

Original Paper

The Reform and Transformation of Education in Contemporary China: Review of Education Policy and Practice in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This study critically reviewed the educational policy and educational reform in China as well as its impacts on educational quality and teacher preparation. Through conducting extensive reviews of relevant research, this study presented practical suggestions to educational administrators and teacher educators to enhance current educational policies and practices to improve educational equity and quality.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Education Policy, International Education, Asian Studies

1. Introduction

1.1 Ethnic diversity and cultural variety

China is one of the world's most populous countries, with 56 different ethnic groups and more than 80 spoken languages and about 30 written languages. It follows the "Pattern of Diversity in Unity of the Chinese Nation" (Fei, 1999; Wang, 2004). The Han cultural remains the mainstream of the society and mandarin is the official language (Wang, 2004). Along with the social transformation and urbanization process, the demographic diversity has been increasing, especially in metropolitan cities since the government started enabling the increasingly free movement of people for both economic development and the improvement of individual living standards (Iredale & Guo, 2003).

1.2 The rural-urban divide

Mentioned in Sato's research in 2014, the population of China are almost evenly distributed with "47% of the population living in urban areas and 53% in rural areas" (p.1), however, as Sato (2014) indicated, the vast deserts of the western inland areas and the mountains in the south created a population "concentration in the eastern part of the country where the coastal cities provide greater opportunity for jobs in manufacturing and other rapidly developing industries" (p.1). Consequently, the eastern coastal regions centralized the vast amount of economic and social resources. With underdeveloped systems of transportation and decades of sharply contrasting access to material and cultural goods, the large percentage of the population that has remained in the countryside has led very different from those who live in the cities (Chang & Paine, 1992).

As has been documented by Chan (2009), the quantity and quality of state-provided services such as education and urban infrastructural services and social welfare are "highly correlated with hierarchical rank in both the pre-reform and current eras" (p.213). Unsurprisingly, this spatial differentiation shapes the opportunity structure of people residing in different geographical locations.

1.3 The rural-urban gap in education

Sato's (2014) research mentioned that China has experienced a history of concentrating resources in the eastern part of the mainland, so as its education system is also experiencing the unbalanced growth in the urban centers and the rural west. Iredale and Guo discussed in their study in 2003, that the government was enabling the "mass rural-to-urban migration; and much of this migration is essential for the economic survival of people living in poverty-stricken areas" (p.1). The major problem, as they

addressed, existed in the extent of the economic and social divide between urban and rural areas and the inferior services such as schools, medical facilities, housing, and social welfare that rural people experience. Wide spatial variations have emerged in the process of economic reform, partly because of the government's economic policies and its emphasis on developing the east coast (Iredale & Guo, 2003).

This economic and social divide also reflected in the distribution of educational resources. High quality teachers and sufficient educational resources are centralized in eastern coastal regions and distributed in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong (Wang, 2004). According to Ming's (2013) research, they have been the top three destinations for the rural-to-urban migrants for many years, and migrants have been making up an increasing proportion of the population in all three places.

Like the allocation of other state resources under China's rural-urban and western inland-eastern coastal divide, the allocation of educational resources reflects a strong preference for urbanities (Fu & Ren, 2010). Government funds were largely allocated to support schools beyond compulsory education which tended to be in urban areas, rather than primary or junior secondary schools located in rural regions (Hannum, 1999; Fu & Ren, 2010). Even so, lack of appropriate financing caused problems in rural compulsory education. According to the data Fu and Ren collected in their research, "while 40.9% of primary school teachers in urban areas had finished at least specialized secondary education, only 20.3% their rural colleagues had done so; while 23.5% of junior secondary school teachers in urban areas had at least graduated from tertiary schools, only 9.4% of their counterparts in rural areas had achieved that level of education" (2001, p.595).

The rural-urban gap in basic education is not only reflected in the distribution of qualified teachers but also can be found in the focus of educational policy. As Hannum (1999) indicated in her study, although educational policies during China's early years reflected an emphasis on both economic development and social equity, the priority of education "was placed on rapidly developing urban high-level education, which limited the resources available for basic educational expansion and development in rural areas" (p.197). The rural-urban gap in education was also addressed in Wu's research in 2011, in which argued that in countries with a decentralized educational system such as the United States, schools are more exposed to community influence, providing greater leverage for high-status families to affect students' opportunities for learning and educational attainment (Kerckhoff, 1995, as cited in Wu, 2011). In other countries with a centralized educational system, where school organizations, the nature of curriculum, and the pace of instruction are more unified, the shift of state educational policies, such as adopting compulsory education free of charge, "could exert greater impact on educational opportunities for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds" (p.3).

