

Overview of Basic Education in China

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Abstract. The first section presents the general structure of Chinese Educational system, particularly with the reference to the basic education. In the second section, the review and analysis of the developments and reforms of Chinese basic education will be presented, starting with a review of basic education before 1985. I will then attempt to indicate the major forces for reforms in education from the mid-1980s, emphasizing the Specific nature of internal change as well as external pressures, such as economic reforms, globalization and economic knowledge. Lastly, attention is focused on investigation of the improvements and achievements as well as the issues of Chinese basic education in terms of quality.

Structure of Chinese Educational System

China has a land mass of 3,705,393 square miles and a population of nearly 1.3 billion people. As such, China is the most populous country in the world and ranking third in land mass, behind Russia and Canada. It is necessary to understand the structure of Chinese educational system before conducting an investigation into its basic education sector.

General Structure of Education System in China

In China, the educational system is divide into four categories higher and adult education.

Primary Education

Primary education includes pre-school education and elementary education. Pre-School, or Kindergarten usually begins at three, ending at six years then children enter elementary school. Elementary school lasts up to five or six years, depending on the system.

Secondary education

Secondary education is divided into regular secondary, vocational and technical secondary education. Regular secondary education consists of junior middle school and senior middle school Junior middle school involves either three or four years of schooling, depending on the system (6-3 versus 5-4), and senior middle school is a three years of schooling ,resulting in a 5-4-3 or a 6-3-3 system of elementary school-junior middle school-senior middle school Students can enter a vocational or technical school after completing junior middle school. Vocational schools generally offer Programs and train medium-level ranging from two to four years, skilled workers, farmers, s well as managerial and technical personnel, Technical schools typically offer four-year programs to train intermediate technical personnel

Higher Education

Higher education includes junior colleges (zhuanke daxue), four-year or five-year colleges and universities (Benke daxue) with a bachelor degree. Many colleges and universities also offer graduate programmes, leading to two or three -year Master's or a three-year Ph.D. degree.

Adult Education

This category overlaps all of the above three categories. There is adult primary education, adult secondary education, adult medium-level vocational and technical education, adult higher education as well as other programmes oriented to adult groups

Basic Education

Basic education, in a broad way, encompasses pre-school, elementary and secondary education and basic non-formal/informal learning programs which focus on functional literacy, livelihood-oriented training, and citizenship/values inculcation for adults and out-of-school youths (SOMIS: Social Development Management Information System)[1].

According to EDUfi (2002)[2], basic education' means general education provided for the children of age group six to sixteen in its entirety. It is intended for children from six to sixteen years of age, and its Completion in comprehensive school takes nine years After completing comprehensive school, children have finished their compulsory education (EDUfi.2002) [2].

In China, basic education includes pre-school (three years), primary (five or six years) and junior (three or four years) and regular senior (three years) schools. Compulsory education ails for each child to have nine years of formal education, including primary and junior middle schooling.

In the context of this study, the compulsory sector of the basic education is taken into consideration. However, the definition of basic education must be not only in terms of a period of compulsory school education, but also in terms of levels attained, knowledge and skills acquired (UNESCO, February 2000)[3].

Developments and Reforms in China's Basic Educational Sector

Basic education is a foundational component of China's educational system. This section will discuss main issues in the historical development in basic education in the course of its current reforms as well as its achievements.

The development of basic education in China can be divided into distinct phases, coinciding directly with political and social changes that have shaped the country over the past fifty-five years after the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949: over-all construction, severe damage, recovery and adjustment as well as current reforms and stable development.

