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The Impact of Curriculum Reform in China

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Introduction

Education has always been highly valued in China since ancient times. Guided by traditional Chinese philosophy which stresses the need for education above other values, all Chinese families believe education is important in the life long development of a child. Education is not only key to the development and future of an individual but also of the family and the nation as a whole. As the Chinese saying goes, a nation's treasure is in its scholars. It is without doubt that an emphasis on learning continues to guide Chinese society today especially when education remains as an avenue for social mobility since high educational achievement is often associated with high social status.

Chinese society puts a high premium on education. As such, developing the education system has always been a top priority of the government in China. There have been constant efforts by the government to reform the education system as seen in the passing of a nine-year compulsory education policy and the strategy of developing the country through science and education (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). The Chinese education system is commonly characterised by rote learning, with a focus on math and science, as well as high-stakes exam taking. The Chinese government recognises that such an emphasis on rote memorization and examinations may not equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the 21st century economy. Thus, the government is working towards reforming the education system so as to prepare future generations of workers with the skills that will help China progress in the 21st century.

Curriculum reform has particularly brought about significant educational changes in China. Shifting away from examination-oriented education, the Chinese government is currently taking
on a holistic approach through a revised curriculum centering on the idea of *suzhi jiaoyu* or quality education to develop all-rounded students (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Extensive literature has been developed on the impact of curriculum reform in China. Many research studies focus on the implementation of specific reforms in schools under this new curriculum and the level of receptiveness of these reforms. Additionally, there is a trend of studying the impact of such reforms on teachers specifically in relation to their teaching styles and classroom activities. Questions have been raised on the effectiveness of these reforms in truly cultivating a quality education in China especially since the examination culture still persists.

This literature review will examine existing literature including book chapters, journal articles and published reports of previous research studies conducted on the impact of curriculum reform under a quality-oriented education system in China. More specifically, this review will explore how social institutions namely the school in terms of the teaching methods and pedagogies as well as the family in terms of parenting styles and childrearing values have been affected by the curriculum reforms. In addition, the effectiveness of the curriculum reforms as implemented in schools will be assessed.

**Literature Review**

According to Lin (2010), the government in China introduced *suzhi jiaoyu*, or ‘education for quality’ in 1999 to nurture creativity and practical skills necessary for the rising knowledge economy. She noted that the policy is well received by educators as it has brought about creative and progressive reforms in schools, allowing a shift from examination-oriented, teacher-centered and monotonous teaching style to more student-centered and active pedagogies (Lin, 2010). However, Lin (2010) observed that the curriculum reform actually increases the academic burden on students as they study additional subjects like morality and aesthetics to develop *suzhi*
and participate in extracurricular activities as well. Moreover, the competitive examination system still remains and results are used to assess both performance of students and teachers. Ultimately, Lin highlighted that the implementation of *suzhi jiaoyu* has been hindered by poor management in local governance, society’s misconceptions about a person with *suzhi* as well as shortages of funds in public education.

Owing to the growing concern of teachers and parents on students’ academic burden, Dello-Iacovo (2009) agreed that the education policy has garnered much approval as innovative reforms that facilitate the healthy development of children can now take place in schools. However, she also acknowledged that the objectives of the revised curriculum are essentially in conflict with prevailing results-oriented goals of teachers, students and parents. Most parents do not practice what they preach as they do not support efforts to reduce their children’s workloads or expand the curriculum, afraid that these reforms will affect examination results (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Similar to Lin, Dello-Iacovo (2009) observed that implementation of the new policy is impeded by inadequate resources, ambiguity of *suzhi jiaoyu* and conservative resistance.

Studying how the curriculum reform affects teachers in urban China, Guo (2012) observed a great impact on the teaching profession in Beijing. Although a student-centered pedagogy leads to a better learning experience for students, teachers are found to face more pressure, dilemmas and struggles since more is demanded of their profession. They now need to translate the revised curriculum into new pedagogies, reconceptualize the goals of education, form new teaching identity and update disciplinary knowledge and skills (Guo, 2012). Apart from their increased job responsibilities, teachers also face the lack of support from parents who are only concerned with exam results. Similar to the comments made by Lin and Dello-Iacovo, the unchanged examination-based evaluation system hindered teachers’ approach to student-centered learning.
Studying trends in student perceptions of classroom practice and engagement under the revised curriculum, Adams & Sargent (2012) found that teaching practices have been changing in primary schools in China due to the curriculum reform. They also observed student-centered learning in classrooms where there is a more relaxed environment that facilitates active, engaging discussion and less teacher lecturing. Unlike Lin who saw an increase in students’ academic burden, it was found that student levels of stress were significantly lower as students in this study reported considerably higher levels of happiness at school (Adams & Sargent, 2012). However, it is recognised that current research has not empirically linked these findings with the change in classroom practices due to the reform.

