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The Value of Xinjiang Class Education to Ethnic Minority Students, Their Families and Community: A Capability Approach

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Abstract

In this article, the authors investigated how families of Xinjiang class students perceive the benefits of the Xinjiang class policy for students. Based on the work of Melanie Walker, the authors adopted the capability approach as an analytical tool and collected data through in-depth interviews with families of Xinjiang class students over three months of fieldwork in Xinjiang and eastern China. The authors obtained a list of seven functional capabilities that illuminate the value of Xinjiang class education, and complaints that need to be addressed in the future. The results demonstrate how the benefits of Xinjiang class education, from a familial perspective, accrue to students, their families, as well as to the wider community. Also, the findings reveal that agency of parents is limited in this educational process. The authors propose that a pretransition program and improved communication between parents and teachers would facilitate better outcomes for students and their families, and ultimately result in more effective implementation of Xinjiang class policy.

Keywords

Functional Capabilities, Xinjiang Class Policy, Ethnic Minority Students, Agency, Qualitative Research

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In this article, the authors investigated how families of Xinjiang class students perceive the benefits of the Xinjiang class policy for students. Based on the work of Melanie Walker, the authors adopted the capability approach as an analytical tool and collected data through in-depth interviews with families of Xinjiang class students over three months of fieldwork in Xinjiang and eastern China. The authors obtained a list of seven functional capabilities that illuminate the value of Xinjiang class education, and complaints that need to be addressed in the future. The results demonstrate how the benefits of Xinjiang class education, from a familial perspective, accrue to students, their families, as well as to the wider community. Also, the findings reveal that agency of parents is limited in this educational process. The authors propose that a pretransition program and improved communication between parents and teachers would facilitate better outcomes for students and their families, and ultimately result in more effective implementation of Xinjiang class policy. Keywords: Functional Capabilities, Xinjiang Class Policy, Ethnic Minority Students, Agency, Qualitative Research

Introduction

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter Xinjiang) has attracted public attention again since the implementation of China's *One Belt, One Road* (OBOR) initiative. The region constitutes more than one-sixth of China's total land area and a quarter of its boundary length. It is also a predominantly Muslim region with rich resources, and strategically important for the Chinese government. Several ethnic groups, all of which are culturally and socially different from the major Han population, have been striving to gain meaningful recognition of their identity and autonomy in the region, especially the Uyghurs (Li, 2018). The "Xinjiang problem," a term generated by Fuller and Starr (2003), describes the continuous violence and the Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang. The Chinese central government has adopted numerous strategies including economic support and preferential admission into schools and universities to enhance communication between ethnic groups and the Han majority, and to encourage national integration (Chen, 2014; Mackerras, 1995). A key aspect of this educational initiative has been the *Inland Xinjiang Senior Secondary School Classes* policy (hereafter the Xinjiang class policy) which was implemented in September 2000 by China's Ministry of Education (MOE). In Chinese, *inland Xinjiang classes* is called *neidi Xinjiang gaozhong ban*. *Neidi* is usually rendered as *inland*, a term that refers to the east and coastal predominantly Han-populated area (Chen, 2008).

As part of a long-term government strategy to support interethnic relationships, and to provide ethnic minorities with access to higher education in Xinjiang, the Xinjiang class policy funds middle school students, mostly ethnic minorities from southern Xinjiang's impoverished rural and nomadic regions to attend boarding schools in predominantly Han-populated cities located throughout eastern China. The purpose of the policy is to improve ethnic minority students' political, economic, and cultural status as well as promoting "ethnic unity" and Chinese nationalism (MOE, 2000). Previous researchers have focused on analysing students' educational experiences in Xinjiang classes (Chen, 2008; Grose, 2010; Yan & Song, 2010), and have argued that students who attend these classes access better educational resources, including well-qualified teachers, and achieve superior educational outcomes than they may have achieved in their hometowns. Others argue that the government tries to politicise ethnicity by legitimizing its authority on minority affairs (Postiglione, 2009; Zhao, 2010), which has created resistance from ethnic minorities toward institutional arrangements, such as speaking Uyghur when they are required to use Mandarin (Chen, 2010) and conducting religious practices in prohibited settings (Yuan, Qian, & Zhu, 2017).

