

The Comparison of Basic Education Between China and Finland: Education Structure, Teacher Education and After-School Education

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ABSTRACT

Through the ages, education is a heated discussion topic for any age group all over the world. For example, Confucius and Socrates are two representative educators in the East and the West in history. In recent years, many parents are still concerned about the quality of their children's basic education. There are two key reasons why Finland is chosen as the comparison country of China. Firstly, they performed very well in previous PISA tests. In addition, the time of educational reform in these two countries are similar. These are why we choose Finland as a compared country with China. In previous study, few papers have systematic review on basic education between China and Finland. Therefore, this article will mainly discuss the following three aspects: (1) the comparison of structural differences, (2) the comparison of teacher education, and (3) the comparison of after-school activities of basic education.

Keywords: Finland, China, Basic Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a heated discussion topic for any age group all over the world. Each country has its pedagogical tradition and education system, and they value education in different aspects. Generally, the Western and the Eastern educational traditions have their representatives. Zhong and Zhao mentioned that Confucius and Socrates are two cultural icons of the East and West. Confucius (551~479 BCE) is an excellent educator and philosopher in Asia who is around 100 years ahead of Socrates (464~399 BCE) [1,2]. The most famous comparison between Confucius and Socrates is that they have various understandings of 'knowing' and 'not knowing' in learning. Confucius emphasized that learning as a closed connection between 'knowing' and 'not knowing', since an endless learning process of enriching and accumulating is an essential way to increase people's knowledge. Socrates has an opposite opinion of the two terms. The base of his dialogues is 'I know nothing'. Therefore, he asked for aid from people

on the street, and then posed questions and raised doubts. In addition, both educators have their unique styles of dialogic teaching. For Confucius, he spends a short length of dialogue by using closed structures (question-answer process) to decrease the complexity during the discussion. Confucius did not explain knowledge entirely to students because he want to let them think and absorb knowledge independently. For Socrates, the style of his dialogue is sophisticated and open-endedness. It is common to spend a long period without getting an exact answer and create new questions for further dialogue. Overall, the similarity of the knowledge image of Confucius and Socrates is that they both built a fully unequal connection between teachers and students. However, Confucius represents a knowledge image of wisdom while Socrates is rather like an explorer than a sophist [2].

Historically speaking, both Finland and China, during different period, had act as the leader of educational research and development in Eastern and Western world respectively. For instance, Chinese ancient educators

were first to develop the idea of humanistic teaching, which focused on encouraging teachers to teach students in accordance with their aptitude but not their status. Before industrial revolution, Chinese education philosophy has been widely accepted and valued in most Asian countries including Japan, Korea and etc. Similar ideas only officially appeared in Europe after Comenius' *Magna Didactica* in 17th century. While the shining moment of Finland Education occurred between the second world war and the beginning of 21th century, during which its unique assessment system based on the balance of government, market and experts started to greatly impress the western world. Education practice in Finland had an immense effect on the development of a considerable number of assessment theories, such as the formative assessment and item response theory. The comparison of present education systems between Finland and China, two systems that have separately made significant contributions to the development of global education, is not only necessary but also beneficial.

There are two main reasons why the education system in China and Finland can be compared. Firstly, Finnish National Curriculum reformed in every ten years which have the same period of Chinese reform. The closest policies development was in 2016 while the last education modification of Chinese education system was in 2014. Therefore, the period of both countries are close enough to be effectively linked. Secondly, China and Finland are two typical samples in PISA studies that can be compared and studied. Depending on the PISA results in 2018, students in four sampled cities in China (Shanghai, Beijing, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang) had the highest average score in reading, mathematics, and science [3,4]. As a country famous for its equality and egalitarian education system, Finnish students still performed an outstanding score, though the result was not as high as China's.

Because of its excellent performance in PISA, Finnish basic education was once regarded as a model of basic education reform in other countries and enjoyed the reputation of "education myth" [5]. To promote domestic basic education reform, Chinese scholars have also made some research on Finnish basic education and expect to learn from the successful experience from it. All of these studies can be generally divided into three categories: studies on the reasons to Finland's successful basic education reform, on Finnish curriculum and Finnish pre-service teacher education [6-13]. However, they are not complete and still have lots of deficiencies. For example, Wang and Yuan only listed the reasons why Finnish basic education could become successful but lacked the exploration of its experience for China [6, 7]. Although Li and Shi have given some advice for China's basic education reform after studying Finnish successful experience, the advice may be not convincing due to the lack of comparison between China and Finland [8, 9]. The other two categories only focus on certain part of

Finnish basic education and cannot represent the whole situation of it.

