Equity and Social Justice
Women in Higher Education
by Dr Sarah J. AISTON

Chinese for Non Native-Chinese Speakers
by Dr CHEUNG Wai-ming

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Dean’s Message

The Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong is home to more than 100 international researchers from a wide range of disciplines spanning education, communication sciences and information sciences. This diversity of background and discipline results in a vibrant research culture. We proudly consider ourselves to be a nexus for the exchange and development of research that draws on the best of Asian (especially Chinese) and Western scholarship.

Within the many research themes addressed by colleagues in the Faculty, we have recently identified three common threads, which we have set out as our strategic focal research areas: the Science of Learning, Education Policy, and Equity and Social Justice. For each of these areas, we have produced a booklet, introducing the theme and also the scholarly work of some of our leading researchers in that area.

I very much hope that you will find these booklets interesting. If you would like to learn more about our research – in any of these areas or more generally – please visit our website at http://web.edu.hku.hk/research/our-research/strategic-research-focal-areas.

Professor Stephen J Andrews
Dean of Education
Equity, Social Justice and Education

The Faculty of Education has selected equity and social justice as one of its key strategic themes. There are many equity and social justice issues and concerns in educational policy, curriculum design and implementation, and educational practice at the school and classroom levels. The Faculty firmly believes that equity and social justice is an important foundation and condition for creating an egalitarian, fair and just society. In research and teaching, the Faculty also upholds the view that although education mirrors, embeds and potentially reproduces unequal, unfair and unjust social relations, it also has the power to be an agent of positive social change, leading to a more equitable and just society. Specifically, it is vital to make education an important vehicle promoting equity, equality, fairness and social justice in society at large, and to help schools to be caring and inclusive learning places in which students see and experience equality and social justice in their daily life.

The Faculty is a leader in Hong Kong, the region and the world in research on policies and issues of equity and social justice, particularly in Chinese and Asian societies. It is well positioned to address the issues and challenges of inequality and social injustice. As shown in the Faculty’s research profile and this booklet, from different perspectives (such as linguistic, sociological, cultural, philosophical and religious approaches), Faculty members contribute to the understanding and promotion of equity and social justice in education and society by conducting various important research projects and publishing findings in international journals and outlets.

From the different perspectives listed above, they examine and explain how education, curriculum and language reflect the ideologies of dominant groups, using them as instruments of social and cultural production and reproduction, and perpetuating their structural dominance. They also provide theoretical insights into how economic, social and educational inequalities
and injustices can be eased or minimized by protecting and promoting civil liberties, providing equal opportunity for competition for socially desirable things (for example, education, power, wealth and status), practising tolerance of diversity, and facilitating fair and reasonable resource allocation.

Through its wide-ranging research work, the Faculty firstly helps policymakers and curriculum developers to address concerns of equity and social justice in their work. Second, it supports principals and teachers in making schools and classrooms caring and inclusive learning places that do not tolerate discrimination and oppression in any form. Third, the Faculty helps schools and teachers equip students of diverse backgrounds and needs with knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable and empower them as active, responsible and participatory citizens. Fourth, the Faculty encourages teachers to teach students to respect human dignity and differences; promote fairness and equality in family, the workplace and society; protect the needy and disadvantaged; challenge existing social inequalities and injustices; and participate in creating an inclusive society.

Professor Wing-Wah Law
Convenor of Equity and Social Justice Strategic Research Theme, and Head of Division of Policy, Administration and Social Sciences Education, Faculty of Education, HKU
Broadly speaking, Dr Aiston’s research looks at the status, position and experience of women in higher education. Within Hong Kong and Mainland China, this brings in the added aspect of the impact of traditional Chinese culture on this experience.

Within Hong Kong, Dr Aiston has undertaken a mapping exercise to generate a comprehensive gendered profile of the Hong Kong academy. It looks at women academics and to what extent they are represented across the eight UGC-funded institutions, mapping them across disciplines, and in leadership roles at three levels: first, Dean and above (of 110 positions only eight are held by women); second, associate and assistant deans and heads of departments and divisions; and third, distributed leadership, i.e. those roles that do not carry formal managerial titles, but nevertheless are important, such as programme directors, or heads of research centres. While the exercise has shown that women are under-represented in senior positions in the Hong Kong, this is a global phenomenon, and not unique to this context.

