

Problems and Breakthroughs of Curriculum Reform in China

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Abstract

While China has been undergoing its Curriculum Reform process in recent years, a variety of issues have been exposed. In particular, there are four problematic areas: an one-dimensional mindset, a city-centered tendency, a tendency to be idealistic and a tendency to focus on form over substance. To achieve substantive results of Curriculum Reform, we need to solve four “bottlenecks” that are a fundamental constraint on the development of Basic Education Curriculum Reform. These are the ‘single thinking’ mode of curriculum leadership, the lag in the examination evaluation system, a lack of curriculum resources, and the insufficiency of teacher-training.

Key words: Basic education curriculum reform; Question; Bottle-neck

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INTRODUCTION

China has been promoting comprehensive Curriculum Reform for many years. It has learnt from other countries’ curriculum reform efforts and revised its own implementation strategy accordingly. It has also shared its own progress and achievements in education reform with

international scholars in this field. However, China’s Curriculum Reform has not proceeded entirely without obstacles. With the further development of the Basic Education Curriculum Reform, a variety of problems and negative tendencies have been exposed, affecting the effectiveness of the reforms. Such problems have increasingly drawn international attention. These problematic tendencies are: an one-dimensional mindset, an overly idealistic attitude, a city-centered orientation, and a focus on form over substance. This paper looks at these issues in detail and sets out key recommendations for future Curriculum Reform.

1. THE “FOUR PROBLEMS” IN THE BASIC EDUCATION CURRICULUM REFORM

1.1 One-Dimensional Mindset

A crucial objective of Curriculum Reform is to change ways of thinking. But change does not mean total repudiation, nor that the old and new paradigms are completely antagonistic to each other. An one-dimensional mode of thinking insists on the principle of dualism of epistemological beliefs, and would negate the old paradigm. Such a way of thinking would criticise the guiding ideology, content and method of the old curriculum. And what are advocated and upheld in the old curriculum are vetoed, criticized and abandoned. Such a one-dimensional mindset is widespread in the current Curriculum Reform, which can lead to misunderstanding and misreading of curriculum policy. This tendency is mainly reflected in the following four areas: Ideologically, the new curriculum paradigm of “student, experience and activity” for the center completely rejects the old paradigm of “teachers, discipline and classroom”, which cuts across the historical context of curriculum development in China, and makes the complete course

phenomenon fragmented. In content, too much emphasis is put on experience, activities, and the orientation of experience in the new curriculum. And the transfer and training programs advocated by the old basic knowledge and basic skills are denied or weakened, resulting in too much generalization of curriculum resources. As for the method, too much emphasis on self-learning, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning in the new curriculum and the denial or weakening of the method used in the old curriculum, has resulted in an increasing classroom disorder, and some discipline problems. As far as the teacher-student relationship is concerned, the exaggeration of students' dominant role in the new curriculum and denial or weakening of the teachers' role in the old curriculum lead to some dislocation of the roles of teachers and students.

1.2 Idealistic Attitude Tendencies

There is a tendency to idealize Curriculum Reform. One problem is perfectionism. Since Basic Education Curriculum Reform began, there was over-optimism, and too high expectations that the litany of problems plaguing the development of basic education in China could be fully solved by the Curriculum Reform. Problems to be solved included: examination-oriented education, overburdened students, outdated curriculum issues, teaching content divorced from reality, rote and mechanical training issues in teaching methods, screening selection in basic education, problems, and many others. Expectations of Basic Education Curriculum Reform were that it would inevitably bring about a Utopian world of education, but many teachers however, consider it a too idealistic response. The ideas advocated in Basic Education Curriculum Reform are indeed very advanced and human, and can appear attractive, even holding a certain romance. However, when these ideas are put into reality, there is a huge gap." (Xie & Wang, 2007) There is a gap between the ideal curriculum, and students' actual course experience. One cannot expect the course will be able to solve all the problems in education reform. Obviously, this expectation is too optimistic and idealistic. It does not take full account of the cumulative nature, complexity and difficulties of Curriculum Reform. The second is the radical orientation. At the beginning of the reform, reformers were understandably anxious to demonstrate success, hoping to establish a new curriculum and create a new set of teaching methods in a short period of time. The complexity of the long-term nature of the Curriculum Reform experiment however means it needs adequate preparation and sufficient resources, as well as applicability to real work conditions. Hastily implemented results affect the outcomes of standardized curriculum construction and experimentation. This radical idealism has led to a reduced effectiveness of Curriculum Reform and insufficient preparation has led to the danger of "haste makes waste".

