a result of the increased mobility of people and ideas.²⁶ In terms of education, mixing is demonstrated as it shows the integration of the student-centered learning with teacher-centered learning. As China continues to develop and reform their education system, the country begins to transition towards a student-centered approach, like what is typically seen in the West. This has been occurring in Changji, a modern city in Northern China, with the help of distance education. Gu further explains the changing teaching methods where “students [are] used as the main roles, teacher[s] [are] used as guider or helper.”²⁷ This type of teaching is being spearheaded in China through distance education, as it is a force that is disrupting traditional teaching methods and encouraging modern methods.

Another example of power dynamics seen within Chinese schools is the way in which certain positions convey particular messages about power, specifically the school principal.

²⁵ Ibid, 250.

²⁶ Eriksen, 117-118.

²⁷ Gu, 248.

Chinese school principals have been known to see themselves within a position of great power, as they are at the top of the bureaucratic chain within a school. A study conducted by Qi and Parkay found that multiple Chinese school principals became interested in the job because it “connotes power, capability, and status.”²⁸ One principal explicitly explained, “what is most attractive about the principalship is the power that undergirds it. When you have power...you will be respected wherever you go.”²⁹ This has an effect on the overall power dynamics within everyday school operations, as more power is given to individuals the higher up they are in the bureaucratic ladder within the school.

Educational Inequalities in China

Due to the immense size of the nation, considering both population and physical size, the government of China faces a number of difficulties when it comes to ensuring all students receive the same level of education across the country. While it is difficult to accurately determine how many children are without access to schooling, it has been recorded by Gao that “some 60 million students in rural schools are ‘left-behind’ children.”³⁰ This refers to children whose parents moved to urban areas to pursue better economic opportunities for themselves and left their children in rural areas, generally under the supervision of their grandparents or other family members. While it is hard to approximate the total number of children inhabiting rural areas who do not have access to quality schools, 60 million gives a rough estimate of what the quantity looks like. However, it must be considered that there are

²⁸ Qi, Li, and Forrest W. Parkay. "Beginning Elementary Principals in the Peoples' Republic of China: An Analysis of their Concerns and Priorities." *Pacific-Asian Education Journal* 18, no. 1 (July 2006): 119-136.

²⁹ Ibid, 124.

³⁰ Gao, Helen. "China's Education Gap." *The New York Times*. September 4, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/05/opinion/sunday/chinas-education-gap.html>.

most likely many more students without access to quality schools or schools at all inhabiting rural and remote areas across the country, who cannot even be reached by researchers assessing the total.

Access to education is restricted by exclusion and inequality, two factors that are complex and intertwined.³¹ Zondiros addresses inequality in terms of inequality of outcome, which is the idea that there is insufficient compensation in society to make up for inequality, so inequalities will continue to persist.³² In the case of China, wide disparities exist between schools in wealthy, urban, more populated settings and poorer, rural, less populated settings. The majority of these disadvantaged populations are residing in the rural western areas in the country, away from the eastern coastal regions. In fact, more than half of the 592 counties in China that are below the poverty line are in the western regions. Those inhabiting the western regions have had far less access to basic education, including what is considered compulsory by the government. Findings have even shown that the illiteracy rate in western regions is 14% higher than the national average, indicating a severe disparity in level of schooling.³³

One of the primary factors for why the Chinese school system is failing many students is due to a lack of qualified teachers. During the shift from a labor/production-focused education to an education that emphasized modernization, most of the teachers from rural areas relocated to teach in the urban centers because these were the epicenters of where modernization was occurring. Teachers in urban centers in eastern regions were greater in amount and also received better training, with 44.4% of primary school teachers holding a

³¹ Zondiros, 1-11.

³² Ibid, 2.

³³ McQuaide, 1-21.

degree compared to only 15.6% of primary school teachers in the west holding equivalent credentials.³⁴ A lack of qualified teachers also leads to a lack of variety in the subjects that can be taught. Subjects that require more teacher training, such as English as a second language, computer science and more technical classes, and physical education have suffered greatly due to underqualified teachers. Many of these classes have been removed from schools entirely or are being taught by teachers who have never been trained in these subjects whatsoever.³⁵

Another major factor contributing to the educational disparities is a lack of financial resources. As previously mentioned, a large portion of western China's inhabitants live below the poverty line, meaning that individuals do not have the money to fund their schools privately. In addition, the government's fiscal policies only further perpetuate inequities. For example, in the year 2000 the Chinese government spent ten times more on Shanghai's education (the richest, most developed coastal city) than it did on the education for the poorest, most rural area.³⁶ Lack of funding also causes a further negative impact on the lives of teachers, which McQuaide claims is in part because, "heavy workloads, tight budgets, and poor transportation, rural teachers [have] little opportunity to attend training sessions, to undertake research activities, or to observe exemplary teachers using innovative methods in the classroom."³⁷ These difficulties and stresses associated with this career then further discourage others from pursuing these jobs, despite the societal increase in respect and power they could potentially experience through this position.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid, 3.