In Mainland China, women make up less than 25% of the academic population, which is in the lowest percentile internationally. Dr Aiston, in collaboration with Professor Louise Morley (University of Sussex), is also studying the phenomenon known in Mainland China as the ‘Third Gender’, or “left-over women”. The ‘fear’ is that a highly educated woman is unmarriageable, and this is viewed as potentially having the effect of undermining traditional society, or challenging societal order. Women referred
to as the ‘Third Gender’ are described as having the three highs – a high level of education (PhD level), a high income and a high-flying career. Dr Aiston is keen to explore the effect this phenomenon may be having on the uptake of graduate education by women in the Mainland.

Women now comprise more than 50% of the undergraduate population worldwide. Although this increase is, of course, far from universal and disciplines remain highly gendered, women are sometimes seen as “taking over”. One possible result of this perception is that university cultures – for example, in the UK – have increasingly become more ‘laddish’. National Union of Students’ reports have revealed increasing sexual harassment against women, and a laddish culture that enables this to continue.

When studying the gender issue in any career, the ubiquitous question ‘can a woman juggle career and family successfully?’ is never far away. A comparative analysis of the research productivity of women with and without familial commitments, across five countries, shows that often the former publish more and perform better than their childless counterparts – a finding that is counter-intuitive.

Dr Aiston argues that the long-standing preoccupation with this particular question could be resulting in other issues of relevance being overlooked. The familial factor is out of the university’s sphere of influence – the provision of e.g. crèches and maternity leave notwithstanding. Focusing on such factors as if they were the major explanation for the research productivity gap between male and female academics might well prevent progress being made with respect to tackling other barriers, for example, ensuring equity in workload allocation.

Dr Sarah Jane Aiston has a long-standing research interest in the status, position and experience of women in higher education, as students and as academics, and from both a historical and contemporary perspective. She is currently researching the underrepresentation of women as academic leaders, the phenomenon of the ‘Third Gender’ in Mainland China and the representation of gender in the student press of the University of Cambridge.
A relatively small but growing percentage of Hong Kong’s population is made up of ethnic minorities. Many of them have problems learning Chinese within the local education system whose teachers often struggle to cope with Non Native-Chinese-speaking (NNCS) students amid a class of fluent speakers. This puts them at a disadvantage in society since they will not have equity of access to further education and career opportunities without good Chinese.

To prevent marginalization, NNCS citizens have to acquire basic competence in reading and writing Chinese. Since 2008, the Faculty of Education’s Centre for the Advancement of Chinese Language Education and Research (CACLER) has been working to enhance the professional capacity of language teachers and to boost the Chinese proficiency of the NNCS students in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools.

With the Hong Kong Government’s support, the Faculty has conducted various university-school partnership research projects and teacher training programmes. The aim of those projects is to find equity-based and imaginative ways to enhance Chinese language teaching and make it more interesting and achievable for NNCS learners. They include innovative teacher training programmes called ‘PROS’, which...
provide teachers with four essential elements: “professional and development talk”, “reflection and workshop”, “observing and coaching”, and “sharing the practice”. This represents vigorous knowledge exchange and collaboration between university and schools, employing classroom-based research projects for effective pedagogy.

The PROS approach has already trained a total of 500 teachers from 30 kindergartens, 11 primary and 30 secondary schools. The experience for many of the teachers has been a liberation from the isolation of their classrooms and a welcome entry into a collaborative environment for collegial learning.

As the development and research projects continue, it has become clear that while literacy is important for social inclusion, the Chinese language aspect is not the only factor to be considered – there is also the bigger cultural picture. In order to motivate ethnic minorities to learn the language, they must feel that they belong, or can at least fit in, to the culture in which they live. The role of girls from some South East Asian societies is down-played. They are intelligent and diligent, but under normal circumstances they simply do not have the opportunities to integrate with the outside world and Hong Kong people. Experiential learning and multicultural service learning have therefore become important strategies of social inclusion.

With the support of the Social Inclusion Fund at HKU, efforts are being undertaken to improve the academic aspirations of NNCS students by inviting them to visit the university to enhance their understanding of tertiary education. HKU students have been given the important role of mentoring them. As a result, some have started thinking seriously -- perhaps for the first time -- that higher education, and a professional career, might be within their reach.

Cheung Wai-ming is Associate Professor in the Division of Chinese Language and Literature with particular expertise in Chinese Language education, phenomenography and school-based curriculum development. She is a main driver in several large-scale research projects to enhancing pedagogy for Non-Chinese speaking students and for the schoolteachers who educate them.
With the activities of Islamic State filling the headlines right now, the work of Dr Liz Jackson on Islam in the curriculum has attracted considerable interest. She did her dissertation on Islam in the US curriculum in the context of terrorism and patriotism, post-9/11, when there was renewed patriotic fervour in the air, and her interest was in how this impacts a student learning about religion and Islam.

