Curriculum reforms in China: history and the present day

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The basic education curriculum in China has experienced several waves of changes since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. These changes usually followed major political and social movements and involved the development and implementation of new curriculum guidelines in the form of teaching syllabi or curriculum standards for all school subjects (Ruan and Jin, 2012). Before the most recent wave, underway since 1999, there had been seven major waves in previous years. It is instructive to give a brief historical overview of these reforms (Tan, 2012). Ruan and Jin (2012) remarked that each reform has left its mark on history.

Seven waves of curriculum reforms in New China:
1949–1998

The first decade after the foundation of New China in 1949 witnessed the introduction of a national curriculum and teaching materials based on the Soviet model (first wave: 1949–1952; second wave: 1953–1957). With the weakening of the Soviet link in the early 1960s, there was a short “renaissance” in education (third wave: 1958–1962; fourth wave: 1963–1965) with many innovations and new thinking blossoming, including one major attempt to promote socialist and agrarian education (Tan, 2012). All these were swept aside when the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. The educational system was rebuilt after 1976 with the introduction of a national college entrance exam in 1977 (fifth wave: 1977–1980; sixth wave: 1981–1984). Many argued that modern education reforms began in 1985 (seventh wave: 1985–1998), with several milestones being decentralization in the administration and financing of basic education; implementation of nine years’ compulsory education; structural change in secondary education and the development of vocational education; reform in student admission and graduate placement in higher education; and a move to encourage local production of textbooks (Cheng, 2010; Li, 2012; Tsang, 1991; Zhong and Cui, 2003).
Yang (1991) classified the curriculum changes of the 1980s into two phases (restoration of the social order vs. structural adaption and reorientation) and pointed out the problems that remained after each phase. In particular, the restoration phase faced challenges related to an imbalanced curriculum in favor of intellectual elites, the devaluation of elective courses, curriculum segmentations, discouragement of creative arts and recreation, and overburdened teachers and students, whereas the reorientation phase had problems related to lack of financial support, an inflexible curriculum for diverse populations, an abstract and segmented curriculum, exclusion of electives and vocational training, lack of diverse instructional media, and no provision for independent learning.

**Education in Shanghai: 1949–late 1980s**

The founding of New China also opened a new era for educational development in Shanghai. The new government adopted the education policy that mass education is for the ordinary people, thus popularizing education for the working people. As a result, the enrollments of students in public schools in Shanghai have increased dramatically since the end of the 1970s. Furthermore, in compliance with the Law of Compulsory Education enacted in 1985, Shanghai was among the first cities in China to achieve universal primary and secondary education (Xu, 2012). The rapid social and economic changes in Shanghai urged the central government and Shanghai government to inaugurate a curriculum and textbook reform (Li, 2001).

**New curriculum reform in China: 1999–present (eighth wave)**

As Feng (2006) remarked, the recent curriculum reform of basic education launched during the period in which China’s economic and political systems were transforming is a significant and profound change. The issue of the Decision on the Deepening of Educational Reform and the Full Promotion of Quality-Oriented Education in 1999 symbolizes the start of the eighth wave of curriculum reform in China. Different from the previous seven waves, which were limited to the textbooks, the basic concept of the new wave is both for the revitalization of the Chinese people and for the development of each student. Essentially, it touches upon the entire education system including educational thought, aim, systems, content and method. The Basic Education Curriculum Reform Outline (trial) promulgated in 2001 specified six objectives as follows (Cui, 2001; Feng, 2006; Guo, 2012):

1. Change from a narrow perspective of knowledge transmission in classroom instruction to a perspective concerned with learning how to learn and developing positive attitudes;
2. Change from the subject-centered curriculum structure to a balanced, integrated, and selective curriculum structure to meet the diverse needs of schools and students;
3. Change from out-of-date and extremely abstruse curriculum content to essential knowledge and skills in relation to students’ lifelong learning;
4. Change from a passive-learning and rote-learning style to active and problem-solving learning styles to improve students’ overall abilities of information processing, knowledge acquisition, problem-solving, and cooperative learning;
5. Change the function of curriculum evaluation from exclusive identification and selection to the promotion of student growth, teacher development, and instructional improvement as additional functions;

6. Change from centralization in curriculum control to a joint effort between central government, local authorities, and schools to strengthen the relevance of the curriculum to local situations.

**Progress and impacts**

6 The new curriculum reform has been in place for nearly 14 years in China. It has achieved a series of conceptual innovations and gained a breakthrough in practice (Guan and Meng, 2007). Feng, (2006) summarized the progress in four points:

1. The administrative style of government has more or less changed from demand-style moving to a new style of servant administration. One typical example involves a website entitled “New Century Curriculum Network” (established by MOE’s Center of Curriculum for Basic Education), which collected related information about nationwide curriculum reform to pool quality human resources for consultation through official channels.