As for the comparative studies of basic education between China and Finland, both of them are typical examples of Eastern and Western countries, so there are still a great many of aspects that are worth investigating. On the one hand, both in Chinese and foreign databases, there are few special studies on it. On the other hand, it is pity that the existing research of their comparison is not systematic or comprehensive. For example, Cai and Zuo (2019) only concluded and classified the past research but lacked the further analysis. This paper will mainly focus on analyzing the following three aspects: (1) the comparison of systematic differences, (2) the comparison of teacher education, and (3) the comparison of after-school activities of basic education.

2. COMPARISON OF STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

2.1. Historical Background, Correlated Values and Theories

2.1.1 The Transfer From Centralization to Liberalism in Finland

Historically speaking, the theory behind the development of modern Finland basic education started in 1972. After World War II the government of Finland supported the idea of "Centralization", believing the idea that a strict regulations and absolute authority of the central government would be the best way to run the nation. On the field of education, Finland government set up a series of general standards and, in negative ways of speaking, cumbersome terms and laws to supervise every school in the nation, from primary school to the end of high school. The Supervisor system was known at that time as a representative symbol of the basic education, which means that officials and authorities named by the government would instruct local teachers' courses and each one of them was completely responsible for the schools in one area. The situation changed in a six-year period since 1972, during which protests were held around the nation, criticizing the low education efficiency and unbalanced resource arrangement caused by unreasonable government policy. As a result, the power of evaluating teachers and students' academic outcomes was gradually transferred from central government to provincial departments. Supervisors were then appointed by local education association. In 1987, due to the constant political instability in North and Eastern Europe, right-wing parties started to take control over most part of the society, bringing the gradual collapse of old bureaucratic system and the forming of new system. In 1988, supervisors finally became history while abundant freedom was given to educational institutions which was at lower levels in the old system [14]. New ideas were

developed under this new political environment. Researchers concluded that the best form of education should be the result of a balance among “Nation, Market and Expert”. Specifically, “Nation” focuses on fairness, Market focuses on efficiency and lastly Expert focuses on quality. Government does not have to right to specifically rule or guide educators and students unless their action damage others’ right of using legal education resource.

2.1.2. Centralized education in China

On the other hand, China, showed a relatively similar pattern of historical development, which I believe that we already learned that in lecture 1’s passage. I may stress it again here. Before 1966, the trend of “Centralization” also appeared, which stressed on national investment and restrictions in order to largely extend the scale of education and provide basic knowledge for students from all social classes. The trigger of the reform and the establishment of present used education value again started to appear after vital political events. The Open and Reform stressed the importance of non-plan powers and allowed the society to embraced changes brought by global capital and markets. However, unlike Finland, a widely known developed nation, Chinese people faced severe economic difficulties at that time. Therefore, instead of building a free and less controlled education system, the government again chose to establish a highly targeted system to support the reformation. The core value of education at that time, during the first Tianjin Education Conference in 1980, was set to be “better support the countries’ economic development” or to say “take economic construction as the central task.”, brought an end to the former theory which stressed class struggle [15]. Chinese education at that time was considered as an important part of economic plan rather than an independent part of the society. Market was playing a decisive role in guiding the development of education. For instance, more students were encouraged to learn natural science than ever before as the related industries rose in an astonishing speed. Things started to change when the idea of progressive education became popular in China after 2008. Between 2004 and 2008, China achieved a lot, bringing great confidence for its citizens. However, the rising nation soon found out its weakness on what now called “soft power” (The general level of cultural industries and social science). The Department of Education released a series of files and documents suggesting that despite the pursuit of better personal career, educators should at the same time encourage students to develop in multiple dimensions including morality, intelligence, physics, aesthetics and labor. Education was attached with new purpose and become a more independent area but remained in the frame of a greater national plan.