³⁵ Ibid, 3-4.

³⁶ McQuaide, 4.

³⁷ Ibid, 4.

³⁸ Qi, 119-136.

Why is Distance Education Beneficial in the Context of China?

The Chinese government is well aware of the large education disparities that exist between the east and west and urban and rural areas within the nation. Due to these imbalances and the importance of education in Chinese society, the government has been working on executing alternative forms of education programs. Distance education programs have become easier to access due to increased accessibility to forms of information and communication technology.³⁹ Access to technology has been a major impact of globalization, which has made technology advance faster and spread into more regions than before. The rapid development of technology in recent years has brought numerous innovations to many different fields, including education. Online courses are becoming increasingly popular methods of teaching and learning that enables involvement from “learners from different corners of the world, rich or poor, urban or rural, to have the opportunity of observing the lectures given by the distant [instructors].”⁴⁰

In China especially, K-12 education has been positively affected by the sharing of high quality, urban-based teachers with lower quality, rurally located schools. There have been such positive reactions that the Ministry of Education of China issued a mandate within the *Ten-Year Project for Informatization of Education (2011-2020)* that calls for “universal access to broadband network on the school level, universal access to quality resources on the class level and universal access to online learning spaces on the individual level.”⁴¹ Through this mandate, the Chinese government is attempting to turn their focus away from allocating money towards

³⁹ Xiong, Caiping1, et al. "Design and evaluation of a real-time video conferencing environment for support teaching: an attempt to promote equality of K-12 education in China." *Interactive Learning Environments* 25, no. 5 (August 2017): 596-609.

⁴⁰ Xiong, et al. 597.

⁴¹ Ibid, 597.

schools in rural areas or teaching training programs directly, and instead focus on funding technological improvements which will lead to an increase in alternative forms of education development.

How Distance Education Works

There are a number of different ways that distance education methods can be implemented, several of which will be exemplified throughout this section. A case study has been conducted on Yellow Sheep River Town, a remote and impoverished mountain town bordering the Gobi Desert.⁴² It is located within Gulang county, one of the many severely underdeveloped counties in the nation. Approximately 23,000 people live in Yellow Sheep River Town, who have a per capita annual income of less than \$200 USD. Originally, the Internet was brought to the small, rural town through an experiment initiated by businessman Wen Sayling. Sayling later invested 50 million USD into technological advancements for the town. This was meant to improve education as well as economic opportunities. The educational project in Yellow Sheep River Town was specific to the town, rather than providing a general education to the students. Furthermore, farmers were trained to use computers and other electronics to improve their farming endeavors. As for school-aged students, computers were used to increase familiarity with technology in order to increase their technological skillset for potential future careers.⁴³

⁴² Zhao, Jingju, Hao, Xioming, Banerjee, Indrajit, 2006. "The Diffusion of the Internet and Rural Development." *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 12, 3, 239-305.

⁴³ Zhao, 297.

Distance education can also be utilized to improve teacher training as well, as is seen in the Gansu Province in China. This is a rural area that borders the Gobi Desert on one side and heavily wooded mountains on the other.⁴⁴ In this area, the European Union and the Chinese government worked towards a project entitled the Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP). A total of 17 million Euros were put into GBEP, 15 million from the European Union and 2 million from the Chinese government. These funds enabled the construction of Teachers' Learning Resource Centres (TLRCs). The main goal of TLRCs is to focus on human resource development for teachers and administrators, focus on the new national curriculum, new methods of teaching, how to utilize certain technologies, and educational management. The TLRCs were meant to accommodate several functions beneficial to teacher training. These centers ensured that teachers would receive information on new and current curriculums being taught across the country, as well as to be able to observe and discuss lessons taught by other teachers via a real-time video. Teachers were also instructed on how to use the computers to find information regarding educational resources, which would allow them to create better lesson plans and interact with other teachers. Overall, these centers have been beneficial and were able to teach many teachers with materials that they would not have previously had access to.⁴⁵

When distance education is directed towards student learning, there are various ways in which an education can be provided. They are generally categorized into two types: asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous is a method that utilizes pre-recorded videos of lectures of a successful teacher. These are available online, in what can be referred to as

⁴⁴ Robinson, Bernadatte. 2008. "Using ICT and distance education to increase access, equity and quality of rural teachers' professional development." *International Review Of Research In Open & Distance Learning* 9, no. 1: 1-17. *Education Source*

⁴⁵ Robinson, 1-17.

