Reforming the curriculum of teacher education:
Framing the future of quality education in China

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Abstract

Reform for “Quality Education” has taken place in Mainland China since the issue of “Summary of Reform and Development of Education in China” (1993). Despite the government’s intention to take care of all students, foster all-round development and promote students’ active learning, gaining high grades in examination remains the goal of learning for most students. Among other factors, the quality of teachers and their belief about education has been regarded as a determinant for the success of reform. In a study conducted in Guangzhou with teacher educators, it was noted that development of teacher education in the last decade lagged behind the development of basic education. The problem of “filling new bottles with old wine” becomes apparent. This paper attempts to analyse the situation and discuss how the reform of curriculum of teacher education in China may bring about the desired change in basic education.

Introduction

On celebrating the centenary of the establishment of the first teacher education institution two years ago, China is proud of her achievement in having educated the great number of qualified teachers over the years. The development of teacher education prospered in the last two decades but is still facing a lot of difficulties. At a time with rapid development of technology, with the introduction of universal education for enhancing the economic growth of the country and with a changing value system, teacher education has been given a heavy responsibility of educating
“new” teachers for implementing “new” education to cope with the “new” world. (? ? ? , 1999). The challenge is how to maintain the indigenous nature of teacher education in China and at the same time break through the traditional mode of operation to accommodate new values in the process of change.

Following the major reform of education in 1986 (? ? ? , 1985) for the introduction of universal education in China, different channels of teacher education were established to train adequate qualified teachers for its implementation. The pronouncement of the 1993 Summary of Reform and Development of Education in China (? ? ? , 1993) which brought forth the implementation of quality education (? ? ? ) put a new challenge to teacher education. As the move from quantity to quality of education requires quality teachers, discussion on reform of teacher education has never ceased since then. However a review of literature indicated that the major concern was on policy issues like combining normal universities with comprehensive universities or restructuring the curriculum, arguing for a redistribution of time for academic studies and professional studies and the like. There was also a lot of discussion on the quality of teachers required for the new century helping to redefine the aim of teacher education. Researches on the pros and cons of the existing teacher education system and how the content, teaching methods and assessment affect the outcome of teacher education programmes were lacking. Interviews with teacher educators suggested that despite reform policies, little change took place in reality. Worst still, teacher education institutions, which were supposed to lead the advancement of education in fact, fell behind the development of basic education. This paper attempts to analyse the situation and discuss how the reform of the curriculum of teacher education may bring about the desired effect for implementing quality education in China.

The framework for course evaluation proposed by Kings (1993) will be used to identify possible problems of reform in teacher education programmes in China. The changing goals, course content, course delivery and course assessment of programmes will be analysed with respect to the external context and internal context. Data obtained from interviews with teacher educators in Guangzhou will be cross-referenced with view points expressed in the literature for the analysis. Suggestions for the reform of the curriculum in light of the analysis will be made.
Goals of teacher education programmes

Traditional goal of teacher education in China

Teacher education in China is done in normal schools (at senior secondary level) and normal universities as an independent system in the education sector. The role of teacher education programmes is to train teachers to serve in primary schools (in normal schools) and secondary schools (in normal universities). Traditionally both moral values and academic competence are cultivated in teacher education institutions. Graduates are expected to serve as role models for students when they become teachers. Strict discipline is usually enforced in normal schools (Law, 1999) and there is a strong academic component in normal universities.

Desired goal of teacher education to cope with reform of basic education in China

In the process of modernization in China, human resources is a major capital which helps the country to develop economically. There is an urgent need to improve the quality of the people to extend possibilities for further development. As pointed out by a respondent of the present study, "Elite education in the past has fulfilled its mission of maximizing the use of resources in producing leaders to lead the development of the country, but it is out-dated now. At the moment, the country needs high quality people at all levels in all fields. We cannot rely on a small number of leaders. The development of the country depends on the mass". It is suggested that the country needs to improve universal education for all. The concept of quality education was put forth in the 1993 government reform document (1993) which pointed out that the education for examination should be abolished. In place, all round development of all children should be looked after and it is necessary to strengthen moral / ideological thinking, cultural and scientific knowledge, skills and competencies in students.