Although described as "China's bold and unpredictable educational experiment" (Leibold, 2019), Xinjiang class policy has been in operation for nearly two decades, with the number of students enrolled rising from 1,000 in 2000 to nearly 10,000 in 2016. Over 90 schools in 45 cities in eastern China had a Xinjiang class program in 2015 (Yuan et al., 2017). Despite these trenchant and largely growing critiques of government schooling for ethnic minority students, the popular appeal of the Xinjiang classes has remained undiminished (Leibold, 2019). It is thus timely to better understand families (especially parents) decisions for supporting a boarding school education for their children. To this end, the research presented here applies the theoretical frame of a capabilities approach (CA), which first designed by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1992, 1993, 1999) and subsequently advanced in the field of education by Melanie Walker (Walker, 2006a, 2006b, 2008). This Capabilities Approach provides as a justice-based framework within which to review the value of Xinjiang class education from a familial perspective, and to explore how this impact upon parents' aspirations to support a Xinjiang class education for their child.

Researching Functional Capabilities in Xinjiang Classes

As an economist and philosopher, Amartya Sen (Sen, 1992, 1999) considered development to be a process of expanding freedoms equally for all people. Robeyns (2005) considered the CA to be "not a theory to explain poverty, inequality or wellbeing, but rather a framework within which to conceptualize and evaluate these phenomena" (p. 94). In the CA, three central concepts namely functioning, capability, and agency need to be addressed. Functionings are defined as "the various things a person may value doing or being" (Sen, 1999, p. 75). These include being healthy and independent, being safe, being educated, having a good job, and being able to visit loved ones (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). Capabilities are "the substantive freedoms a person enjoys leading the kind of life he or she has reason to value" (Sen, 1999, p. 87), or the ability to achieve (Wilson-Strydom, 2012). Agency is the ability to pursue goals that one values and has reason to value (Sen, 1999, p. 19).

The CA has been used to explore policy and practice in education recently, and it provides a useful language with which to articulate both the learning processes and social value of education. CA also offers a framework through which the process, purpose and impact of education can be evaluated, in terms of its impacts on human development (Unterhalter, 2009; Walker, 2016a, 2016b; Wilson-Strydom, 2012, 2015, 2016). CA refocuses our evaluation of the utility of education onto the individual's capabilities that education has provided. Sen (1992, 1999) considered participating in education as a process for "capability development"

as well as “personal flourishing” which contributes to collective human progress and socially just change. The CA positions education as comprising a process, action, and an outcome, all of which focus on empowerment (Kabeer, 1999), and has critical links to social justice. It stresses the importance of conversion factors and diverse institutional arrangements for educational inputs to be translated into valuable outputs (Unterhalter, 2009). In Xinjiang class policy, this would reconfigure parents’ focus from an outcome-driven approach, based on academic achievement within the existing system, towards an empowering and critical engagement of their child. CA is directed at discovering how government schooling may relate to what one values, and what one comes to believe he or she can choose to be, or to do (Hannon, Faas, & O’Sullivan, 2017).

Walker (2008) developed the notion of functional capabilities to articulate the capabilities that are fostered through education and valued by undergraduates. Functional capabilities capture the significance of both capability (opportunity) and functioning (achievement) in learning. By adopting a grounded method of identifying valued capabilities through students’ voice, she identified a dimension in each case, followed by a “thick” description to indicate how the dimension was identified for her 11 categories. This includes knowledge, social relations, critical thinking, imagination and empathy, recognition and respect, active and experiential learning, autonomy, confidence, active citizenship, deliberative dialogues, and having economic opportunities (pp. 482–484). Based on this concept, we took an innovative step by synthesising the functional capabilities of Walker (2008) with the self-concept model of Sedikides and Brewer (2001). In their model, Sedikides and Brewer argue that the diversity of one’s self-concept can be best captured through the lens of the individual, the relational, and the collective. Consequently, we suggest that functional capabilities can be understood through a multi-layered, hierarchical ordering comprised of individual functional capabilities, relational functional capabilities, and collective functional capabilities. Individual functional capabilities refer to one’s wellbeing; relational functional capabilities convey one’s value connected to the family or the ethnic group, and collective functional capabilities imply one’s role in the wider society.

Research on the Xinjiang class policy has largely focused on the Uyghur-Han dichotomy, and in particular the interplay between the institutionalized authority of the state agenda and the responses of ethnic minority (especially Uyghur) students (Chen, 2008; Grose, 2008, 2010), with a small number of studies focusing on students who have graduated from Xinjiang classes (Grose, 2016; Oudengaowa, 2014). Although there are numerous critiques of Xinjiang class education regarding the discussion of its political goals over educational goals (Grose, 2008; Leibold, 2019; Leibold & Grose, 2019), the value of this schooling for ethnic minority students and their families has been largely overlooked, in the general discussion of how Xinjiang classes translated resources into students’ capabilities, and provided them with real opportunities and options to strive for certain achievements.