The Historical Development in China's Basic Education

Over-all Construction (From 1949 to 1965)

During the first two decades after 1949, the Chinese government made great efforts to widen access to basic education, including school-age children and youth, which marked the first step towards the implementation of compulsory schooling in China. Achievements were impressive. Throughout that period, the number of primary schools increased significantly, as well as total enrolment, in particular the proportion of female and minority students enrolled in primary and secondary schools. According to the statistics, in the years 1949-1965 primary school enrolments rose from 24.3 million to 116.2 million, which accounted for about 84.7 percent of school-aged children. Secondary school enrolments, including technical, rose from 1.2 million to 14.3 million (China General Information)[4]. In addition, the Government also placed great emphasis on basic education for adults, especially the eradication of illiteracy, which is regarded as an integral part of an effort to upgrade the quality of the whole nation. During the 17-year period, 102.72 million illiterates became literate, adult illiteracy rate reduced from 80 percent to less than 50 percent (Zhang Zhaowen, 1997)[5].

Severe Damage (From 1966 to 1976)

During 1966-1976, the Cultural Revolution in China was in turmoil. In this period, China had devalued the role of intellectuals to the 'stinking ninth category' and had largely rejected mental achievement in favour of political loyalty (Cleverley, J. 1985)[6]. The education sector was in a state of complete confusion. The entire educational system catastrophically collapsed and educational standards seriously declined. Schools were in a state of uncertainty and instability. Most young people, teachers and students joined the recognized youth movement. Many teachers were forced to leave their jobs and labour in the countryside. A teacher who tried to continue teaching was to be branded revisionist and classroom teaching concentrated on the study of

Chairman Mao's quotations. Thus, in 1968, the number of students enrolled in primary schools dramatically declined to less than 90 million, along with enrollments in secondary schools (China General Information)[4]. There was also a chaotic administration. The training of the teachers had completely stopped. Associations of teachers, trade unions and professional groups were dissolved.

Recovery and Adjustment (From 1977 to 1984)

With the end of the Cultural Revolution in October 1976, China began to have its new era. The new government started to correct the wrongdoings, which happened during that period, and started to develop professional teaching, by revising rules and regulations in the education sector. Through an overall re-organization and re-formulation of rules and regulations, the schools had gradually gone back to their normal schooling. Simultaneously, because a formal structure was at the basis of the education system, the popularity of basic education again had become central to social strategies for the promotion of the four modernizations, i.e. industry, agriculture, national defence, science and technology. In 1983 the target to achieve universalisation in primary education had been set. According to the statistics, the enrollment in primary schools in 1978 was 146.2 million and 135.7 million in 1984 respectively and 94 percent of China's children attended primary school (45 percent of them were girls) (Lofstedt. 1990 cited in Lewin, K. et al 1994:36). Although the number of students enrolled in primary school declined steadily due to the 'one-child' policy, the net participation rate increased from 93 percent to 97 percent in this period (ibid).

Current Reform of China's Basic Education (From 1985 to Now)

Background of Educational Reform

Chinese Economic Reforms

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. In order to realize the four modernizations i.e. agriculture, industry, national defence, science and technology, China began its economic reforms in 1978. From then on, the planned economic system has moved gradually towards the market-orientated system with socialist characteristics. According to the statistics, between 1978 and 1985 overall social output, national income and the average income of inhabitants in urban and rural areas have doubled (Lewin, et al 1994:13) [7]. This significant transformation of the economic system and its impressive achievements led to reforms in many different in many sectors of society. Basic education was no exception.

The impact of economic reforms on basic education is multi-dimensional. The rapid development of economy brought by investment in material resources for education, that is providing the necessary resources which education restructuring needed. However, simultaneously, it also brought about the reforms in education in order to meet the demands of economical development in the quantity and quality of labour and intellectuals because the educational system was completely inadequate for the new economic situations.

By the early 1980s, the following aspects of education were regarded as problematic by the CPC (CPC Central Committee, 1985; Wan Li, 1985 cited in Lewin, al et 1994:19):

---Elementary education was perceived to be of low quality and to have a negative impact on the quality of schooling at all subsequent levels.

---All levels and kinds of Schooling were thought to have failed in varying degrees trying to keep pace with the rate of economic, social, cultural and scientific and technological change.