As the “engine” for developing basic education, teacher education inevitably bears the responsibility of producing teachers who can implement the government policy. Basically, it is expected that teachers are trained to be politically enthusiastic, academically knowledgeable, professionally competent and committed, as well as healthy both physically and psychologically (1996, 1997). To cope with the technological world of the
21st century, Li (? ? ? 1997) proposed that future teachers should also have high ideal, have a broad base and depth of knowledge, have a desire to continue to learn, be capable of independent thinking, be creative and able to work independently as well as working cooperatively with others. Interpersonal relationship and enthusiasm for innovation were also stressed. It was Lim’s (? ? ? 1999) craving that student-teachers’ awareness towards democracy, legal responsibility, competition and cooperation should be raised. Further, qualities like making critical judgement, bearing hardship and developing one’s potential should be strengthened.

Problems with transition

Quality education in China has called for a shift of emphasis from examination-oriented education for elites to balanced education for all, from acquisition of knowledge as a basis for further learning to acquisition of competence for continuous life long learning (? ? ? 1993). This leads to a need for teacher education institutions to produce quality teachers who are creative, flexible, critical and open-minded enough to cater for individual difference, and who possess the skills and have a strong desire to continue to learn.

When the teacher educators of this study were asked about the strength of teacher education programmes in China, there was a consensus about fostering professionalism in terms of moral behaviours, emphasis on the depth of subject knowledge and care for basic teaching skills including the planning of lessons in terms of organization of knowledge for presentation and expression in verbal and written forms. This reflected a firm belief in the traditional goal of teacher education. Although the ideal goals of teacher education for the new era have been widely disseminated and accepted, the deep rooted belief of teacher educators probably has a greater influence on the teacher education programmes. Hargreaves (1996) rightly pointed out that teachers do not simply change according to instructions given. They have their own desires to change and to conserve the practice they value. It is noted that in this period of transition, there is the reform goals of teacher education pronounced by the government, but the reform is held back with the conflict between sets of moral standard and creativity; political loyalty and awareness towards democracy; stress on knowledge acquisition and acquisition of skills for life-long learning. Under such a situation, the stated goals often become rhetoric and the practice often gears towards achieving the traditional goals.
Content of teacher education programmes

Academic emphasis as reflected in course structure

The curriculum structure of teacher education programmes is standardized all over the country. To a great extent, it frames the content of the curriculum and determines the outcome of training. Teacher education for primary school teachers is carried out in normal schools which are at the senior secondary levels. The training of secondary school teachers takes place in the normal universities at the tertiary education level. In either case, about 5% of the curriculum time is devoted to educational theories (1999 Paine, 1997). The emphasis of the curriculum is placed on subject areas and a large proportion of professional training of teachers is done in the school as on-job apprenticeship training (Law, 1999). This will be discussed in further detail in a later section.

Problem of relevance

Despite the curriculum reform that has taken place in basic education and the introduction of new policy in tertiary education, reform of the teacher education curriculum has only taken place at the discussion level. The informants of this study suggested that it has lagged behind the development of basic education.

A concrete example illustrating the problem of relevance is the gap between subjects offered in the normal school and in primary schools. Since 1992, subjects like history and geography have been combined to become social studies in the primary curriculum and subjects including biology, physics, chemistry and nature studies have been integrated into the subject of science. However, subject division in normal schools remain the same. Teaching of the two integrated subjects became problematic for the student-teachers (1999).