Purpose of the Study

There is limited research exploring the perspectives of families of ethnic minority students attending boarding schools, and the impact of Xinjiang class policy on their lives. Importantly, there is limited understanding of how government schooling can better support the educational progress and wellbeing of these ethnic minority students. This study therefore aims to examine the life experiences of those whose voices not being heard in the Xinjiang class policy, and to explore the value of Xinjiang class education for individuals, family and the wider community, with the intent of finding ways to better support the progress and wellbeing of ethnic minority students enrolled in boarding school education.

Role of the Researchers

The research team consists of three co-investigators. It is important to address the researcher's position before describing and justifying the data collection methods, because that position will influence what information is collected and how the data are interpreted (Bernard, 2006). As the field researcher and the first author, educated in the mainstream society, I understand that my ethnicity and identity as a Han Chinese meant that the relationship was never completely equal or free from a sense of difference. Therefore, all I could do was describe my understanding of what I heard, saw, and felt, in a way of thinking that had been socially constructed in settings dominated by the Han people. The second and third authors, who are experts in the field of cultural studies, and PhD supervisors of me were both born in Australia, and have worked as teachers in schools, and as researchers in universities for many years. Both have worked with ethnic and Indigenous minorities in Australia, with much of their teaching work focused on teaching English an additional language or dialect in Australia. They have assisted with the development of interview questions, reading data, and structuring the manuscript.

Methods

Participants

Postiglione (2000) asserted that “national minority education is still the most difficult area of research within Chinese educational studies...Access to minority areas is often restricted and contacts are usually managed through Han mediators” (pp. 54–55). Similarly, previous research has shown that social relations have played a vital role in gaining access to the research field in China (Yu, 2009; Zhao, 2010; Zhu, 2007). In this study, participants were recruited in two ways. First, a personal friend of mine named Ming, an ethnic Xibe and a Xinjiang class graduate, helped me identify the first potential participant, his mother Ping. Ping then introduced me to some of her relatives and friends in the community, two of whom I was able to build rapport with. Second, my Xinjiang based Han Chinese friend introduced me to some local ethnic minority friends, who then became active facilitators in identifying potential participants. This purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) and snowballing strategy helped me find 9 participants (see Table 1, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms), with each participant has a family member attending or finished Xinjiang class education. The relationship was then maintained through online social networks (i.e. WeChat) before and after the fieldwork. Although I intended to achieve demographic representations, the data sample does not necessarily represent the Xinjiang class “norm,” yet more than half of the participants came from a Muslim background, which reflects the demographic characteristic of the Xinjiang classes.

Table 1

Family Members who Participated in the Research

Participants	Pseudonyms	Ethnic identity	Position/job	Relationship to the student
P 1	Xue	Hui	Civil servant	Mother
P 2	Jiang	Uyghur	Farmer	Father
P 3	Jin	Uyghur	Nurse / public affairs official	Mother

P 4	Ping	Xibe	Restaurant owner	Mother
P 5	Zi	Kirgiz	University student	Sibling (elder sister)
P 6	Jie	Han	Civil servant	Mother
P 7	Yue	Uyghur	Teacher, retire soon	Mother
P 8	Gang	Xibe	Farmer	Father
P 9	Qiang	Xibe	University student	Sibling (younger brother)

Note. Participants who come from the same family are highlighted together (P2&3 and P8&9). Ethnic Uyghur, Xibe, and Kirgiz have their own ethnic language while ethnic Hui speak the same language as Han people. All participants except those from ethnic Xibe and the Han come from a Muslim background.

Data Collection

This research draws on three months of fieldwork in the eastern Chinese city of Nanjing, and at five other sites in Xinjiang province, namely Ürümqi, Shihezi, Turpan, Tekes county, and Qupqal Xibe autonomous county. Ethical and scientific approval was granted by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 5201700055). Data collection took place between July and September 2017, mainly through in-depth interviews and observations. In addition, documents including major official documents, news releases and photographs provided by participants about their life experiences were also collected to complement the interview data. Most participants spoke Mandarin except Jin who had limited language fluency in Mandarin and therefore her university-level daughter translated during the interview. To create a supportive environment for participants to speak, all interviews were conducted at the participant's house. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

In-depth interviews. Interviews were one to two hours in duration, although pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, the actual stream of questions is likely to be fluid rather than rigid (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The researcher followed “the leads of my informants and probed into areas that arise during interview interactions with guiding questions” (Hatch, 2002, p. 94). To specify, the interview started with general questions about their early perceptions of the Xinjiang class policy in the hope of gaining an overall impression. The questions were then focused on probing the value of Xinjiang class education from their experience. The interview concluded with their views on how to improve the delivery of Xinjiang class policy in order to provide a better education for ethnic minority students.