Thus, with the aim of promoting economic development and increasing qualified people, the educational reforms began in 1985 to solve the problems.

Globalization and Knowledge Economy

As happened internationally, the knowledge economy and globalization are two of the most frequently discussed concepts in the public media and at national conferences. They pose new competitive challenges for nations' economic development.

Knowledge is the fuel for economic growth. China is approaching the Four Modernizations in order to intensify global competition before the advent of the knowledge economy and globalization.

China has a large population of approximately 1.3 billion, with a low level of cultural and technological development. If China wants to realize the economic target, which in economic terms is equal to that of the middle-income developed countries by 2015, building a sound basic education system is the top priority. It can provide 'effective ways to turn our citizens into people of character, and to convert the vast Chinese population from a cumbersome burden to a pool of highly productive human resources' (Lanqing Li 2004:238) [8]. The education which basic sector provides will definitely affect the development of the economy and the development of the nation as a whole. When knowledge and economy are so closely connected, the quality of basic education faces a crucial turning point. It is not only expected to provide a highly productive labour force, it is also expected to have a positive 'impact on the quality of schooling at all subsequent levels' (Lewin, al et 1994:19)[7]. Thus, in order to emphasize the importance of basic education and knowledge for the development of the economy, essential educational reforms have become more and more urgent.

Reforming Policies in Basic Education

China's reform and opening up since 1978 has brought the basic education into a new period of development. On National Day in 1983, it was stated "Education should serve the modernization drive while gearing to the world and future" provided a guiding principle for the future strategy of educational development.

In order to accelerate the development of China's education system as well as to meet the demands of economical development on education, 'Draft Decision on Reforming the Education System' was issued in May 1985, National Conference on Education, laying down the principle that local governments should be responsible for basic education. The new policy was an incentive for local governments, especially those of the counties and townships. Consequently, a series of educational reforms planned and carried out by the government has emerged.

On April 12, 1986, the Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education was adopted at the Fourth Session of the Sixth National People's Congress. The NYCE law, which took effect on July 1, 1986, placed basic education in the country on a firm legal basis.

In February 1993 the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued the "Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China", clarifying the directions and policies for the development of basic education until the early years of the 21st century.

In December 1998, the State Council ratified the "Action Plan for Educational Vitalization Facing the 21st Century" formulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE), laying down the implementation of the strategy of "Invigorate China through Science, Technology and Education" and drawing the blueprint of reform and development for the cross century education based on the "Education Law of the People's Republic of China" and the "Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China".

In June 1999, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly approved 'Action Plan for Invigorating Education in the 21st Century' and passed the decisions on bringing educational reform in depth, with the aim of improving the educational quality. (China Education and Research, 2004)[9].

The implementation of all these programmes played a vital role in improving the overall nation's quality and pursuing the development of the economy and society (MOE, P.R.C. 2003)[10].

Achievements in Chinese Basic Education

"Chinese education system is better than it has ever been since the reforms and opening-up in 1978, with outstanding achievements of spreading compulsory education" Education Minister Zhou Ji (People's Daily 2004)[11]. According to a survey from MOE of China in 2003, considerable success in terms of basic education has been achieved.

The historic breakthrough has been witnessed in the development of the scale of compulsory education. By the end of 2003, there were 116,400 kindergartens with an enrollment of 24,000,000 young children, 425,800 primary schools with 116,897,400 students, and 67,400 junior secondary schools with 66,908,300 students altogether (MOE P.R.C 2003) [10].

In addition, by 2002, the net enrollment rate of primary schools had reached 98.65%. 97.9% of the graduates had access to junior secondary schools and the full-time teachers in primary schools had reached 5,702,800. The net enrollment rate of junior secondary schools had been raised to 92.7%. 59.6% of the junior secondary school graduates attained the chance to attend senior secondary schools and full-time teachers reached 3,497,500 (MOE, P.R.C. 2003) [10].