“digital supermarkets.”⁴⁶ Asynchronous lessons are more standardized, which means that anyone who accesses these lessons is receiving the same standard of education. The concept of globalization is illustrated through standardization, which Eriksen argues implies increased similarity and comparability of products and ideas.⁴⁷ Standardization is occurring with these lessons because they can be accessed and used by anyone around the world, implying they offer a comparable benefit to the learners who utilize them. The asynchronous method allows for a vast amount of lessons to reach an infinite number of schools but does not allow for direct interaction between teacher and student. The synchronous method, however, refers to when a successful teacher directly lectures the students in weaker schools via real-time video. This allows for direct interaction between the teachers and students during the lesson.⁴⁸ Due to the fact that students can better interact with their teacher and other peers, they are generally more engaged and eager to build a community setting within their classroom. This community setting, and overall increased sociability, leads to increased learner satisfaction as well as improved learning outcomes.⁴⁹

One of the most successful and student preferred methods of utilizing distance education has been through a one-on-one tutoring system. This is a system that connects students with tutors through the phone or in person for academic and personal counseling. A one-on-one teaching method has been beneficial to learners, especially because they are doing a large amount of their learning from a separate location from their teacher. This would allow the student time to work on the individual issues they are having, as well as to develop a

⁴⁶ Xiong et al., 597.

⁴⁷ Eriksen, 57-58.

⁴⁸ Xiong et al., 596-609.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 606.

relationship with their teacher. When distance learners were asked about their preferred forms of distance learning, results from a study conducted by Au and Yan Chong showed that the tutoring system was the most preferred as well as the most effective, according to the students themselves. This would rank the tutoring system before several other types of distance learning, including: face-to-face teaching, written learning, small study groups, visual learning (through pre-recorded videos), and audio learning.⁵⁰ Au and Yan Chong's research, as well as the case studies presented demonstrate the benefits of distance education. In particular, the benefits of the one-on-one tutoring method. These work to show the benefits that come with distance education for those without access to quality teachers through traditional schooling.

In my personal experience as an English tutor for students residing in Shanghai, I have been able to see the benefits of tutoring system directly. Every Friday morning, I video chat and screen-share with four students via Zoom, an online meeting application. I utilize PowerPoint to present the lesson on English writing. The students are the American equivalent of seventh grade, but they are learning English at about a third-grade comprehension level. While the teacher to student ratio is 1:4, it is still a beneficial way to learn. One of the main differences between my work and the research that I have presented thus far is that I am not reaching students in remote areas. All of my students live in Shanghai: a rich, coastal, urban center. Additionally, I am getting paid to teach them, which makes it clear that these students are coming from some level of privilege and making the choice to hire a teacher from America to teach them English, rather than this being their main form of education as it may be for other students. Each lesson I teach has a topic from a list provided by YouYou Education, which is an

⁵⁰ Au, Mabel, and Chan Yan Chong. "The evaluation of the effectiveness of various distance learning methods." *International Journal of Instructional Media* 20, no. 2 (June 1993): 105-126.

educational organization based in China and run by a woman named Lisa Middlezong. Topics have ranged from “A Successful Person in my Eyes” to “My Life in Ten Years” to their opinions on bringing mobile phones to school. Sometimes the topics will be specially requested by Lisa based on what the students are being tested on in school to better prepare them for their exams.

Generally, in a lesson I will start by introducing the topic and define any words they may not be sure of. I then incorporate an English lesson into the topic. For instance, during a lesson on realizing and accomplishing your dreams, we focused on using sequencing and transition words in writing. In most lessons, I incorporate a video as well. These have included popular American music videos, educational videos, and others relevant to the lesson. After the lesson is complete, I will provide them with an example text demonstrating what I expect from them. We read it together and then I provide ten minutes for students to write their own pieces. Once they are done, they send their work to me. It is at this point that I work individually with them and review, edit, and correct their writing. When I first began the lessons, we did not do this. They would just read me their stories and we’d move on. However, I have noticed an improvement in their writing since they have had more one-on-one attention. Mainly I have noticed an improvement in their retention of corrections. For example, in the beginning I would repeat the same corrections for several weeks in a row before the students would stop making the same mistakes. However, I have now noticed that they will not make the same mistake twice after being corrected on their own, individual work.