2. The ratios of local and school curricula have been increased from 7 percent up to 16 percent or more.

3. Innovative approaches in teacher development have been developed, such as the “Big Name Teacher Studio” program (hosted by local experienced and excellent teachers, who are selected and named by the district), in which the host-teacher shares his or her knowledge of the craft by mentoring a group of promising young teachers in the same subject from neighboring schools, and giving online presentations and online question-answer sessions for all teachers in the district.

4. A positive tendency has emerged from the learning and teaching process, including many teachers having learned to reflect upon their classroom behaviors after teaching, instructor-teacher relationships in the classroom becoming more harmonious, and an obvious decrease in the dropout rate.

**Problems and challenges**

7 It is believed that “anxiety, difficulties, and uncertainty are intrinsic to all successful change” (Hanson, 2003). A number of explicit and implicit problems gradually emerged with the new reform (Feng, 2006):

- The curriculum standards are not flexible enough. While many qualified and experienced teachers choose to move to schools in big cities, those in small towns and rural areas have more difficulties in successfully implementing the new curriculum due to their insufficient ability.

- Teacher workloads have increased, with the requirements and expectations of a teacher in the new curriculum now including the roles of educator, learner, innovator, facilitator, researcher, etc.

- Student interests and parents’ voices are still somewhat ignored, though the situation has improved.

- School leaders experience cultural dilemmas with the introduction of new leadership and managerial approaches based on Western culture (e.g. distributed leadership and total quality management).
It is not clear whether the curriculum reform should proceed rapidly or gradually, while the new reform is under pressure to provide visible and exciting results in limited time. As a matter of fact, most of the research projects on basic education funded by the MOE were slated to last only one to three years, which somehow mirrors the country’s impatience with educational reform.

Shanghai curriculum and textbook reform: 1988–present

The Shanghai curriculum reform is usually called the Shanghai Curriculum and Textbook Reform, which started in May 1988 when the Shanghai Education Committee set up a statutory organization known as the Shanghai Committee of Curriculum and Textbook Reform (Li, 2001). The reform consists of two waves, with its essence being to overcome examination-orientated school practices so as to build quality-oriented education (Ding, 2010). The first wave (1988–1998), centering on improving students’ overall quality by integrating societal needs, student development and a school’s disciplinary system, introduced a three-block curriculum: compulsory subjects, elective subjects, and extracurricular subjects. Accordingly, diversity of textbooks and teaching materials were implemented and phased in (Xu, 2012).

Since 1998, Shanghai has stepped into the second wave, aiming to transform students from passive receivers of knowledge to active learners with an emphasis on ethics, innovation, practical skills, information and technology skills, experiential learning, and the personal development of each student. The second wave proposes a revision of the difficult, obscure and less innovative traditional curriculum to offer a basic curriculum, enriched curriculum, and inquiry-based curriculum as three separate components of the new curriculum (Wen, 2007). While schools are encouraged to adapt the government’s curriculum framework to meet their students’ needs, teachers are encouraged to remember to “return class time to students” and that “to every question there should be more than a single answer”.

The reform has several significant impacts on school education in Shanghai (see Xu, 2012). Firstly, it strengthens the concept of focusing on students’ development. Secondly, classroom teaching activities become more varied with improved awareness and teaching capacity. Thirdly, students’ academic quality, innovative spirit and practical skills see overall improvement. Fourthly, a mechanism of sustainable development and protection of various types of expert teams has been formed. Fifthly, the guidance of the research team has been significantly enhanced.

While much progress has been made in Shanghai, problems exist and challenges remain that call for more attention and actions for solution. Li (2001) argued the major problem was that most reform measures were largely politically motivated. In particular, the Shanghai Education Commission and its delegation, Shanghai Committee of Curriculum and Textbook Reform, fully controlled the development of curriculum and textbook development for Shanghai schools. According to Li, the devolution of curriculum development from the central government to the local Shanghai authority formulated a new centralization at the city-level system by the Shanghai education authority. In this sense, the changes in student learning were brought about mainly by organized and structured top-down reform (implemented either through examinations or policy shifts).
In fact, students were not provided much autonomy in their learning (Cheng, 2010). Another great challenge faced by Shanghai is the large gaps between urban and suburban, native Shanghai and recent migrant students, as well as variances between schools caused by historical traditions and teachers’ professional quality (Xu, 2012).

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