2.2. General Institutional Differences

2.2.1. Double-Track System in Finland

The education system in Finland executes a typical double-track system. Students need to choose, or to say, be separated into different forms of senior high education after 16 years old, Upper Secondary School or Vocation Education. The first one focused on academic training and students there normally went into universities for higher education while the second one focuses on specific working skills and students will mostly went to Polytechnics. As we all say, assessment is “the baton of the concert”. The basic education in Finland also has to respect and prepare students in different ways so they may follow different trials. As it might already be introduced above, basic education of Finland started at 3, Pre-school Education, and ended at 6. Although the government nowadays does not force every kid to attend this, the latest data proved more than 93% of students have benefitted from this sort of schools at a reasonable cost. So, we take this as a part of basic education in our research. Then follows the Compulsory Education which will last 9 years, from 7 to 16 and be completely free of charge. Students need to spend 190 days a year at school between the middle of August and the end of the May [16]. One important characteristic of education during this period is that students do not have the right to choose which specific school they wish to go through competition or else ways. They are all officially arranged to go to the nearest school and government put lots of effort to make sure these school are around same academic level. During the first 6 year of basic education there will be only one head teacher in the class, teaching every course while subject teachers could only be seen in the last 3 year. The average percentage of students who go to Upper Secondary is 57%, 33% to Vocational, and lastly 8% give up senior high [17].

2.2.2. Single-Track System in China

Back to China, government has a relatively vague attitude towards pre-school education, no clear instructions are given about courses that should be set up for very young kids between 4 and 6. There are types of such schools who focuses on academic preparation and those who only functions like nursing caring institutions but not strictly as school. However, as more and more primary schools with above-average teaching level choose the students they want according to performance showed in entrance examination, more and more pre-school education function as a pre-extension or primary school, teaching courses according to the curriculum of primary school. The Compulsory education starts at 6, also 9 years. Students will normally spend more days at school than ones in Finland, approximately 260 days a year. The basic education in China is mainly single-track system as most national support and employer’s

preference lie on students who finished their university program [18]. School's lessons are conducted to train students to pass two important tests, Senior High Entrance Exam (SHEX) and High School Entrance Exam (HSEX), which may determine which kind of school they will enter. Traditionally students would be classified into two groups who focus on different fields, social science (Geography, History and Politics) and natural science (Physics, Chemistry and Biology).

3. COMPARISON OF TEACHER EDUCATION

3.1. Definitions

In China, teacher education is mainly used for training teachers for basic education schools, and it normally comprises pre-service education, induction training, and continuing education [19].

While in Finland, teacher education can be generally divided into pre-service education and in-service education. As for basic education, qualified teachers teach in comprehensive school, where classroom teachers teach Grades 1-6 while subject teachers teach Grades 7-9 [20].

Considering that induction training and continuing education can be classified as in-service education, the paper will compare the teacher education reform of the two countries from pre-service and in-service education in the following text.

3.2. Comparison of Pre-Service Teacher Education

In China, there were three levels of teacher education institutions. (1) 3 or 4 years Secondary Normal Schools recruit junior secondary school graduates with the aim of training teachers for kindergartens or primary schools. (2) 3-year Higher Teacher Education Colleges recruit senior secondary school graduates and aim to prepare teachers for junior secondary schools. (3) 4-year Normal Universities enroll senior secondary school graduates and they are the major providers of senior secondary school teachers [19].

As for the study subjects in these institutions, students can both learn theoretical knowledge and do some teaching practice. But the higher the level, the more contents students will learn.

However, in 1999, to provide high quality teaching staff for schools, the Ministry of Education issued *Some Considerations on the Structural Adjustment of Teacher Education Institutions* to adjust the structure of teacher education institutions. In this way, the three-level pre-service teacher education system was transformed into a two-level system. The level 1 institutions generally disappeared in China [19].

Similarly, in Finland, the pre-service teacher education institutions also experienced a series of reforms and adjustments. According to Zuo and Fu, until 1960, the training of primary school teachers was still carried out in the form of short-term practical teaching training such as 2 to 3-year teacher education seminars, rather than in the charge of academic institutions [21]. However, in 1963, the Finnish general education commission passed the *Education Reform Act*, which set equal education for all. In this way, the private grammar schools and public civic schools were integrated into a 9-year Comprehensive School, and a new "public school" system was built. Then, in 1971, Finland issued *Teacher Education Act*, ruling that the teacher training for comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools was transformed into colleges or universities.

Finland has strict admissions of students for future teachers. The students are all senior secondary school graduates. Before entering colleges or universities, students have to take written examinations and interviews. The pass rate is only 10-15% [24]. Besides that, according to the *Teacher Education Act*, those who want to be primary and secondary school teachers must have a master's degree.