Her book *Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism* came out in 2014, based on her dissertation and exploring the complex interface that exists between US school curriculum, teaching practice about religion in public schools, societal and teacher attitudes toward Islam and Muslims, and multiculturalism as a framework for meeting the needs of minority group students. It studies how values relate to tolerance and understanding other people, how those values can change and shift over time and explores that within the curriculum.

Dr Jackson arrived in Hong Kong in 2012, and began to study how religion and ethnicity are discussed in the Hong Kong school curriculum, particularly in the core senior secondary subject Liberal Studies. She was surprised to find that the emphasis – perhaps following a Western paradigm – was always on Islam and terrorism.

As Dr Jackson observes, the Liberal Studies curriculum explores globalisation and global problems. At the same time, it aims to increase understanding of diverse viewpoints. In the case of Islam, doing both can be challenging. If the curriculum ultimately hammers negative associations about Islam dominant in the news – terrorism etc – multicultural understanding of Islam can be precluded.
While some scholars are looking at the experiences of Muslims in Hong Kong from an anthropological point of view, and others are working on ethnic minorities learning within Hong Kong’s education systems, Dr Jackson’s work is unique in asking whether the curriculum is reflecting our society’s values and the values that we as a society want to promote. It all became even more pertinent in view of the debate about moral and national education that was raging in Hong Kong last year.

The Umbrella Movement too raised important questions among her students such as who is a Hongkonger, what is multi-culturalism, and are Hong Kong people one race or one language group? It also threw up other unforeseen developments - some of her ethnic minority students who have lived in Hong Kong all their lives said they have never felt such warmth and belonging as during the Movement.

From a wider perspective Dr Jackson is working towards an over-arching agenda focusing on the key question: what are the moral values we want education to promote? New trends such as multi-culturalism, education for sustainable development, and global citizenship all raise questions about what attitudes and attributes we want people to have.

Dr Jackson is also looking at Islam in education from a comparative point of view, and is setting up a project to collaborate with people in Thailand, India, South Africa, China and Iran. She aims to look at what Islam means in terms of educational challenges – especially from the teacher’s point of view.

Recent events such as the rise of IS have put Islam under the spotlight. For Dr Jackson in Hong Kong this has meant a change in how people view her work. Whereas before she had to explain her specialist area, and sceptics would often react with the question ‘Why would I want to know what’s going on in Islam?’, now they say: ‘please tell me what’s going on in Islam?’

Dr Liz Jackson is Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Policy Studies in the Division of Policy, Administration, and Social Sciences Education, HKU Faculty of Education. Her book *Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism* was published by Routledge in 2014. Dr Jackson is currently the principal investigator of a Hong Kong Research Grants Council funded project, “Representation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in School Textbooks: Aligning Multiculturalism and Liberal Studies” (Early Career Award Scheme, 2013–2015).
Dr Wang Dan’s research focuses on equity and social justice in rural education in China. The modern Chinese educational system follows the Western educational model in terms of curriculum, time structure and school organization. It is worth noting that a significant function of modern education in Western countries is to meet the demands of urbanization, industrialization and capitalism. Therefore, when China imported the Western model of education 100 years ago, it also imported the intrinsic discrimination against rural communities — financially, institutionally and culturally.

Today, rural students in China continue to experience the entrenched disadvantages in curriculum, instruction and school staffing, compared with their urban peers. Even worse, the rural-urban disparities are exacerbated by the neoliberal policies of commodification, privatization and marketization in recent decades. The study of rural education in China has to disentangle the complicated relationships between China and the West, the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, and most importantly between capitalism and socialism.

Dr Wang’s recent studies analyse the profound impact of neoliberal economic reforms in China on teachers’ work in rural schools. In the context of rising social inequalities brought about by the reforms, one of the biggest concerns facing rural schools was that morale among teachers was at rock bottom. Teachers felt isolated, left behind to teach second-tier children in woefully underfunded schools, abandoned by the state, subject to authoritarian administration on campus, and commanding no respect from community. On top of this, teachers, both rural and urban, express strong concerns about the decline of social mores and increasing domains of life dictated by money.

The crisis in rural education in China is not a unique problem to China.
Some teachers are found to apply market rationalism in their own work, coercing students to pay arbitrary fees to improve teachers’ incomes.