In a research project investigating classroom practice and student learning under the recent mathematics curriculum reform in China, Ni, Li, Li, & Zou (2011) observed that the curriculum reform led to some expected changes. It is proven that teachers affected by the reform were more likely to embrace a dynamic view of mathematics and acknowledge the importance in providing students with the opportunity to theorize, proof, and communicate in the learning of mathematics (Ni, Li, Li, & Zou, 2011). There was higher cognitive demands seen in reform classrooms because of student-centered tasks. The teachers also raised more questions that encouraged increased student participation in problem solving. The findings also showed that students under curriculum reform achieved a comparatively more balanced development in various cognitive areas of mathematics achievement (Ni, Li, Li, & Zou, 2011).

Similar observations for the impact on teachers were recorded by Joong, Xiong, Li, & Pan (2009) in their study of perceptions of Grades 7 and 8 students, parents, and teachers on the curriculum reform. However, the opinions of parents differed from the aforementioned studies. This investigation found that parents were generally supportive and satisfied with the reforms. They
even wanted to see improvements in the development of creativity, interest and potential of their children, more variety of practical, relevant and optional courses as well as a reduction of workload. In fact, majority of the parents felt that they shared a common understanding with the teachers and school officials where both sides supported and encouraged each other. Although these parents still acknowledge the examination system, it seems like they are placing increasingly less emphasis on examination results.

This concurs with Wu’s observation where the concept of *suzhi* has affected childrearing practice of affluent urban parents in particular. In accordance with *suzhi jiaoyu* which seeks to develop a diversity of skills and encourage critical thinking of a child, these parents compete to enrol their children in extracurricular activities which cultivate *suzhi* tastes and dispositions (Wu, 2012). Under the system of *suzhi jiaoyu*, Wu (2012) argues that the body becomes a site for social and familial intervention. Consequently, there is a growing trend of parents investing heavily in child nurture focused on an all-round development to ensure the child’s educational competitiveness in receiving the best possible education.

Crabb (2010) also pointed out that discourses of quality education and what defines a quality individual is associated to the issue of competitiveness by the nation, schools, families and individuals. She argued that there is a strong correlation between educational reform and the way the growing middle class governs through the family in urban China. Currently, parents shoulder the responsibility and have become increasingly concerned for nurturing the quality of their children to ensure a successful future (Crabb, 2010). Quality education, which can be achieved through attending schools that provide top education and participating in extracurricular activities, is no longer a choice but the norm of what ‘good parents’ ought to provide for their child in China today.
Conclusion

In the era of curriculum reforms under a shift towards *suzhi jiaoyu*, or a quality education, a review of existing literature proves that the revised curriculum has influenced teacher development, classroom practices and parents’ involvement in their child’s education. The education system in China is indeed changing to focus more on an all-round development of students. Current research studies observed similar trends in the impact of the curriculum reform on teachers where the profession now demands more job duties and responsibilities which results in a change in teaching pedagogies. However, studies varied when observing the impact on students and parents. Some research showed that students were better off with the introduction of curriculum reform as they had more autonomy in the classroom and were faced with less academic pressures while other studies observed that students had an increased academic burden owing to the need to pursue more extracurricular lessons and activities.

Although the current literature describes that the implementation of curriculum reform has influenced how social institutions like the school and family function, research studies agree that a quality education cannot be fully achieved as examinations are still a powerful force in the education system in China. Ultimately, students still have to compete in school and national exams and such an exam culture with an emphasis on test scores has hindered the objectives of the current education policies. Examination results have been so deeply rooted as the mark of educational achievement that it is highly unlikely for educators, parents and the wider society to accept other measures to determine the success of students. As such, it is crucial for teachers, parents and society at large to change their mind-sets of valuing examination achievements.
This literature review has examined the effectiveness of current education reforms through exploring how the school and family have been affected by the curriculum reform. It is observed that research has generally been dedicated to the impact on educational institutes and teachers but less on the impact on the family as well as the students themselves. Future research can thus explore the effects of the curriculum reform on students as well as the family in order to assess the success of the education policies in China. More specifically, studies can be conducted to explore if the changes in education systems have influenced the parenting styles as well as childrearing values in China. Perhaps, in the same way the curriculum reform has affected teaching pedagogies, it may also change parenting styles and influence the situation at home.
Bibliography


