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**CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN CHINA**

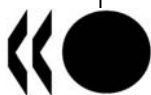
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# Curriculum Implementation Challenges and Strategies in China

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## **Abstract**

**This paper reviews the development and reform of early childhood curriculum in China in the past 30 years and proposes that curriculum is strongly influenced by socio-cultural changes and reflects the hybrid of traditional, communist and western cultures. The paper examines challenges in curriculum implementation, and national action plan for the implementation. Teacher's training and support aligned with the curriculum implementation is also highlighted. Curriculum evaluation is mentioned even though there was no evidence to say whether the current curriculum implementation is successful or not.**

**key words:** curriculum implementation, challenges, action plan, teacher's training, curriculum evaluation

## *Brief introduction about the current curriculum in China*

**In China, education and care for children between the ages of 3 and 6 are primarily provided in kindergartens which usually provide full-day programs, although in rural areas there are some one-year pre-primary classrooms in elementary schools serving children in the year prior to first grade. Informal early childhood programs such as family childcare and mobile schools are also available in some areas of the country. Nurseries, on the other hand, serve children younger than 3 and are not considered educational institutions under the supervision of educational authorities.**

**From the 1980s, China started to carry out the Reform and Open-up Policy, which greatly modified traditional education concepts. Foreign theories, such as those of Dewey, Montessori, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner and especially Piaget and Vygotsky, began to spread widely in China, and the thoughts of recent modern Chinese educationists such as Xingzhi Tao and Heqin Chen, were brought to the fore again. These ideas challenged the early childhood education system that had existed for more than 30 years. The early childhood curriculum reform began with spontaneous experiments in different parts of the country, gradually expanding from a single subject to the whole curriculum, progressing from city to village, and actively propelling the early childhood curriculum reform on a large scale (Zhu, 2002a).**

**The most influential measure of this reform is the “*Kindergarten Work Regulations and Procedures*”, issued by the National Education Committee (the former Ministry of Education) in 1989. The regulations reflect the original aim of the reform; that is, that early childhood education should face the world, face the future and face modernization. This document was immediately and widely disseminated throughout the country, and reform was implemented at all levels of administration and in all kindergartens. According to this document, early childhood curriculum should shift from an emphasis on teaching knowledge and skills to an emphasis on the development of children and the acquisition of abilities, from an emphasis on the result of educational activity to an emphasis on the process of activity, from an emphasis on the uniform curriculum standards to an emphasis on diversified and autonomous curriculum development and implementation. Through**

administrative policies, the reform content was implemented to each level of administrative organizations and each kindergarten.

The Regulations adopted theories and practices from different cultures and presented progressive ideas and practices to early childhood educators in China. However, it has been difficult for practitioners to fully embrace this progressive ideology so long as powerful and deep-rooted cultural traditions run counter to modern scientific and democratic ideas (Wang & Mao, 1996). For example, the traditional values of obeying authorities and upholding unity are contrary to the goal of establishing a unique and democratic relationship between a teacher and each individual child. In addition, the lack of practical guidelines left many teachers not knowing how to implement the regulations.

To solve these issues, the Ministry of Education issued the “*Guidance for Kindergarten Education*” (trial version) in 2001. The *Guidance* takes into consideration the gap between progressive ideas and reality and offers compromise solutions by stating specific requirements and content in different domains. For example, the *Guidance* suggested the curriculum content could be divided into five learning domains (social, health, language, science and art) and content integration was advocated.

The reform movement is ongoing. Curriculum approaches are becoming more diverse and aligned with the increasingly open and diversified society. Different curricula such as the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia and Montessori have been widely adopted and localized (Li & Li, 2003). As a result, many new curriculum have been developed at the province, city, town or preschool level. For example, the Integrated Theme-based Curriculum in Shanghai represents a localized progressive early childhood education approach (Zhu, 2002b). Many kindergartens were required to develop their own school based curricula by the local administration department no matter they could do it or not.