Moreover, students in such institutions can enjoy rich curriculum and systematic teaching practice. For example, class-teacher education programmes are always comprised of educational science (major studies), multidisciplinary subject studies (minor studies) and other studies like optional studies [22]. They will take three internships during their college years and postgraduate period. Finland has also formed the research-based teacher education to cultivate scientific research ability of teachers [23].

3.3. Comparison of In-Service Teacher Education

In China, new teachers must receive at least 120 hours of induction training. Besides the requirements issued by the Ministry of Education, local education authorities can also make some implementation plans based on their local education situations.

As for the teachers continuing education, different levels of education authorities are responsible for arranging training content and evaluation system for teachers. It is worth mentioning that the evaluation results will influence teachers' appointment and promotion. And the teachers continuing education can be generally divided into two categories, one of which is non-qualification education, including induction training of new teachers (no less than 120 hours), teachers job-specific training (no less than 240 hours in every five years), and advanced training of promising teachers. The other refers to qualification education, which leads to the awarding of study certificates, diplomas, degrees and

qualifications, with the aim of upgrading the education and qualification level of qualified teachers [19]. This kind of education is mainly financed by local government budgets.

When it comes to the in-service teacher education in Finland, teachers in Finland can enjoy an open and inclusive teaching environment. In Finland, teachers can independently design teaching content and freely determine teaching methods. In such an environment, the atmosphere of trust has been built. Hence, there is no comparison, competition or evaluation among teachers. Teachers are encouraged to make educational innovation and personalized education to meet every student's need.

Besides that, teachers in Finland can also receive effective in-service training. On the one hand, this teaching training is free, various and lasting. On the other hand, it is in line with international standards. The book resource sharing has been achieved. University libraries are open to primary and secondary school teachers all over the country. In addition, due to the decentralization of educational rights to schools, schools and teachers have more autonomy, which is beneficial for them to make innovations.

4. COMPARISON OF AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES OF BASIC EDUCATION

4.1. Comparison of Current Situations and Attitudes of Homework

Motivations, why students spend different time on homework, are mainly distributed in education policies, which is the main aspects mentioned above. Depending on the data collected by OCED in 2014, students in middle school in Shanghai spend 13.8 hours per week on their homework, almost three times the report average of 4.9 hours [3][4]. It is undebatable whether the time spent on homework is directly proportional to the grade. The 2008 study, for example, showed that the more effort freshmen put in after class, the higher their grade point average scores were [25]. While the study goes beyond basic education, its findings can be applied to compulsory education as well. Therefore, the achievement of the four Chinese cities chosen for PISA can average ranking of the top. Chinese students have the default this learning method [26]. Because of Chinese reform and opening and after the nine-year compulsory education policy, exam-oriented education was used in traditional Chinese schools and achieved good results in many ways [27]. Chinese educational philosophy and cultural construction tend to put effort more important than ability, and studying hard is also the only way to climb the social ladder and success [28].

In comparison, ninth-grade students in Finland spend two to three hours per week [3][4], Chinese students spend six times that of Finnish students. Reasons should

be concluded as: Finnish education system is to commit the ideal of equality. The teaching profession is highly valued and trusted [27]. In Finland, students stay in school for a short time, and students in basic education have no after-school tuition. However, they can achieve good academic results, which reflects the efficiency of the Finnish education system. Chen, an education researcher in Taiwan, writes in her book that every student in basic education has a free half-hour reading assignment [29]. On the whole, because Finland's educational philosophy focuses not only on developing students' academic performance but, more importantly, cultivates the autonomy and equality of all students.

4.2. Comparison of After-School Tutoring

4.2.1. Introduction of Double Reduction Policy

Except for basic learning in schools, students have extra classes and tutoring at weekends or holidays. The reason that causes the intense competition among students is China's test-driven education system [30]. Chinese education competition is very fierce, and parents attach great importance to their children's after-school education so that the after-school tutoring market demand is extreme. Double-reduction policy published on 23 July to reduce students' homework burden and reduce discipline training institutions outside the school. The provision released by the state councils claims that banned tutoring companies running tutoring schools for profit and any investment [31]. However, the reaction and effect are not the same as what the government thought at first. The primary problem of the education system is the pressure and tough competition between a large number of Chinese students and parents. Before the reform of the 'double reduction policy', most Chinese students have similar schooling forms. The government's new policy cannot fundamentally solve the problem, though its original intention is to reduce the imbalance and unfairness among students. Furthermore, the new policy also caused a rise in unemployment. For instance, parents who used to work in educational institutions will lose their sole source of income [32]. Under the influence of the double reduction policy, students will have fewer extracurricular academic burdens than before. Nevertheless, it does not change the cruel system and institutions of exam-oriented education and the pressure of competition among students.