Participant observations. Participant observation was conducted over the three months of fieldwork, in both formal (i.e., houses) and “informal” spaces (i.e., dining areas, backyards, streets). Invited by Ming, I had been a resident in the neighbourhood for 2 weeks during my fieldwork in Xinjiang. Ming's family owned a small holiday resort which consists of dining, accommodation and informal ethnic culture experience tour. Lots of visitors are attracted by its reputation of authentic ethnic food and culture. Since his mother is one of the interviewees, Ming's family is happy to host me, and I automatically became a “casual helper” in the dining section. According to Patton (1990), some sensitive information that the participants may be reluctant to discuss in interviews could be learnt through observation, the researcher can add his or her own experience in the setting to the analysis of what is happening (pp. 202–205). In my case, field notes concerning language usage, indoor decorations, community events were taken in detailing the research contexts and recording my reflections of nonverbal behaviours.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author, the participants were offered a chance to read the transcriptions to ensure the accuracy of the contents. A simplified English version of each interview was provided to the second and third author to gain a general viewpoint. The data were analysed in the participants' original language by the first author to maintain the subtle meaning. While a thematic analysis could either be data-driven (inductive) or theoretical (deductive; Kuehn & Ridener, 2016). I initially used a theoretical approach, meaning use pre-existing knowledge from the literature and our work on Xinjiang class education to work with the data, which, in this study, were based on the individual, relational and collective functional capability. However, I am aware that during the analysis, new categories, emergent sub-categories and patterns could emerge and that pre-existing categories may be changed or be discarded (Kuehn & Ridener, 2016). Therefore, an inductive approach was applied to extract, categorise, and systemise participants' concepts, beliefs, and philosophies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Stated otherwise, my approach to the data was first deductive based on the theory, then, an inductive approach that "was data-driven and not based on any pre-conceived notions or theory was adopted to allow the patterns emerge from the data" (Kuehn & Ridener, 2016. p. 2250). For the reliability of the findings, the codes and themes were shared with the second and third author for review until consistency was reached for the research team.

Findings

Three major themes- individual, relational and collective functional capability -were used to develop the interview schemes and categorise the data, however, an inductive approach which involved a hierarchical coding system identified a fourth theme "complaints," and nine sub-themes also emerge from the data. In conclusion, four overarching themes and nine subthemes consist of the research finding. A detailed description of the foundational themes and emerged (final) themes and subthemes is provided below.

Theme 1: Individual Functional Capabilities

Individual functional capabilities refer to what families considered valuable for students themselves in Xinjiang class education. This includes independence, employability, and knowledge, each of which is examined in detail below.

Independence. Walker (2008) understood independence to be autonomy, which means that students could be independent and self-directed in their learning. Families, particularly parents, discussed independence in terms of taking care of oneself, self-discipline, and being ambitious at school. They considered independence to be the most significant thing they noticed in their children since they started boarding in inland China, which might be easy to understand considering the large geographical distances between students and their friends, families. Let alone the organisational climate change such as academic, lifestyle, personal, interpersonal, and even social changes when they first arrived at boarding school at a young age.

Working in the public sector in northern Xinjiang, Xue had a really tough time after her daughter went to one of the Xinjiang classes in Jiangsu province. She decided to pay a visit to her daughter in eastern China two months after her daughter enrolled, to see how things were going. Her daughter was growing up as the only child in the family, which is rare since ethnic minority families were not subject to the well-established one-child policy at that time. Xue

worried that her daughter may find boarding school difficult because it was a totally foreign environment. She even thought about taking her daughter back to Xinjiang if allowed. But her fears were unfounded:

I first felt sorry for my daughter when I first experienced the coldness there in the winter because the southern part of China does not have an indoor heating system. But my daughter told me, “If everyone else can live here, I could as well.” Her teachers were so surprised knowing that she is the only child at home and told me that she is very independent. Even now, she is still self-regulated, and I do not need to worry about her at all.

There were a number of other ways in which parents spoke about how independent their children had become. Jiang, for example, said her daughter was once seriously ill and went to the hospital without telling her and her husband, only doing so when she came back home, “she is so thoughtful and did not want us to worry about her.”