1.3 City -Centered Tendency

There is city-centered tendency in the value orientation of curriculum resource allocation. On the one hand, cities play a dominant role in the new curriculum design and curriculum resources. For example, the new curriculum requires changes of management and the ways teachers teach and students learn. And a prerequisite for the successful realization of these changes is the support of modern teaching hardware. However, the current implementation of the curriculum in rural schools is faced with a lack of teaching hardware, laboratory equipment, network equipment, books and curriculum resources, which make some high schools unable to access the Integrated Curriculum, especially information technology classes. In addition, new textbooks are too urban in focus, and the Chinese and Integrated Curriculum are unsuitable for rural schools. Some content is too deep, and divorced from the reality of real rural life, which will be difficult for rural students. On the other hand, the "decision-making power of education", encouraging the right to speak is also city -centered. It is difficult to attract attention to rural education issues, with the over-focus in the education community on urban education. Education reform started from the city, and then rural education copied the experience of the city, rather than the endogenous needs of rural education determining the approach in rural areas. Therefore, rural education reform always keeps up with the pace of urban education reform and development in every step." (Wan, 2003) China's rural population however accounts for 80% of the overall population, and rural education should therefore be the focus of Curriculum Reform. The city-centered tendency has neglected the basic facts of basic education in rural areas, a serious deviation from the Chinese educational reality.

1.4 Formal Operations Tendencies

In a specific embodiment of the process of course, there is a tendency to focus on form over substance. The first phenomenon is to "concern forms, and ignore the actual effect". As teachers lack a comprehensive and profound understanding and awareness of Curriculum Reform, formal operation in the implementation process is made and the effects of the reform are neglected. Therefore, Curriculum Reform is difficult to implement. Basic Education Curriculum Reform advocates "autonomy, cooperation, and exploration" in terms of changing teaching methods, but many teachers focus only on the form of autonomy, cooperation, exploration, dialogue, experience, the "self" into "gravity", the traditional" chalk and talk "to" full house to ask "the" dialogue "to" Q & A". And there are no real cooperation and experience in the form of classroom activities. "Surplus" in the form and the "fun" atmosphere, make classroom teaching from "chalk and talk" into a "full house and asked," "self-defeating", so teaching activities show a superficial change but not a real one – with the

spirit behind the intended changes lacking. The second phenomenon is the “rejection of reform and negative coping”. Subject to the examination-oriented education and exams mental set selection, elimination mechanism, exam-oriented education become confirmed habits hard to get rid of. For some school administrators, teachers, parents, students, Basic Education Curriculum Reform will be seen as an obstacle restricting excellent students and burdens in many areas, and many schools have shown strong resentment to Curriculum Reform. Therefore, they exclude it not only in the understanding, emotion, attitude, and the guiding ideology, but also in action, strategy, method. In the course of reform implementation, negative and superficial coping result in the phenomenon of “wearing new shoes to walk the old”, and make Basic Education Curriculum Reform in a superficial, formal way.

2. THE BREAKTHROUGH IN CURRICULUM REFORM

Currently, the various problems occurring in Curriculum Reform, lead to the slow progress. There is huge distance from the reform objectives. To solve problems, on the basis of research and practice, this paper presents four key breakthroughs for Curriculum Reforms.