As discussed in previous section, the unbalanced economic and social development and educational resources distribution between rural and urban areas could pose many challenges for educators and school administrators. Based on Wu's (2011) study, students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds may have access to educational resources that "either directly from families or indirectly from family influences on school organizations" (p.3). Influences of residential location on children's education have also been examined in Liang and Chen's study in 2005. Some important findings emerged from their analyses: "First of all, migrant children and children in rural areas are much less likely to be enrolled in school than local urban children. Secondly, they encounter a major disadvantage in terms of school enrollment and attainment" (p.26). As education becomes increasingly significant for socioeconomic mobility in the Chinese society, such disadvantages faced by the large amount of migrant and rural children is likely to have long-term consequences for them and for Chinese society as a whole (Liang & Chen, 2005).

1.4 Standing at the crossroads of change

Governance of education is centralized by the Ministry of Education (Sato, 2014). As mentioned in Sato's (2014) research, the education system is comprehensive from pre-school through adult learning opportunities. The Ministry of Education certifies teachers, creates standardized curriculum and unified textbooks, as well as monitors the entire education system.

Under the influence of globalization, the economic reform, and the government's commitment to

modernization, the education system in the last decade of the twentieth century is being challenged to keep pace with new knowledge flooding into China as well as changes in thinking and lifestyles brought about by reforms (Chang & Paine, 1992). The schools, teachers, and hence teacher education face the need to reform. As Chan and Paine (1992) stated, a major policy reform of 1985, was the resolution on the reform of the education system, which further complicated the educators' charge by calling for greater differentiation in curricula and types of schooling. Consequently, here comes the call for teachers to introduce innovations that "stress the active participation of students and the development of students' independent and creative thinking, which are considered the foundations for social and technological transformation" (Chan & Paine, 1992, p.74).

In response to this expanded and revised educational mission, teacher education stands at the crossroads of reform. As a result, the improvement of the nation's educational and teaching quality paid increasing attention to the development and transformation of its teacher education, to satisfy the needs of diverse student population, and improve the national educational outcomes (Wiseman & Huang, 2011).

2. The system of teaching: An overview of Teacher Education

Most teachers proceed through teacher training institutions at different levels in China. The institutions are: First, national teacher training institutions. For example, the two leading teacher education universities in China: Beijing Normal University and East-China Normal University, both are funded by the National Education Commission. In addition, more four-year universities in China establish College of Education, or Department of Education to offer educational courses and bachelor's degrees to their graduates. Second, there are one hundred and eight six teachers' universities and teachers' colleges, funded by municipal or provincial governments.

Third, there are teacher training schools, or secondary professional schools, which provide teachers for primary schools and kindergartens. These institutions are funded by governments at municipal, provincial or county levels. Moreover, there are education institutions like teacher training schools, funded by government at municipal, provincial, or county levels, which mainly concerned with in-service education and provide short-term refresher courses (Wu & Chang, 1990). Among teacher colleges (tertiary institutions), they are divided into two categories: Benke, or four-year system: graduates from these colleges obtain a bachelor's degree as well as a diploma of education, which demonstrates they are qualified to teach in both junior and senior secondary schools. Zhuanke, or two-or three-year system: graduates who successfully completed the two-or three-year courses will be awarded a diploma of education, which enables them to teach in junior secondary schools.

The tertiary teachers' universities or colleges are composed of departments of different disciplines to match the subjects taught in secondary schools, such as mathematics, history, Chinese, and English etc. Undergraduates major in one content subject which takes up more than 50 percent of their total coursework. A second compulsory area consists of pedagogy such as history, theories, and principles of education, psychology and methodology for about 10 percent of the total number of credits. In four-year universities and colleges, a "pre-practicum" is usually arranged in the second year, and a "practicum" in either the second semester of the third academic year, or the first semester of the fourth year (Wang & Chang, 1990). These vary in length from six to twelve weeks. The two-or three-year colleges have a similar curriculum except that the courses tend to be more practically focused than theoretically oriented.

2.1 Global impacts of reform in teacher education in China

As Paine and Fang (2006) indicated in their study, Chinese education has been undergoing reform in many sectors as wider economic and social transformations of the country have taken hold in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Since the 1980s there has emerged the ongoing development of policies related to teacher education and teacher development. An increased emphasis on in-service teacher education in many countries has occurred for upgrading unqualified teachers already in service as well as for introducing new subject matter (Foshay, 1992). The questions about teaching quality and teacher professionalism also proposed important questions for educators and policy makers: To what extent can teacher education programs promote professionalism and achieve educational excellence in the

teaching profession? What priorities should be established for promoting the different types of in-service teacher education programs and professional development resources?