Employability. With fierce competition in job markets, being able to have a proper and stable position in the public sector, such as in schools, government departments, or hospitals, is most parents’ aspiration. Walker (2008) illustrated this capability as providing economic opportunities, such as prepare students with basic skills for a job interview. In the current study, this capability was noted by most parent participants. For example, Yue, whose daughter worked as a university teacher in Xinjiang, recalled:

My daughter came back to Xinjiang after graduating from university in Beijing. She worked as a bank teller for a short period of time and managed to find a job at X College. Her grandparents did not agree to send her away for education years ago, you know the elder generation ... but when I looked back, I am glad we made the right choice (to allow her to move away for education). Especially compared with her junior high school friends, most of whom did not continue their studies after high school, let alone find a proper job.

Family members in this study indicated that, compared with peers in their hometown, Xinjiang class students have more job opportunities due to their bilingual ability and exceptional personal qualities. Parents also highlight how education enables their children to do well in job interviews because they have the requisite knowledge including English and Mandarin. Moreover, parents stated that it helps their children continue their studies and work internationally.

Knowledge. Parents made it clear that being able to gain more knowledge through government schooling was at the heart of their decision to allow their child to attend Xinjiang classes. Knowledge, in this case, refers to “knowledge of a subject and its form of inquiry and academic standards, knowledge for personal development... economic opportunities... professional practices... the inclusion of the marginalised, [and] ownership of knowledge” (Walker, 2008, p. 482). Families believed that Xinjiang classes could provide their children with better educational resources, including more qualified teachers, to learn more effectively. For instance, Zi, an ethnic Kirgiz whose younger brother went to the Xinjiang class in Tianjin (near Beijing) in 2016, stated:

I lived and studied here in this small county for my high school. I know what it feels like. Everyone is studying without knowing what exactly they have

learned. I mean we learn without a purpose ... We do not have any extracurricular activities, no student associations. That is why I encouraged him to go out and study. He changed a lot since he went to inland China; he knew much more about things around us and was able to tell me what is happening around the world.

Zi failed the Xinjiang class entrance examination a few years before and was attending university in Ürümchi at the time of interviewing. According to her, her younger brother, a second year Xinjiang class student, has been immersed in the world's daily news at school, attending short-term visiting and sightseeing in nearby cities regularly. She commented on the value that Xinjiang class education provided her brother with "new experiences and extended knowledge." Moreover, the knowledge gained in Xinjiang classes would provide students with the knowledge to function more effectively in mainstream society. Similarly, for Ping, the value of Xinjiang class education is that it offers the "right kind of knowledge," she said:

It is easy to understand [the decision]. I do not need to worry about my son after sending him to eastern China. Being mentored in the mainstream educational system, he could build "the right way of thinking" following the teachers. Honestly, it is a bit risky for a teenage boy being influenced and involved in some politically sensitive situation here. Besides, we are busy farming all the time. I do not have time to take care of everything and if he stays with us in Xinjiang, the possibility of him failing the college entrance examinations is high.

Running a well-known ethnic restaurant in her local community, Ping was quite satisfied with her son's current situation, even though he was busy working in Beijing and can seldom return to visit her. Her son, according to her, is "my pride."

Theme 2: Relational Functional Capabilities

Relational functional capabilities are associated closely with benefits to family or ethnic community, and focus on three dimensions: respect and inspiration, financial contribution, and belonging.

Respect and Inspiration. Walker (2008) explained that respect means that each person's identity matters, and each individual should be recognised and respected, be treated with dignity in the learning process. In the case of Xinjiang classes, students are selected mainly on the basis of their academic performance, and those who have a chance to attend Xinjiang classes are viewed as bright, helpful, and outstanding. Some of the students become role models for their younger peers in the extended family and are used to encourage the little ones to work harder. For example, Jiang, the father of an ethnic Uyghur girl who is now in college, said:

Of course, I am very happy and proud of my daughter. Our relatives and friends told me that they are jealous of me for having such a brilliant daughter. They asked their children to learn from my daughter and to work hard and to go to a metropolitan city to study. What is more, my little boy now follows in the footsteps of his sister and goes to the library on Sundays.

As the participants pointed out, their children are valued and acknowledged as respected and inspiring community members in terms of academic performance. Moreover, with exception

of two children who were currently attending high school, all participants' children had been enrolled at the top universities after graduating from the Xinjiang classes. One of the participant, Gang, said that his daughter is "the pride of the whole ethnic community" because she managed to study at one of the leading universities in China.