Furthermore, by the end of 2003, the Nine-Year Compulsory Education (NYCE) had been universalized in the area where 91.8% of the population inhabits, the highest rate among the E-9 countries. In the urban areas of large cities and economically developed coastal areas, the universalization of senior secondary education has been launched (MOE, P.R.C 2003) [10].

Issues of China's Basic Education

China has the largest primary and junior secondary education system in the world. The figures in the survey made by the MOE of P.R.C. (2003) [10] provide a complete and general view of current basic educational development in China. It has made remarkable progress in achieving compulsory education.

However, there are still many drawbacks emerging from the big population, economic imbalance, poverty and also the centralized system.

Firstly, gaps are continuing or widening between eastern and western regions, urban and rural areas, and between schools in the same region. Economic disparity contributed most to the imbalance of educational development (Li, 2004:244)[8]. Though the goal of nine-compulsory education and senior secondary education has already been achieved in most large cities and coastal areas, many poor and remote areas still lack primary education. In addition, in urban areas, there are some well-established primary and secondary schools but a large number of schools lack adequate resources. While the standards of well-established schools are very high in teaching quality and school administration with quality resources, many weaker schools are short of quality resources and educational quality is substandard.

Secondly, education has been decentralized and local administrations are now generating their own resources for educational development and it is no longer centrally managed. The decentralization policy has motivated the local authorities in better-off areas to raise funds in multiple ways, but it exerts enormous pressure on the poor regions where local resources are limited. The schools in these regions suffer from insufficient classrooms, inadequately trained teachers and teaching materials. They have above average dropout and repetition rates along with unsatisfactory management. On the contrary in better-off areas, the big problem is that the high school selection fees have become a main channel to raise funds, which has led to a glaring difference between schools in the same regions.

Thirdly, a shortage of quality teachers and low quality teaching still persists, preventing the development of quality compulsory education as well as that of character which leads to all-round student development stressing the cultivation of a creative spirit and practical skills. The teaching quality and skills, remain at intellectual levels, resulting in cramming of knowledge, which is not suited to the requirements of character education. Subsequently, student learning is also focused on the passive memorisation of textbooks, driven by poor teaching style. In addition, the curriculum and textbooks are usually irrelevant and useless to students' individual development as well as to the development of society.

Above all, improving the quality of education still remains a challenge. Among the other factors affecting the quality of education are insufficient budgetary allocations and administration, which are the most common cause for low quality in basic education in different areas as well as in the same area.

Conclusion

This paper briefly outlines the educational structure in China, the development and improvement of basic education, context of current educational reforms and issues from the reforms.

Before the reforms the development of basic education was uneven, especially during the period of the damage of the Cultural Revolution. After the Cultural Revolution, as the open-door policy and economic reforms proceeded, the standard of basic education has improved but it required further Improvement in order to cope up with the boosting economy. Thus the pace of development of basic education had to be increased, to adjust to changes in the fast moving economy. The reforms in basic education of China were driven by both internal and external forces. The important factor was the initial open door policy and the economic reforms. However, the importance of external factors, such as Knowledge economy and globalization, should not be underestimated since China is more and more involved in the international organizations and is becoming an important part of the global community.

Affected by these internal and external pressures, basic education had to develop to adapt to the situation, to serve the nation's socio-economic development. As a result, new policies in the basic education sector emerged in order to better serve economic development. Although there have been considerable achievements, there are still some serious problems in basic education, imbalance of development between the regions, the administrative system and the investment mechanism, a shortage of quality resources including quality teachers and teaching skills etc. An imbalance between economical development and inadequate investment of funds in basic education is the main cause.

While consolidating the tremendous achievements in quantity and speed of basic education, it is imperative to priorities the issue of improving quality and efficiency in making educational planning so that the developmental trend of education should be focused on improving the quality and efficiency of teaching.

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