During the last decade China has been confronted with the task of all-round social reform aimed at modernization and urbanization, consequently, education has been geared towards new objectives, where teachers are the key to educating people to meet the needs of the economic development of the country (Wu & Chang, 1990). Combined with influences of globalization, the mission and nature of Chinese teachers' work is changing, responding to curriculum reform and its embedded notions of the good student and good teacher (Paine & Fang, 2006). As Wiseman and Huang (2011) argued, while many of these reforms are particularly important and can benefit teachers, the top-down and radical nature of the change and the lack of ownership of reform by teachers pose persistent challenges when "teachers try to reconcile with their individual positions and collective professional identity" (p.7).

3. Teacher education reform with unique characteristics

3.1 Moving towards decentralization

Based on empirical research about China's educational reform, one of the most radical changes in the educational system because of educational policy reform and implementation of these reforms is through the decentralization of educational responsibility, decision-making, and resource allocation to local agencies within China (Mok, 2005, 2007; Wiseman & Huang, 2011). As Wiseman and Huang (2011) indicated in their research, this also signals a significant shift in the social ideology of the Chinese educational system as a whole and is particularly evident in the impact decentralization has had on social transformation and local implementation of education in China. The focus of decentralization has specifically been on basic education (Law & Pan, 2009; Ming, 1986; Wiseman & Huang, 2011), but the impact has spread beyond basic education to special needs, higher education, and all subsectors of the education system in China.

The wave of education reform in China does create an appearance that the role of the localities in Chinese education system is changed from passively carrying out the instruction formulated at the top to actively working with the central state in reforming Chinese education (Qi, 2011). However, Qi (2011) also pointed out that the core issue is to examine to what degree the central state is transferring its authority in the process of decentralization in education reform. Under the influence of the "open door" policy and with the growing number and impacts of intergovernmental organizations such as the UNESCO, OECD, and the World Bank constitute a participative force to spread the notion of decentralization in global education reform movement, the shift in the accelerated globalization led to a series of substantial adjustments in education in China (Qi, 2011). Gradually, a variety of local sectors are involved in supporting Chinese education financially.

3.2 Redefining goals and quality of teacher education

As far as teacher education is concerned, mentioned by Wu and Chang (1990), it's recognized that "the qualifications of teachers should be evaluated, and in-service education of various kinds be provided to ensure that the majority of primary and secondary school teachers are properly qualified for their work" (p.227). The traditional view of a good teacher in China involves "competence in subject matter, teaching ability and moral character" (Hayhoe, 1984, as cited in Wu & Chang, 1990, p.228).

While still adhering to ideologies and moral integrity, current reforms shift the emphasis to the development of teachers' professional competence, which illustrated by Wu and Chang as the ability to "apply pedagogical principles and appropriate methods to the teaching of relevant subject at school, and academic qualifications" (p.228). More efforts are now being made to ensure prospective teachers and teacher education students fulfill the qualification and requirements of graduating from teacher preparation programs and institutions. Reforms aim at improving the quality of education by emphasizing the need to meet the challenge of contemporary education and incorporate innovation and technology in teacher education. One of the common themes in educational reforms of teaching innovation is the emphasis on active learning (Chang & Paine, 1992). However, the demand for more teachers with professional training, establishing more teacher preparation programs in a wide range of new disciplines, and delivering pedagogical skills and theoretical knowledge for effective teaching in diverse ways also place challenges on teacher education programs and teachers themselves.

3.3 Re-examining structure of teacher education

As Chang and Paine (1992) argued, the problem of defining what good teaching is and consequently of stating teacher education's mission is both expressed in and highlighted by the structure that "house teacher education, their irrational overlap, and the content of their work" (p.78). According to their research, although the government has claimed the need for teacher education to be responsive to basic education, its reform and innovation, the structures and content of teacher education often reveal a mismatch with the needs of a refined and updated education requirement. Several issues were reported in their study. A clear division of labor exists among the various levels of teacher education programs: teacher training schools prepare elementary teachers; teacher training colleges prepare junior high school teachers; teacher training universities educate senior high school teachers; and education institutes such as traditional university-based teacher education programs or normal universities conduct in-service education. In practice, as Chang and Paine (1992) concluded, several factors in the organizational environment work against this rational allocation of tasks. Moreover, shortages of qualified teachers at each level, particularly in secondary schooling and rural areas, make the structure of teacher education has become a "supply-driven system contributing to the imbalances in the teaching force between urban cities and rural regions" (p.79).