With reference to the existing content of teacher education programmes at the university level, informants of this study suggested that a major problem is the lack of relevance between what is learned in the normal university and what is needed in secondary schools. “Sometimes, the teacher educators do not know well enough what is happening in secondary schools”. Besides, students at the normal universities take a great number of units in a specialized area with a small amount of time allocated to each. Because of the little time spent on each unit, only bits and pieces of everything is learnt and there is not enough depth in the learning. Neither does the focus on one
special area allow students to have an adequate range of knowledge. An informant of this study opined, “Students’ knowledge base was thus too narrow to cope with the rapid development of the society.” Worst still, it was suggested that what was taught to the student-teachers were out-dated. “The teacher educators are outdated themselves because the teaching content has not been revised for a long time.” Although the phenomenon cannot be generalized, it reflects some of the problems of reform.

It was reported that the centralized curriculum and the hierarchical management structure of the teacher education system were major factors accounting for the rigidity of the curriculum. As an informant suggested, “You cannot change what you want. Prior approval had to be sought to change the curriculum.” The institute policy has discouraged teacher educators to take the first step to initiate changes.

All in all, it is recognized the content of teacher education programmes does not seem to match the aims of producing quality teachers for quality education. On the one hand, it has been argued that the future teachers need to have a broad knowledge base, but on the other hand, the existing curriculum is specialized and narrow in nature. On the one hand, ability to learn rather than acquisition of knowledge is desired, on the other hand, subject knowledge in well organized form is taught to the student teachers. On the one hand, creativity and making critical judgement are valued, on the other hand, everybody is exposed to the same content and there are few choices and no space for developing individual potentials. On the one hand, one would like to foster enthusiasm for educational innovation, but on the other hand, the hierarchical administrative structure in teacher education institutions does not support initiations from teacher educators.

**Course Delivery for teacher education programmes**

“It is common to find teachers keep talking throughout the lesson.” The lack of awareness on the part of the teachers and principals of secondary schools worried our informant who reported, “The teaching approach is so well accepted that even though students complained about the boredom they experienced, other teachers and the principal all thought that the lesson was well conducted. The merits of the lesson were the breadth of content it covered and the smoothness of the teacher’s presentation.” This does not only happen in secondary schools. All teacher educators participated in this study felt that teaching methods adopted in teacher education institutions tended to be traditional. They suggested that the effect could be
detrimental because the didactic method might serve as model for student-teachers and affected the way they were going to teach. The tradition might pass on and formed a vicious circle. Similar observations were made by Kung (?? 1999) and Kim (?? 1999) who suggested that teaching methods used in teacher education programmes were not effective.

**Problems of modernizing teaching methods**

It was suggested that student-teachers should be taught how to make use of educational technology in their teaching (?? 1999). This would be best demonstrated in the teaching that took place in teacher education institutions. However, respondents of the present study suggested that the amount of content that teacher educators had to deal with in each lesson forced them to complete their teaching by lecturing. Another problem was the lack of resources. It was reported that as more resources had been allocated to primary schools and secondary schools, teacher education institutions in fact lagged behind. In cases where there were multi-media audio-visual equipment, the educational technology centre had often been taken as visitors’ centre for demonstrating the advance facilities of the school. Teachers might sometimes demonstrate how the facilities could be used but student-teachers usually did not have the chance to try out using them. It was suggested that a major factor affecting the progress of modernizing teaching methods is the quality of teacher educators. One of the informants suggested that some teacher educators tended to be out-dated in terms of their professional knowledge and attitude. The lack of awareness for innovation affected their enthusiasm to improve themselves. It would be difficult to expect student teachers to teach actively if teacher educators did not teach in creative ways themselves.