In my experiences, I have seen several instances of the mixing of Eastern and Western school power dynamics. One of these is in the way that they address me. Even though they are

aware of my name, they only refer to me formally as “teacher.” In addition, they have never once interrupted me while I was speaking. The lessons are entirely teacher-led. The students are hesitant to speak unless directly addressed by name. For example, if I asked them a question as straight-forward as, “do any of you have a favorite color?” no one will offer an answer until I rephrase the question to be, “[name], what is your favorite color?” After this, the student will respond and answer the question. This demonstrates the teacher-centric ideal that is typical in Chinese pedagogy, as well as the integration of interactive education ideals that is typical in Western models.⁵¹

The American Dream

While distance education can be a way to increase equity among Chinese students, it has also contributed to further division between students. As previously mentioned, advances in technology have allowed urban students to gain access to American teachers to teach them English, rather than a teacher who learned English as a second language. This is largely due to the esteem that an American education holds. Boubasil and Carabajal assert the hallmarks of an American education “are highly prized by students, parents, educational partners, and governments across the globe.”⁵² Therefore, while distance education can lead to a more quality education and increase future economic goals for rural, poor students it also continues to create a disparity by allowing urban, wealthy students to further their English educations provided by well-qualified and educated teachers. Technological developments have furthered the ease of access to quality education. This can be described as borderless education, which is

⁵¹ Gu, 247-252.

⁵² Boubasil, 700.

when a student foreign to the United States is able to receive an education equivalent to that one they would receive if they were living in the country.⁵³

Essentially, the phenomenon of distance education in China demonstrates that the American education system is being disembedded, a key feature of globalization. It is becoming a service that people can access all around the world, without having to live in the United States. Boubasil and Carabajal further explain that “technological innovations compress the world in space and time; economics become rapidly impelled into a state of interdependence, interconnectedness, and cultural diversity, and educational institutions across the globe are being challenged to follow suit. Thus, education contexts abound with the rhetoric of globalization.”⁵⁴ Through the technologies that have been advanced as an effect of globalization as well as the increased speed at which these technologies can spread, distance education has become a form of learning that makes the dream of an American-style education a reality. It does so by bringing an American teacher straight to any number of screens in any number of places around the world.

Due to the fact that, historically, America has had a dominant role in world affairs, certain cultures and societies strive to obtain institutions similar to those that exist in the United States. Demand for an education that emulates an American education is high. As the American education system continues to expand across the globe, it influences the economies and prosperities of the developing nations who are adapting this form of education. Boubasil and Carabajal explain that, “educating people to higher levels increases the prosperity of

⁵³ Sethy, Satya Sundar. "Distance education in the age of globalization: An Overwhelming Desire towards Blended Learning." *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 9, no. 3, 29-44.

⁵⁴ Boubasil, 700.

poorer countries all-the-while addressing the moral imperative of the age in ensuring that all people of the world get a decent education.”⁵⁵ However, this could be an issue in the sense that mass adaption of the United States education method would lead to a lack of diversity in global education. Distance education has contributed to this in the sense that it has made the United Stated education system even easier to access remotely. Nonetheless, Boubsil and Carabajal still argue that due to the current state of education throughout the developing world and in areas without access to quality schooling, the advancements made by distance education and the expansion of United States education methods are indeed beneficial. Access to and quality of education in rural areas is something that needs to be improved in many areas throughout the world, so distance education and the adaption of an American education is a way to encourage developing better, more localized methods in the future.⁵⁶

Drawbacks of Distance Education

While the benefits of distance education are ample, there are also a number of drawbacks to consider when attempting to understand this increasing prominent form of teaching and learning. While some programs connect a teacher with a student or small group, this still does not replace an in-person connection with a teacher. The development and maintenance of human relationships is a crucial aspect of social and cognitive development, which usually occurs naturally in a traditional schooling setting. In programs that do not connect students directly with a teacher, such as online schooling, audio, or video – there are no feedback loops. Meaning that if a student is failing to understand a particular topic, there is

⁵⁵ Ibid, 704-705.