2.1 To Solve One-Dimensional Problem

Do the objectives, content, implementation, evaluation, etc., of Curriculum Reform have the necessity to let everyone satisfied? Does not-allowing the failure of reform mean success? These questions have been controversial. Tracing the source of the study was that for a long time, one-dimensional or “Either this or that” thinking mode exists in the understanding and attitudes, methods and paths of the development of basic education. In the understanding and attitudes, the “change” and “no change”, “reform” and “no reform” are put in opposition. As for curriculum planning, the “reference” research and “native” research are put in opposition; on the basis of theory, the “constructivism” and “Marxist epistemology” are put in opposition. In fact, the relationship between two or more is not antagonistic to each other. Without extensive reference, local theoretical construction is hard to improve and their unity can only be resolved through the practice of reform itself. As for methods and approaches, one attributes the teaching to purely technical procedure, leading to a single teaching and emphasizing students’ “learning to accept”; or attributes the teaching to students’ “active construction, emphasizing the students’ inquiry learning” and the “accept learning” and “inquiry-based learning” are put in opposition. However, the two basic learning, “learning to accept” and “inquiry-based learning” are often intertwined in practice, not irreconcilable. Therefore, the Curriculum Reform highlights “inquiry learning” which does not negate “accept learning”, but are designed to transform the

way students learn, to “explore” instead of “candidate selection.” Thus, reflection and correction of Basic Education Curriculum Reform awareness and attitudes, methods and paths become fundamental problems which need to be solved urgently.

2.2 To Solve the Problem of Academic Evaluation of Examination System

At present, the rates of excellent students and the test scores of students are still the most important index of evaluation in the assessments of school education, teachers’ teaching and student learning. Many outstanding students in school mean good school education and high level of teachers’ teaching. On the contrary, the student will be enrolled in another school, resulting in inadequate funding for the school, reducing the treatment of teachers and other issues. Under the current system, any teacher’s teaching reform must take great risks in many aspects. Schools, teachers and students have to take such aspects seriously as the school’s assessment evaluation, teacher practitioner’s crisis, social acceptance recognition, accountability from the government. In order to survive and develop, schools, teachers, students had to rate one-sided pursuit of excellent students and test scores. As long as “college entrance examination system is synchronized with the new curriculum, a variety of courses the school offers are inevitably affected by exam objectives in a way.” (Jin & Zhang, 2004) Therefore, reforming the screening and selection examination system and revising the students’ academic evaluation system is very urgent for the current reform.

2.3 To Solve the Problems of a Lack of Curriculum Resources and Uneven Configuration Issues

The education development in China is still relatively scarce in terms of funds, personnel, technology and so on. Curriculum resource is the material basis for Curriculum Reform to be implemented and also an important guarantee. The required curriculum space, materials, equipment, facilities, environmental, space and other curriculum resources for the implementation should be planned, and also can be provided in a timely manner. Without the necessary resources, schools, teachers and students will be in a situation that demands were not met, which could seriously hinder the process of curriculum implementation, and this is more serious in rural schools.

2.4 To Solve the Problem of Teacher Training Lag

Teachers are the key factors in the implementation of the curriculum. Teachers’ quality and professional level directly affect the process of Basic Education Curriculum Reform. Piaget, a famous scholar, pointed out: “With regards to education and teaching, everything is associated with teacher training in quality. If there are not quite sufficient qualified teachers, any reform most people admire is bound to fail in practice.” (Ding, 2009)

Curriculum Reform being implemented increases the requirements of teachers' quality, while teacher training lags and lacks specificity. Some teachers cannot change the concept of education completely, and they don't have sufficient awareness and understanding toward the new curriculum; some teachers' understanding of the Basic Education Curriculum Reform also just stay in the textbook- replacement level and they do not understand the spirit of Curriculum Reform. New materials but the old teaching methods in the reform lead to a mere formality. Therefore, one of the key breakthroughs is to strengthen the training of teachers and to create a variety of conditions and open up a variety of ways in order to promote the professional development of teachers. Only if the overall quality of teachers is improved, we can better achieve the objectives of the reform.

CONCLUSION

As a coin has two sides, Curriculum Reform in China has made gratifying achievements, but also inevitably exposed some problems. There is no doubt that Curriculum Reform breakthrough in values lays a good foundation for the future of education. Meanwhile government attaches great importance to the Curriculum Reform and the whole

society concerns it. The government is strongly supportive and invests a lot of money to promote Basic Education Curriculum Reform. However, it seems that "output" is not equivalent to "input" of time, manpower and material resources. The concept of Basic Education Curriculum Reform is still stuck in the text, and there is no access to the actual operational level. Ultimately, implementation of the new curriculum calls for changing the thinking mode, reforming the examination system and teacher training institutions, as well as a good social environment and public funding support.

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