**Passing on traditional methods of teaching**

In China, teacher education programmes only form part of the training for teachers. Law (1999) observed that professional socialization of teachers actually took place in the school context. Teachers in their induction year are assigned a supervisor who is an experienced teacher in the school. The novice teachers are expected to learn from the supervisor professional ethics, political ideology, teachers’ roles and duties as well as teaching methods. Paine (1997) noted that the apprenticeship system did not start only when teachers took up their first teaching job. It was in place when the student-teachers did their practicum. Student-teachers would observe the supervising teacher teach. They would plan and prepare their lessons and perform it in front of the
supervisor. Only with the supervisor’s approval that they were allowed to conduct the lesson in class. Student-teachers and novice teachers could of course initiate new ways of teaching, but to play safe, they dared not experiment. More than often, traditions passed on from generation to generation and there was difficulty in breaking through.

Assessment in teacher education programmes

Formal assessment in the form of examination take place for all subjects in teacher education institutions. Even student-teachers’ attitudes are formally assessed. In a research study (Wong et.al.), two student-teachers were asked to list in writing the role of teachers. It was interesting to note that both of the subjects wrote down the same thing in almost identical wordings. This suggested that they wrote down the list from memory like answering an examination question. As pointed out by an informant of the present study, the assessment system encouraged rote learning and reinforced learning by heart. Student-teachers may or may not practise what they write down in examinations.

Problem with standard and conformity

Few research studies could be found on assessment in teacher education programmes. With the limited information available, it can only be speculated that examination is used to guarantee that student-teachers who graduate from teacher education programmes have met the required standard for becoming a teacher. The examination system reflects an emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge. The concept of passing on knowledge from teachers to students is a deep rooted belief. As pointed out by an informant, “If the teacher has a full cup of water, his students may not be able to learn as much. It is a tragedy if the teacher only has half a cup of water.” Therefore teachers must have a lot of knowledge. A high degree of accuracy of what he knows is essential for good teaching. While it is important to encourage student-teachers to do well and achieve in their studies, a side effect of the examination system is the reinforcement of conformity. Student-teachers who conform tend to comply rather than think critically, nor will they be creative. Student-teachers who strive to meet external standard can hardly work independently. The assessment system in place does not seem to match the desired goal of teacher education.
Reforming the curriculum of teacher education for framing the future of quality education in China

Summary of result

The analysis of the curriculum of teacher education in China suggests that although the desired reform goals of teacher education are to produce creative teachers with critical thinking and awareness for innovation, teacher educators have a different agenda. The content, method and assessment of teacher education programmes tend to be traditional. They reflect the traditional value of acquisition of knowledge and moral codes. It was suggested that the teacher education curriculum lagged behind the development of basic education. In the first place, content of the curriculum and teaching materials for basic education have undergone constant review and revision while content taught in teacher education programmes is outdated. Secondly, there is more use of audio-visual aids at the basic education level than in teacher education institutions. Thirdly, while a lot of teaching experiments goes on at the basic education level, little innovative teaching has taken place at the level of teacher education.

Essence of reform

The result tended to suggest that teacher education had been responding passively to the reform needs of basic education and had not properly performed its role of leading the development of education. The long term effect can be detrimental to the development of basic education. How can the curriculum of teacher education be reformed to facilitate the development of quality education in China? It is the belief of the present researcher that there is not a single solution to the problem. What is important is to base the reform on tradition and strength of the existing teacher education system in China, as well as taking in challenges of the future.

Strength of teacher education programmes in China

On evaluating the problems of teacher education programmes, Goodlad (1990) found that most programmes made relatively little use of peer socialization; there was often confusion on the mission of higher education and teacher education; and, there were disjunctures between the campus-portion and the school-portion. If peer socialization, distinct mission for teacher education and coherence between the training at institute and in school are factors enhancing the development of teacher education
programmes, then teacher education programmes in China has great potential for development as they possess all the listed characteristics. The close collaboration between teacher education institutions and schools in the training of teachers is apparently a strength of teacher education in China. This can serve as a fundamental support for the reform of teacher education.