Financial Contribution. As indicated in the individual capabilities, employability means that an individual is able to find a job in the job market and consequently can contribute financially to the family. Sitting in a small office where she worked, Yue was more than willing to share her experience of allowing her daughter to go away to school in inland China. While her daughter was teaching at a college at the time of the interview, Yue became emotional when she was reminded of those past moments:

We had two kids at that time, every household is not as well off compared with the present. My husband and I earned about 800 to 900 ren min bi [AU\$160 to AU\$180] a month at that time. I considered sending my elder daughter to Xinjiang classes since they did not ask for tuition fee, and they offer meals for kids as well. We asked the opinion of our daughter. She decided to go, I guess largely out of curiosity.

Yue indicated that sending her daughter to inland China saved a substantial amount of money for the household. Apart from that, students are able to become a financially helpful family member after they graduate from high school and college. For instance, Gang, whose daughter worked as a consultant in a famous airline company in Beijing after graduating from a well-known university, said, "My daughter would give us red pockets (money) now and then since she is working and earning money now." It is not suggested here that economic benefits are the major reason parents send their children away for education. Nevertheless, two of the parents did admit that it was an economic decision to relieve the family's financial burden. The financial situation is influenced by both the decrease in expenditure due to absence from home and the potential income after graduating from the Xinjiang classes.

Belonging. Belonging emerged as significant in the evaluation of the benefits accruing to families from Xinjiang class education. Walker (2008) considered belonging as being able to participate in groups for learning and teamwork in a learning setting and noted it as social relations. In this article, belonging refers to a sense of group-belonging to the extended family and the ethnic community after long-term detachment. Although students may have diverse responses towards parents' aspirations of belonging. The families interviewed interpret it as students sharing their experience or support other family members in education after attending the mainstream education system, or even return to Xinjiang to work. Even though some parents might not be able to identify what kind of skills and knowledge their children had gained, they would persuade their children to look for jobs in the local area, and preferably, to marry someone who came from the same ethnic group, to maintain ethnic membership and a sense of belonging. One participant, though, said that she did not consider coming back to Xinjiang for work a viable option for her child due to the complex situation in Xinjiang. To sum up, eight out of nine participants expressed the hope that students would have a sense of belonging to the extended family as well as their ethnic community, especially in terms of marriage and working issues. As illustrated by Xue:

We have the elder to take care of. We could not spare our time and energy to worry about my daughter if she stays in inland China. So, we asked her to come back after finishing her study. She was obedient and followed our advice. But

she did not agree with us on her marital issues. She now has a boyfriend who is half Han and half Hui. Her father was very upset about this, but what else could we do? Nowadays kids normally stay outside the community for a long time. We should be thankful that she did not date a Han Chinese.

A sense of belonging sits in the middle of most participants' thoughts. We also found that, compared with individual capabilities, participants paid greater attention to relational capabilities. In other words, participants cared more about the Xinjiang class education supporting a sense of attachment to their families and ethnic community than about developing individual capabilities.

Theme 3: Collective Functional Capabilities

A cluster of collective functional capabilities, which refers to one's role as an agent of social change, was revealed in the data. For some participants, the value of receiving education in eastern China represented the possibility of changing the environment of the local area or even the wider society.

Social Changemaker. Collective functional capabilities are performed through someone who aspires to be an agent of social change. With this capability, people would understand that their contribution to society was valued and that they have "active citizenship" (Walker, 2008). Two participants explicitly claimed that Xinjiang class education could cultivate and motivate agents of social change. Instead of focusing on the value of Xinjiang class education for oneself and family, these two participants drew a wider picture of the potential functional capabilities that education could bring. Zi said:

I hope that young students could all go out. They go out [to study] and bring back modern thoughts, developed skills and creations that could eventually contribute to the overall development of our hometown. Then, our hometown can become a modern city and education here would finally be improved. Years later, we would all have children who could receive an education here in Xinjiang instead of [leaving home]. ... I do hope so.

The value of education is not restricted to self-development or family prosperity but also has a potential function of bringing social change to the wider society. Jiang, as a father of two, recalled that some of those who came back from Xinjiang classes for summer holidays would be required to teach Mandarin in the countryside. He considered this a good thing because it could improve language skills in remote areas. By expressing their hope for the development of their hometown or even Xinjiang, the participants hope that those who went to mainstream society to receive education could eventually come back, armed with knowledge and experience, and become agents of social change for local areas.