4.2.2. Impacts of Double Reduction Policy

The new policy affects educational institutions outside of school, moreover parents. Several parents believe that giving their children after-school tutoring will give them better competitive conditions and capital in China. Other competitors will not eliminate in the brutal exam-oriented education system. Statistics show that in 2021, 95 per cent of Chinese parents will send their

children to after-school tutoring classes and pay the corresponding fees [31]. There are significant differences in education quality and resources [31], which leads to the number of students in each class exceeding the scope of each teacher's ability, resulting in the lack of teaching quality. Families of different classes respond diversely to the policy. Upper-class families whose parents are ready to send their children abroad will not be affected by the policy. Even for high-income families studying in China, their parents will hire private tutors for them. Parents from well-off families worry about the scores of students without extra classes, or they will sacrifice their overtime hours to be with their children. Poor parents will benefit from the appearance of the policy, cause they think there will be more equality among pupils [10]. The policy has not been as successful as expected, based on its impact on different families.

4.2.3. Finnish Private Tutoring Institutions

There are few or no private tutoring institutions in basic education in Finland, and a private tutoring market exists before university entrance exams. Because of Finland's egalitarian education system, private tutoring can lead to social inequality, and students are not in the same situation [33]. The Finnish government noticed the problem a decade ago and launched a survey into private tutoring in 2014 [34]. The development of the market is related to specific subject areas with strong competitiveness. In order to get a good score in the entrance test of these majors, students will choose to have a vacancy in the year before entering college, also known as gap year [34]. Finland is trying to ease the stress and burden of college entrance exams by incorporating exam content and textbooks in specific fields into the basic textbooks of high schools. The policy will not remove private tutoring from the market, but it will change the private market, which provides jobs for many people [35]. By and large, in the face of after-school tutoring, Finland's solution is based on the original policy reform, rather than the indirect monopoly of the private after-school tutoring industry like China's double reduction policy. Even if the proportion of private after-school tutoring in Finland is not very large, just in the higher education sector, the consequences of monopolising the industry may not be as perfect as expected.

Through the analysis and comparison of after-school basic education in the two countries, it is hard for Chinese politicians and parents to change the traditional view of homework. They believe spending more time on homework means studying hard. The Chinese government has also noticed the social inequality caused by private after-school tutoring and implemented a double reduction policy, but the results are not favorable. There is a corresponding gap between China and Finland in basic education facilities and education management. However, this does not mean that China's current policy

has no advantages. China's better PISA results in 2018 do not mean that China's education policies and frameworks are perfect. PISA has limitations in data statistics of China. It only tests four cities with relatively late development of education system. If it conducts large-scale data statistics for the whole country, the results may be different. National education policies and systems are a long-term task and cannot be succeeded by borrowing from a country and using fire.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is meaningful to compare the basic education reform in Finland and China. There are several findings through three dimensions. Firstly, the educational structure in Finland and China are totally different. Finland changed from centralization to liberalism while China remained centralized education. In schools, Finland uses double-track system whereas China implements single-track system. Secondly, China and Finland have many distinctions in the institutions of teacher education, student enrollment as well as study subject in the comparison of their pre-service teacher education. Finland has more strict requirements for the selection and training of basic education teachers than China. This is why basic education teachers in Finland have higher academic qualifications than those in China. Furthermore, Finnish society has attached much more importance to research-based teacher education compared with China. As for the comparison of in-service teacher education, it is obvious that teachers in Finland have more freedom in teaching than those in China. Thus, both of them have reformed their teacher education and made some achievements in the past few decades. Thirdly, through analyzing and comparing the after-school basic education in these countries, it is hard for Chinese politicians and parents to change the traditional view of homework, since they think that more time for homework means harder work. The Chinese government has also noticed the social inequality caused by private after-school tutoring, so the government implemented a double reduction policy. There is a corresponding gap between China and Finland in basic education facilities and education management. Although the previous PISA results in China performed very well, it does not mean that China's educational policies and frameworks are perfect. PISA test has limitations in data statistics of China. It only tests four cities with relatively advanced development of education system. If it conducts large-scale data statistics for the whole country, the results may be changed. National education policies and systems are a long-term task and cannot be succeeded by borrowing from a country and using fire.

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