### *Challenges we are facing in implementing current curriculum*

Li (2002) pointed out six factors that limit the success of implementing the current curriculum: the teacher-child ratio, the quality of the teacher, resources, parents’ expectations, the educational system, and the socio-cultural environment. We summarized those factors which challenge the multi-level governance and decentralization of curriculum implementing as following:

I Conflicts between borrowing western educational ideas and Chinese traditional culture and political system

There are three distinct cultural threads -- traditional culture, communist culture, and Western culture -- have mixed to profoundly shape Chinese people’s lives as well as different aspects of Chinese early childhood education (Wang & Spodek, 2000). Thus, the contemporary early childhood curriculum in China can be seen as reflecting a hybrid of these three cultural threads. (Zhu & Wang, 2005)

Traditional Chinese culture has influenced Asian countries a lot from ancient times. Chinese people are more group-oriented, or social unit-oriented as opposed to individual-oriented, and more extrinsically motivated as opposed to intrinsically motivated. Chinese people also tend to value drilling, memorizing and discipline rather than creativity, understanding and freedom. Confucianism has greatly influenced Chinese educational ideas. In the context of globalization, it may be good for Chinese people to modify their traditional culture, but not to change their own culture totally.

For example, in China, the emphasis, traditionally, in language development has been on enunciation, diction, memorization, and self-confidence in speaking and performing. Chinese children learn in preschools how to deliver long, rehearsed speeches flawlessly and belt out songs with many verses (Tobin, 1989). Americans, in contrast, tend to view words as the key to promoting individuality, autonomy, problem solving, friendship, and cognitive development in children. In American preschools children are taught the rules and conventions of self-expression and free speech (Cazden, 1988). In the process of ECE curriculum reform, many Chinese kindergarten teachers tried to change their language-teaching program from emphasizing enunciation and memorization to self-expression and free speech, but they were used to using old strategies and methods based on their own culture.

Actually, the influence of this hybrid on early childhood education has been selective, dynamic, and changing. First, each of the three cultural threads has shaped different aspects of early childhood education. While the influence of the communist culture is evident in practical aspects of kindergarten education, such as organization, administration, and curricular goals and content, traditional culture has had a profound influence on the ideological and philosophical bases of kindergarten, including views of the young child, views of learning and development, and views of appropriate teacher-child relationships.

Sometimes one cultural thread counteracted another. For example, the individualistic ego structure is one of the main goals of the new ECE curriculum, but administrators feared that this might pose a threat to the communist social order. McClelland (McClelland, 1961) points out that the achievement-oriented ego style that is a prerequisite of economic development tends to encourage selfishness and thus to pose a threat to social cohesion if it is not corrected by an emphasis on “other directedness” and “collectivity” in the education system.

The pattern of influence has changed over time. In the post-Mao era, European-American culture has emerged as an important cultural source and has exerted an increasingly powerful influence. The progressive ideology toward children, educational values, and the curriculum has been a strong force in early childhood education reform in recent years. Meanwhile, the communist culture’s control and the influence of traditional culture on early childhood education have been waning ideologically and philosophically. But there have been no major practical changes, especially in most developing areas.

## **II Contradiction between curriculum implementation and great ECE resource disparities caused by regional and economic differences**

Preschool education is not compulsory in China. Only 1.3 percentage of the total national expenditure on education is used for ECE, and most of them are contributed to the high-developed regions. In China, about 25% of young children have no access to one-year preschool, and about 50% have not attended three-year ECE programs. Those children are mainly in rural areas, especially in the western remote areas.

Due to the huge regional and economic differences, there are great ECE resource disparities between China's coastal and inland areas, well-developed and developing regions, urban cities and rural villages. The successful implementation of current curriculum ideas needs a ton of supportive educational resources, but rural and remote areas have lagged behind in their available resources for early childhood education. They lack financial resources because of the poverty and uneven distribution of the limited educational fees. They have a shortage of qualified teachers due to scarce resources for local preschool teacher education and training, low pay and a harsh environment. In those areas, most kindergarten teachers have only high school diplomas at best, and hardly have a

chance to obtain specialized professional training. They also have a lack of parent support because many rural parents work in big cities as migrant workers, leaving their children in the countryside. Usually the child - teacher ratio is 12-20 in well-developed regions and about 25-40 in developing regions. As a result, the curriculum may can be well implemented in some high-quality kindergartens of well-developed coastal cities, but rarely can be used in rural kindergartens located in the interior developing areas.