3.4 Modifying the content of teacher education programs

The reform on the content of teacher education by broadening the definition of good teaching and learning, diversifying types of knowledge students and teachers need to be equipped, incorporating real-life elements and skill-develop factors into curriculum design, and addressing the importance of substantial learning demonstrates the trends of transformation in the education system in China. Educating students to meet specific personnel needs, to prepare prospective teachers to adapt to the learners' needs in the constantly changing society that affects their classrooms and differentiates teacher educators' roles that better suit for the ongoing development of their students start to receive more focus from teacher educators and policy makers. As reflected in Pain and Fang's (2006) research, two distinguished themes appear to summarize the general features of teacher education reform:

First, the professional knowledge base for teaching was changing: Information change, expanding technology, rapid developments in subject matters, and a growing body of knowledge concerning teaching demanded new content for and approaches to professional development. Second, there was a reform to shift from teaching to the test to a kind of teaching more responsive to the learners. There are "more expectations of teachers and schools to consider children as active learners rather than as passive receivers of knowledge" (Pain & Fang, 2006, p.283).

Although the reform on the content of teacher education programs seemed promising and achieved some progress, several issues remained open for discussion. One of the problems is the less addressed content of multicultural and migration issues in teacher education programs. Lu (2014) reported this issue in his study by identifying that current China's teacher education programs need to enhance teacher candidates' cultural awareness, renewing Han cultural capital and reduce cultural deficit teaching attitudes, embracing multicultural education courses, and offering effective field-working training for developing teachers' culturally responsive pedagogies. Moreover, the educational inequity related to the large number of migrant students without local household registration and the rural-urban educational gap still exists in the discussion of educational reform. Consequently, teachers in service and study in normal universities usually find less attraction to work in rural regions and explore pedagogical strategies to improve teaching effectiveness with those students in their classrooms (Cheng, 2000; Zhou & Reed, 2005).

3.5 Teacher collaboration and connection to local communities

Over the past few years, there has been coordinating the Teachers' Learning and Developing Community (LDC) project in Beijing and other areas in China as part of a three countries (China, Canada, and Australia) collaboration professional learning community project. The purpose of the LDC is to establish professional research and learning community to assist and support teachers as they attempt to modify their teaching and learning practices in line with the aims of China's national curriculum reform programs (Kang et al., 2011). This teacher collaboration project reveals the

importance of trans-and-cross-cultural learning and how it can facilitate teachers to improve students' learning and the professional development of teachers as well as the advancement of schools and school districts in China.

Leading by scholars, educational administrators, and school principals, the LDC project began at Beijing Zhongguancun NO.4 Primary School in the Haidian District, of Beijing, in which more than 60 higher education institutions and research institutions are located. The LCD project applied in this school encouraged teachers' collaborative work. As Kang (2011) indicated, it explored the most effective methods to encourage teachers to collaborate with each other by organizing teachers to find the same topic and carry out research jointly; engaging in "project-recruitment" based on one project, and allowing teachers to voluntarily make groups according to their own interests and expertise; introducing school to guests and university colleagues; and inviting the participation of local community and academic institution researchers.

The value of this teacher collaboration and creating teaching-learning community is that it makes every participator feel that they are not alone in the challenges that they face. The essence of enabling everybody to learn, to engage in self-reflection, and share others' experiences and excellence not only greatly contributed to teachers' professional development in that school but also was adapted into teacher education reform in various cities such as Shanghai. In Shanghai teachers participate in subject specific study and research groups, and cross-disciplinary study groups, as well as conduct peer observations in their own school and in other schools (Sato, 2014).

Improving teachers' collaboration across schools and cross-disciplinary contributions to the establishing of teaching community within the teacher education profession. Another effort has been made to expend the professional community by reaching out to local and rural communities, which is the program of Teach for China. TFC mainly places its graduates in rural areas in the southwest of China, in which are home to various Chinese ethnic minority groups through the full-time, two-year teaching commitments of young graduates at under-resourced schools. With good intentions of "one day, all Chinese children will have access to a quality education", TFC contributes to the education in those remote areas, but several issues also remain. First, here comes the issue of crossing multiple hurdles including cultural and ethnic diversity, and language barriers. Second, many TFC volunteers still lack systematic training in classroom management, instructional methods, multiple professional knowledge backgrounds, and assessment design. Last but not the least, the issue of sustainability. The socioeconomic disparity and rural-urban gap can become a great obstacle for the sustainability of TFC program, and yet the maintenance of this program and the development of rural teacher education still need financial investment and policy, resource support.

4. Conclusion

The educational context in China is experiencing an era of restoration, revival, and prosperity in terms of economic development, urbanization and industrialization, and active involvement in the process of globalization. Despite those vastly different contexts and conditions, teachers and teacher education programs often face similar challenges and can find shared ways to address these challenges. Although many reforms in educational system and teacher education programs have been completed and achieved some progress, further work of understanding of how educational reform can be sustained by collaborative work jointly by teachers, school leaders, and policy makers remain debatable and challenging. As Morgan and Wu (2011) proposed, these reforms and efforts across China are continuing to inform both the development of teacher education programs in universities and work on improving the professional supports for in-service teachers across China.

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