Core values held within the teacher education system in China

With reference to what is currently valued by teacher educators, it must be noted that the existing curriculum is consistent with their belief system. In a study conducted with student-teachers in Guangzhou (Law, 1999), it was suggested that the aim of education is to “teach knowledge” and “cultivate the person”. It was believed that internalization of basic knowledge is essential for extending students’ learning. Only when basic knowledge is mastered that students can be enhanced to think critically, work independently and create. There is a general belief that teachers need to be knowledgeable themselves to be able to teach. It was also believed that students learn through modeling. To cultivate the person, the teachers need to serve as role models and so they must pay attention to their own moral behaviour. It is apparent that while other teacher qualities may be required as important for the “new” teacher, helping students to acquire knowledge and learn the appropriate moral behaviour are regarded as basic to all other kinds of learning. Reform of teacher education is meaningful only when these basic values are recognized and equally stressed in the new curriculum.

Collectivism and professionalism in China

In the collective society of China, professionalism means total devotion to the profession, sacrificing one’s “micro-self” for the benefit of the “macro-self”. In the process of professional socialization, student-teachers learn to live in the hierarchical structure of the school organization and comply to request made on them by their seniors. The conformity culture thus established has specific effect on reforms of education in school. In China, innovations are usually carried out in a top-down manner, with policy makers and administrators studying existing problems and suggesting possible solutions. After a lot of discussions among themselves and with teacher representatives, a final decision is made and the reform policy is disseminated to the teachers. Teachers then carry out the innovations dutifully with a clear understanding of the rationale for reform and the aims to be achieved. The
introduction of reforms into schools is usually very smooth as they are well taken in by teachers and teacher educators. This gives innovations a good starting point. How to develop the reform basing on the good starting point to make innovations effective worths careful examination.

Reforming the curriculum

The analysis of the existing teacher education curriculum revealed that it is effective in producing teachers well qualified to teach in a traditional setting. A reform of the teacher education curriculum is needed if “new” teachers are to be produced. The suggested strategy is to base the reform on existing strength of teacher education in China.

In previous sections, it was argued that the existing practice of teacher education has a number of strengths. The close collaboration between teacher education institutions and schools in the education of teachers can form a good support for the reform. The emphasis on learning academic knowledge and moral behaviour can serve as a good base for further development of teachers. The compliant professional culture allows innovations to start off smoothly in schools.

The strengths are not without limitations. Over-emphasis on knowledge acquisition and fostering of set moral standard may impede the extension of learning and make the learning culture within teacher education institutions a static one. There may be difficulty in forming a learning community for continuous life-long learning when student-teachers carries with them these values. Because of the close collaboration, schools and teacher education institutions may be reinforcing each other in terms of the traditional values held. The stronger the traditional culture persists, the more difficult it is to have real break through in the development of education. Though the compliant professional culture enhances the smooth introduction of reforms into schools, it encourages teachers to follow instructions rather than initiating big moves in the process of reform. It can be an impeding force rather than a facilitating one in the process of reform.

How to build a learning community for continuous professional development on top of student-teachers’ knowledge base; how to form an inquisitive culture on top of compliance; and how to maximize the benefit of close collaboration between schools and teacher education institutions are important issues to be resolved for reforming the teacher education curriculum.
Another important issue is to take curriculum reform as a process. It cannot be taken for granted that restructuring the curriculum of teacher education will automatically improve the quality of teachers, leading to the success of reform at the level of basic education. For the success of reform, it is not enough to have a perceived end product and a good start. It is necessary to continuously evaluate the effect and make amendments in the process. Reform of the teacher education curriculum in China is still underway. The goals of teacher education is in place. If the content, delivery and assessment do not help to achieve the goals, there are all kinds of possibility to rectify the situation.

Conclusion

The transition of “examination-oriented education” to “quality education” is a long process. Reforming the curriculum of teacher education also takes a long time to see its effect. There is no single solution to the problem, nor can the present researcher prescribe any panacea for the reform. It is hope that the analysis in this paper can provide a source of reference, among many others, for considering reform of teacher education in China.

References

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