### III. Inconsistency between curriculum philosophy and the school examination system

In China, school education is closely linked with the examination system. Students' performance at the college entrance exam determines their future fate to a certain degree. Many parents associate their children's examination success with early childhood education, which is caused by Chinese culture as well as China's current social status (such as huge population VS. limited employment opportunities, etc.).

The current curriculum emphasizes much on meeting children's interests and needs, and also the process of education rather than the result. Therefore, the ideas and practice of the current curriculum can not easily gain acceptance from parents and the society, especially from the low socio-economic families who are eager to change their current status. Obviously, this situation will affect the whole course of the curriculum implementation.

### IV Contradictions between high requirements of the curriculum reform and teachers' low professional level

Generally speaking, the professional level of preschool teachers in China is not high enough to meet the requirements of the current curriculum. In addition, the *Guideline* is relatively generalized, which doesn't give clear and concrete statements on how to do in practice. Therefore, even in the well-developed areas with high-level preschool faculty( such as Beijing and Shanghai) , there are also much misunderstanding about the reform ideas among teachers. This situation brought many difficulties during the process of the curriculum implementation. At the same time, the professional level and training methods of the teacher training institutions have many problems as well.

At present, China has undergone the massive urbanization process. A large number of farmers and their children have moved into cities from rural areas. That brings huge pressure to preschool education, especially in the terms of cultivating enough qualified teachers. One solution is to train persons without ECE professional background to be ones who can implement the current curriculum in a short time, but obviously it will be a great challenge.

#### *The National action plan for the implementation*

On the national level, there is only a generalized document for curriculum titled with "*Guidelines for Kindergarten Education*". The "*National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*", and five policies and measures issued by the State Council recently are still very synoptic.

This year the Chinese government has issued the "*National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*", which will briefly lay out the direction of Chinese education for the next ten years. This outline has been more than a year in the making, with a large amount of public consultations, online consultations, and a series of expert roundtables, where both the Minister of Education and the Prime Minister of China have participated.

The *National Outline* put forward the objective of popularizing preschool education by the end of 2020 in China. It proposed that China should strengthen the government's responsibilities on preschool

education development (including planning, investment and supervision), set up a universal, flexible and public ECE service system, help rural, poor and remote areas to develop their preschool education, and ensure the education rights of disadvantaged children.

According to the idea of this outline, I believe that the implementation strategies of current curriculum should be adjusted. That is to say, apart from further promoting the current curriculum implementation, the government should develop comparatively high-structured curricula for rural and remote areas, which will be easily understood and operated by teachers, even those without long-time professional training.

Now the Ministry of Education of China and UNICEF are developing "*Guideline for Learning and Development of 3-6 Aged Children*". Based on the philosophy of protecting children's rights and through developing the standards of children's learning and development, this global project aims to reach consensus on expectations about preschool children's learning, help teachers and parents to educate more purposefully, improve children's learning, get all children ready for entering elementary school, promote pre-school education fairness, and to develop appropriate evaluation tools.

### ***Teacher training and supporting aligned with the curriculum implementation***

On November 3 of this year, the State Council of China issued five policies and measures for early childhood education, one of which is "to strengthen the construction of preschool teaching staff". The concrete measures include: to determine a reasonable child-teacher ratio, gradually cultivate adequate faculty for public kindergartens, improve the preschool teacher training system, build high-quality normal schools and majors for preschool teacher education, provide national training to 10,000 selected kindergarten directors and elite teachers during 3 years, and extend the training at the local level to all of directors and teachers during 5 years.