Theme 4: Complaints about Xinjiang Class Education

Despite the capabilities fostered in the Xinjiang classes, parents' complaints concerning the policy was another important theme to emerge from the interviews. Including parents in the CA would mean considering parents as agents in their children's education. According to Sen (1999, p. 19), an agent is "someone who acts and brings about change." However, from the interview data we found that parents actually felt disempowered because they had difficulty in understanding the experiences of their children once they enrolled in Xinjiang classes. And

due to parents' limited understanding of the education process, they rely on the "authorities" to make decisions for their children.

Limited access to detailed information. The Xinjiang class policy is disseminated centrally, and officials and schools work hard to translate and implement it locally. As many of the participants indicated, however, their access to detailed information about this policy is limited. The teachers, school boards, television, and print media briefings by local officials offer only basic information. Families would obtain incomplete second-hand information concerning the policy from relatives, classmates, and friends who had been to eastern China or returned from the Xinjiang classes. Some of the parents interviewed considered the 4-year boarding school program to be a period of time during which "the government takes care of everything and we parents worry about nothing" (Jiang). There was a consensus among parents that the quality of education is superior in eastern China compared with that of Xinjiang, and that the program would not only ease domestic financial burden but also lead to a bright future for their children. As Xue emphasised:

My daughter has great academic records; we would definitely send her to one of the best high schools if she stays in Xinjiang. However, no school in Xinjiang could compare to schools in eastern China, and we think it is a better choice for her.

Even though parents had perceived that there was nothing they could do to influence the education process, they did have opinions about the program, especially those parents whose child had graduated from the Xinjiang class. When looking back at their experience, some were of the opinion that aspects of the education system and the process of the enrollment of universities should be revised. For example, Xue said that the system does not recognise whether students have prior knowledge of Mandarin Chinese:

I think it is too rigid that every student stays in high school for four years. Those who speak Mandarin as their mother tongue, they could be treated the same as local Han students.

Students enrolled in the Xinjiang classes have to finish a 1-year preparatory course that focuses on Chinese, English, mathematics, physics, and chemistry before continuing their studies. This first year is largely seen as language learning and environment adjustment. In the following 3 years, unified teaching materials are used the same as in local high schools. Thus, for those with fluent Mandarin, such as the ethnic Hui, the first year seems unnecessary, and "if they could cut down the whole process from 4 years to 3 years for Chinese-speaking students, the policy would seem more 'humane'," said Xue. It should also be noted that some parents did want to participate, or even intervene, in their children's rights to access tertiary learning. However, because they were unfamiliar with the procedures, they were unable to act to support their children and were therefore disempowered by the process. This led to some complaints about the final results of the national college entrance examination (GAO KAO). For example, Xue lamented:

I did not know much about university admission, nor did my daughter. I just thought it makes no sense to put all Xinjiang class students from different provinces in the same selection pool since they did different exam papers. Take my daughter as an example: She had wonderful academic records but failed in

the admission procedure and ended up going to a university she did not like at all.

Students from the Xinjiang classes were enrolled in universities after the national college entrance examination based on four principles: unified examination paper, unified scoring system, separate admission scoreline, and separate admission (MOE, 2000). Students sit for the university entrance examination in the local area, where the local recruitment office takes responsibility for the scoring, ranking, and sorting work. Each province or city formulates the enrolment plan and reports to the MOE. The university then takes control of the actual admission work under the instruction of the Inland Xinjiang Senior Secondary High School Class Admissions Office of the MOE. Because each university can provide only a limited number of positions for Xinjiang class students, which could barely meet the number of students who want to apply for any particular university, it is not unusual that some miss out on their university of first choice. Parents view this approach as unfair after all the years of study, but limited information concerning all these issues leave them little opportunity to assist with their children's leaning.

Top-down communication. Even though not satisfied with some aspects of the schooling system, parents had not shared their suggestions, reflections, and ideas with school authorities. Instead, the degree of their participation in the educational process was normally controlled by school authorities, especially the teacher in charge. Parents bestow trust and respect on the teachers, and they were regularly informed about how their children performed at school by those teachers. As noted by Tao and Yang (2014), teachers in Xinjiang classes had a good reputation and were described as “our good Han mothers” by students. In most cases, parents would only ask for day-to-day details in terms of food and health conditions of their children while talking on the phone with their children. This is partly because, as noted, due to the lack of formal education or limited knowledge of the mainstream education system, they could not understand what their children were learning and experiencing. In addition, they assumed that all would be well in a controlled environment and nothing much could go wrong. As noted by Jiang, “they [students] could do nothing but study at school, I do not worry about my daughter's learning at all.” Thus, this top-down communication style causing parents' experiences remained untapped, even though they had some valuable advice and reflections based on their observations and experiences.