⁵⁶ Boubsil, 705.

no way to edit the lessons to meet that student's needs. In these cases, Carter explains that "courses become generic products that do not meet the needs of learners."⁵⁷ Xiong et al.

continue to emphasize that these issues persist to an even greater degree when concerning the education of younger children:

"The problem is that, unlike adult learners, K-12 students are usually not independent in learning, not adequately motivated intrinsically, and not endowed with adequate literacy, time-management ability and technological skills, while these characteristics are essential for online learning...Furthermore, there is no interaction between the teachers in the recorded videos and the students, while interaction is essential and fundamental for knowledge acquisition and cognition and skill development, and is the basic element for any learning environment, face-to-face, asynchronous/synchronous or blended."⁵⁸

Teachers and tutors are not necessarily readily available when a student may need them, especially if they are living abroad, due to time zone differences and other obstacles. Students attempting to learn English have an especially difficult time communicating with and asking for help from their native English-speaking teacher and this barrier is only increased for beginner level English learners.⁵⁹

It is also important to consider the financial factors that allow distance education to occur in the first place. While the access to technology and speed at which these technologies can be utilized has definitely increased as a factor of globalization, it is important to consider that there are still inequalities present in the development of these concepts. Eriksen explains this further by saying,

"If we look at acceleration from a spatial point of view, it becomes evident that certain places change much faster than others. The central nodes of any disembedded activity

⁵⁷ Carter, 4.

⁵⁸ Xiong et al., 597.

⁵⁹ Zhang, 30-40.

are characterized by a much higher speed than the rest of the system, and outside the nodes – in unconnected areas – the speed may approach zero.”⁶⁰

While the epitome of distance education is the fact that extended to these nodes, it is important to consider this quote in the sense that it presents the idea that speed and technology (or any aspect of globalization) are not homogenous, especially when considering development and finances. Examples throughout this text featured programs that were funded by the government or wealthy donors, but it is not guaranteed that these programs will continue to receive money in the future. This could make education programs difficult to maintain in poorer areas that do not have the ability to fund these programs alone. In addition, as technology advances so rapidly, it will be important to continuously update these education programs to ensure that they are still relevant and operating properly. This will just be another added expense that remote, rural areas presumably could not afford.

Additionally, the argument can be made that distance does not suit the educational needs of the disadvantaged and instead furthers the inequality gap. Zondiros supports this point as he states, “inequality is a structural feature of society – it is something that actually exists...and it can be said that new developments create a much broader gap between the members of a given society.”⁶¹ Here, Zondiros argues that inequality is something that is inevitably going to exist throughout society, regardless of any developments that could occur. Therefore, it is argued that even if distance education is successfully implemented and even if it improves the education of certain students, it will not lessen the overall inequality within a society – wealthy people will be continuously improving their educational methods as well.

⁶⁰ Eriksen, 45-46.

⁶¹ Zondiros, 1-11.

These thoughts are reiterated by Jiang Nenjie, a filmmaker who focused on left-behind children. He states, “rural students stand virtually no chance when competing academically with their urban counterparts.”⁶² Instead of pursuing an education past middle school, which is the end of compulsory education according to Chinese law,⁶³ many rural residents pursue factory or farming jobs in order to address immediate economic security.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The paper’s analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of distance education demonstrate that it is a useful method of improving access to education for students living in rural or remote areas of China.⁶⁵ Though asynchronous and synchronous methods of content distribution, education increasingly becomes disembedded from its original setting and re-embedded in a new context. This demonstrates a key feature of globalization, as education is able to reach children it would have otherwise never have. This is additionally helped by other dimensions of globalization, such as the speed at which technology has advanced and spread throughout the world, the mixing of Eastern and Western educational ideals, and the standardization of certain concepts that comes along with the distribution of pre-recorded content. The combination of these factors has allowed students in China without access to quality schools to be able to have a chance to improve their skills and educational backgrounds, which could in turn lead to the improvement of their economic standing in years to come. Yet distance education may not be the entire solution. Educational inequalities in China may continue to persist between the

⁶² Gao.

⁶³ Ni, 236-255.

⁶⁴ Gao.

⁶⁵ McQuaide, 1-21.

urban and rural and rich and poor, regardless of the technological advancements that work to lessen these differences. However, distance education is a relatively new phenomenon that has been utilized to bring education to areas in unprecedented ways. Perhaps it will not end educational inequalities overall, but it has improved the educational opportunities of those who have had accessed it.

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and I have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.