From December of this year, the Ministry of Education will officially launch the national kindergarten teacher training program which is supported by the government's special funding and eight famous domestic educational institutions. About six hundred selected kindergarten teachers will attend this training program. The purpose of this program is to make these teachers to be the backbone of the implementation of the current curriculum and the education trainers in their region. This training program could undoubtedly play a positive role for improving the professional level of Chinese kindergarten teachers and changing the status of the implementation of existing curriculum in China.

According to 2008 statistics, there are about 900, 000 kindergarten teachers in China, of which about 200 thousands are in rural areas (about only 15% of them have 3-year college degrees). While the number of kindergarten teachers increases, the system of teacher education and training seems lagging behind. From 2001 to 2007, the percentage of uncertified teachers is not decreasing but increasing from 48.27% to 57.70%. (Yong. Jiang, 2009) Therefore, during the action with the goal of universal preschool education, it is time to rethink about how to conduct the teacher training. So far, the national government only has macroscopic plan for this issue, but it is urging the county governments to develop their own action plans.

Early childhood teacher education is crucial to the success of early childhood education reform which aims to modify curricula to be diversified and flexible to suit local and individual programs' needs (Zhu & Wang, 2005, p74) . Some scholars put forward the opinion that different teachers should have different kinds of professional training. Someone argues that teachers also have the zone of proximal development. If we want to ensure not only the effectiveness of teachers' teaching but also teachers' professional development above their original level, the teacher training should be located in their zones of proximal development. In many instances, preschool teacher education and

**training should not be impractically focused on helping teachers to construct tacit knowledge via their own introspection. Instead, the main concern should be placed at helping most teachers successfully complete basic teaching tasks and achieve basic competencies. Meanwhile, high-quality and easily-implementing curriculum should be provided to teachers, which can definitely help them effectively conduct educational activities without spending much time for preparation.**

Actually some strategies for teacher training have been used by some local administrations as following:

1. Establishing abundant curriculum resources and encouraging teachers to use. .
2. For high quality kindergartens, focusing more on practice in the context rather on theory in in-service training by using case study, teaching research rooted on kindergarten, and documenting children's and teacher's behavior to reflect teacher's teaching, etc.
3. For kindergartens in developing areas and/or rural areas, providing curriculum resources even high structured curriculum which are of easy access and easy use.

### ***Something about curriculum evaluation***

*The Guideline for Kindergarten Education (trial version)* briefly referred to a few principals and methods for curriculum evaluation. It emphasizes that curriculum evaluation is both the process of problem solving and the path of teacher's professional development. It believes curriculum evaluation should be mainly and spontaneously conducted by teachers themselves during the course of education. It points out child development and behaviours are the main index of evaluation. So observation, conversation and documentation are very important evaluation methods.

The *Guideline* also points out that evaluation should mainly examine:

- Whether the aims of the educational programs and activities is adaptable to children's current status in the classroom;
- Whether the educational contents, methods, strategies and environment are able to promote children's motivation to learn;
- Whether the education process can provide meaningful learning experience for children and meet their development needs;
- Whether group needs and individual differences are both considered in the educational contents and demands;
- Whether the guidance of teachers can help children learn initiatively and effectively.

But in real classroom situation, it is really hard for teachers to implement curriculum evaluation in this way. Instead, the curriculum evaluation is always conducted by local governments. The governments usually develop their own evaluation schemes according to the brief principles in *the guideline*. Then some officially organized evaluator teams which are usually constituted by some experts and supervisors will go to kindergartens to do the evaluation. They will observe educational activities; check the curriculum documents and materials (such as the outlines of the whole curriculum, activity plans, etc.) and interview with directors and teachers. Then the evaluator team will write an evaluation conclusion or report on the status of kindergarten curriculum according to the local evaluation guidelines. Since curricula are quite diversified and autonomously developed by kindergartens themselves, curriculum evaluation is always subjective rather than objective.

Till now, there was no evidence to say whether the current curriculum implementation is successful or not. The popular saying is the curriculum implementation has difficulty progressing.





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