Discussion

Ethnic minority education in China is often viewed as promoting national integration, while ethnic minority people are viewed as passive recipients of mainstream education and its policy directives. Our aim has been to enable families to voice their perspectives about Xinjiang class education in order to promote wider understanding of their experiences and needs. A second aim has been to assist government to produce a more effective policy which could better meet the needs of ethnic minority students and their families. We consider that it is necessary for both researchers and policymakers to raise awareness of family concerns. In this research project, we present evidence showing how parents observed students developing functional capabilities through Xinjiang class education. We also highlighted how parents have limited access to useful information that could prepare them to more effectively support their children's aspirations for education. It was noted how communication between teachers and student-guardians is normally “one-way,” where teachers play an authority role in informing families how students are performing at school. In order for the families of Xinjiang class students to play an active part in the education process, the following two suggestions are provided.

First, we propose the establishment of a pretransition program. That program could focus on the parents of prospective Xinjiang students and be delivered prior to the commencement of senior secondary school education. This would not only promote a sense of preparedness for parents but also prioritise dialogue between parents and boarding schools to discuss strategies that positively support students' transition, as well as preparing staff to meet the needs of incoming students, as evidenced by Mander (2015) in Aboriginal education. For example, the presentation of a preschool information seminar for Xinjiang students would provide a useful opportunity for parents to meet and talk with staff members who work in inland Xinjiang classes. The preschool information seminar would promote familiarity with a new boarding school context and identify the contributions that parents can make to prepare their children for the personal and social changes associated with boarding school life. Such an information seminar would also raise awareness about the potential impact that boarding school may have on families and students, as well as parents' feelings of self-worth before they decide to allowing children away for education.

Second, we propose that parents could be further supported to play an active part in the education process through better communication between home and school. This communication should not be one-way, from teachers to the parents. Parents need and want to play an active role in their children's learning process and to have their voices heard by school teachers. For instance, families whose children graduated from Xinjiang classes could play an active part in terms of feedback and advice through a large-scale questionnaire or one-on-one interviews. Given the limited research about Xinjiang class graduates (Grose, 2016; Oudengcaowa, 2014), there is a need for more dialogue that addresses the concerns of all involved parties, including parents. This may contribute to enhance the educational model for ethnic minorities from Xinjiang, and from other regions in China.

A significant point to emerge from the research is the extent of "silence" between students and their families. On the one hand, students are separated from their home and community for at least four years, moving strategically between different settings in their "double life," thus positioning them as familiar strangers both at home and in schools. On the other hand, parents have high expectations in allowing their children to go-away for education, despite the fact that some lack understanding of their children's "new" lives in inland China. Educational mobility inevitably influences the parent-child relationship largely through the discontinuity of home and host cultures. The disjunction of the old and new ways for ethnic minority students and their families and communities documented here contributes new knowledge in the field of Xinjiang studies.

There are several limitations to this study. First, my identity as a Han Chinese from outside Xinjiang has positioned me as an outsider in this research project, my understanding of other cultures in China is limited by my knowledge and ontology. Second, I do not speak any of the ethnic languages of my participants from Xinjiang. This inevitably limited my capacity to build trust and intimate relationship with my participants, especially parent participants. In some cases, I relied on students to interpret during the interview, and that may have resulted in me missing some important information. However, nearly all participants consider me as a knowledgeable PhD who is familiar with the mainstream education system and thus show me their respect. They also relied on me to provide them with knowledge about their children, since long-term detachment was alienating them from their children (Su, Harrison & Moloney, 2018). Some even feel more comfortable discussing their worries about their children's marriage or career development with me. It should be noted that in this research we did not endeavor to generalize the findings to ethnic minorities in China. Rather, we intended to highlight the unique life experiences of the nine participants and hope that in doing so we can stimulate further debate and scholarly attention.

Conclusion

It is important to include the voices of ethnic minorities in developing and implementing ethnic minority policy. This research has endeavoured to present these voices so that Xinjiang class policy can be better adapted to meet the needs of minority families. The article has addressed questions about what kind of functional capabilities were valued by parents and whether they can be active agents in the pursuit of their children's education. The findings reveal that parents and guardians of Xinjiang class students identified the capabilities that students gained from Xinjiang class education as independence, knowledge, employability, respect and inspiration, financial contribution, belonging, and social-change makers. We note here that the views and experiences of parents and other family members of Xinjiang class students are not yet fully recognised in the educational process, and it is necessary for both researchers and policymakers to raise awareness of family concerns.

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