These poignant findings cut across the dichotomy of rural and urban education. The rural-urban divide is conspicuous, on the one hand, in sharp disparities in the distribution of educational resources. However, Dr Wang’s research exposes the paucity of the resource theory and reveals the deeper cultural and moral crisis in rural schools and in larger society in general. She asks the question: given adequate educational resources, where should rural education go? The urban model, i.e. the modern educational model borrowed from the capitalist West, is encroached by commodification, individualism, elitism and commercialism, which have engendered the moral and ethical crisis that exists among teaching staff. Should rural education continue on this path?

The rural problem has always been a fundamental problem in the development of capitalism. Here once again, rural education in China reflects the symptoms of systemic illnesses, not merely in rural schools or communities, but for the entire educational and economic system. Educational problems in China are rooted – like everywhere else – in the economic realm not in education itself. Education as a means to serve economic ends distorts the original humanistic purpose of education. Competition in the labour market compels individuals to treat education as an investment. The market never stops producing winners and losers. It intensifies the competition and reinforces the hierarchy in the school system. The result is the growth of elite schools which get more and more resources while poor rural schools keep losing ground. Culturally, both urban and rural schools yield to the economic rationalism that tends to displace educational aims and professional ethics.

In her current teaching and research, Dr Wang endeavours to identify or re-discover the innovative practices by Chinese educators, both in the past and at present, that effectively combat inequalities in the modern educational system. The crisis in rural education in China is not a unique problem to China. Rather, it reflects intrinsic flaws in the general model of modern education. Therefore, the Chinese lessons and experiences may shed light on educational development in many countries to help enhance equity and social justice.

Dr Wang Dan is Associate Professor in the Division of Policy, Administration & Social Sciences Education. Her research interests include the sociology of education, rural education in China, teachers and the workplace, organizational studies in schools and school leadership.
Two decades ago when information and communications technology (ICT) was first widely used in education, the thinking was that it would be a liberation for the under-privileged. It would help bridge the gap between poor and rich, as the poor would have equal access to information and knowledge. That hasn’t happened.

Instead a ‘digital divide’ has opened up – the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not – a phenomenon that raises questions of equity of access. Even in developed countries such as the US, the UK and Australia, there is an access divide between those with the financial standing to afford the latest technology for their children and low-income families who cannot afford it. And in developing countries, such as Mainland China, major swathes of Africa, and some SE Asian countries, some communities have no access to the internet, let alone ICT in education.

Governments need to develop policies to fill the divide – because it is getting wider, and some students are being left far behind. Policies need to be put in place to ensure that lack of access to ICT doesn’t marginalise some students. This is not a technological problem: however, it is a situation that could have serious ramifications in society.

Even when there is access to ICT, there is still a divide in how it is used. Research has revealed that high socio-economic status (SES) families have good usage – the parents are better educated and therefore able to nurture and guide their children. But in low-income families ICT usage is often not positive – there are risk factors and ethical problems in using computers, often through lack of parental guidance, either because the parents themselves don’t know or aren’t there as they are working.
The results of various studies suggest that inequalities have not disappeared in the increasingly networked society, and members of disadvantaged families are not particularly advantaged by their access to ICT. This raises the question of whether the digital divide problem has been sufficiently addressed at a time when education policy-makers and schools have already committed to taking bold steps to extensively utilize ICT in teaching and learning.

Current research at HKU is looking into ICT as a cultural tool, as well as a cognitive one. In-depth studies are being carried out following 22 students, from junior primary to secondary level, for one year to provide a better basis for capturing the extent of the digital divide in education.

Rather than a simple analysis of disparity among schools or students, a number of diverse but overlapping elements are being cross-examined, encompassing different types of technology, and, more importantly, different forms and levels of access, with special emphasis on specific areas of society and the activities of the individuals.

Policy implications suggest positive and quality usage of technologies must be encouraged, and there is a need to build cultural capital for low SES families and to provide guidance for parents in how to help their children to use ICT positively as an educational and productive tool.

With ICT, the boundaries between family and school are blurring. Today, students can learn in many ways – and often in better and more interesting ways than they were taught in class – and they can learn anywhere. It is a new paradigm: students don’t look primarily to their teachers when they want to learn, they open their mobile devices.

Digital equity is not only about the distribution of teaching or technology resources. Further, it is necessary to look beyond the cognitive aspects of learning to the social, cultural and contextual factors in order to ensure that ICT in education is an asset to all.

Allan H. K. Yuen is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Information Technology in Education. He is also principal investigator of two public policy research projects to investigate issues on the digital equity in education. The projects are funded by the Government’s Central Policy Unit and the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.