Formal, Nonformal, and Informal Education in China

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Abstract. Since the implementation of China's double reduction policy on July 24, 2021, formal education has received increasing attention, while the status of nonformal and informal education has gradually declined. In this social context, this paper adopts a literature analysis approach to conduct a comprehensive study of formal, nonformal, and informal education in China. It is found that although these three types of education are in different status quo, they all have their own problems: formal education has an excessively uniform grading system, restricts students' inventiveness, creates a variety of pressures, and distributes educational resources unevenly; nonformal education suffers from unregulated, expensive fees, and specialized training aims; informal education restricts students' advancements and does not fully contribute to their development. The author finally proposes corresponding solutions: training educators in new teaching techniques, modifying the degree of difficulty of the learning materials, fully utilizing new technologies, networks, and media, and combining formal education, nonformal education, and informal education.

Keywords: Formal education, Nonformal education, Informal education, China.

1   Introduction

It is well known that the policies of a country governing each locality and the conditions of each locality can have a significant impact on schools and their outcomes [1]. It is evident that national policies have a great influence on the development of formal education. Currently, in order to effectively reduce the excessive homework burden of students, the double reduction policy was officially proposed on July 24, 2021, with the issuance of the Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden of Students in Compulsory Education and the Burden of Off-Campus Training by Chinese government. The policy mainly focuses on extracurricular institutions and in-school education with corresponding requirements. First, the policy proposes "three restrictions" and "three strict measures" for extracurricular institutions, limiting the number of institutions, training hours, the price charged and teaching content, eradicate arbitrary capitalization, and strictly control advertising. Secondly, there are also "three controls" and "three improvements" for in-school education: to manage the order of teaching, the examination evaluation, the teachers' anomalies in making up lessons, and to raise the

standards of instruction, homework supervision, and after-school programs. Through the implementation of this highly transformative policy, formal education, with school education at its core, has received increasing attention, while informal education, led by out-of-school tutoring institutions, has been gradually ignored or even resisted.

However, many scholars at home and abroad have confirmed that nonformal and informal education are as important as formal education. For example, nonformal and informal education are important supplements to formal education, and their roles and significance are prominent [2]. Also, informal learning is the original state of human learning, an instinct of human beings, and an essential and important part of lifelong learning [3]. Since the 21st century is an era of lifelong learning, where learning is everywhere and all the time, it is evident that informal learning is very important nowadays. In addition, Panait, C points out that nonformal education can help people acquire skills and techniques; informal education can improve people's mental health, thus helping them to integrate better into social life [4]. Therefore, a focus on the quality of formal education at the expense of support for nonformal and informal education is not conducive to the overall development of students' psychological and skill development.

Although there is a rich literature on formal education, nonformal education and formal education at home and abroad, in terms of research objects, the existing studies are relatively focused on the adult stage, and there are much less studies of fetuses, infants, adolescents and the elderly [3].

Therefore, in order to promote the three types of education to be well supported and thus contribute to the overall development of students, this paper adopts a literature analysis method to conduct a comprehensive study of formal, nonformal as well as informal education in China. In terms of research structure, the paper first clarifies the concepts of formal education, nonformal education, and informal education, then analyzes the current situation and problems of each of them in China, and finally proposes corresponding solutions.

2   Definition

Etling noted that education means learning knowledge, skills, and attitudes, deciding about lifestyle, and most importantly, learning how to learn [5]. Learning can be intended or accidental, outside or inside the classroom, given or not by teachers. According to Zhang, Y.H., Zhong, D.P., and Liang, X.Y., the tripartite classification of education is mainly derived from the concept of lifelong learning or lifelong education in the field of adult and vocational education [2]. In 1996, the declaration signed by the ministers of education of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries clarified the idea of lifelong learning: that is, lifelong learning includes the learning of a person's entire life process from the cradle to the grave, including formal education, non-formal education, and informal learning. This division has been endorsed by 23 countries on five continents and by the European Commission (EC), the permanent executive body of the European Union.

2.1   Formal Education

The term "formal education" (FE), according to Coombs, refers to the academic system, which spans from kindergarten through university, and is graded in accordance with a set of hierarchical standards [6]. FE offers not only general academic education but also a wide range of specialist courses and institutions for full-time technical and professional training.

2.2   Nonformal Education

Nonformal Education (NFE) is designed to help students maximize their learning and is intentional and systematic outside of the usual traditional schools. It can accommodate each student's specific requirements and unique set of circumstances. Educators in NFE have more teaching time than teachers in FE because they are relieved of the extra work of taking roll, enforcing discipline, making reports and monitoring study rooms [7]. Therefore, NFE is more learner-oriented and flexible and has a lower level of structure than schools [5].

2.3   Informal Education

According to Zhang Weiping and Pu Li-E, the term "informal education" (IFE) was coined in Malcolm Knowles' research on informal adult education in the 1950s and rose to prominence [3]. IFE is less structured or organized because it is mainly taught through the everyday experience of elders or peers [7].

In a word, the similarities and differences between those three forms of education are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Three Types of Education [2]

	FE	NFE	IFE
Learning places and sources	Education and training institutions	Not education and training institutions	Daily work, family, and leisure activities
Whether to issue a qualification certificate	Yes	No	No
Whether structured	Yes	Yes	No
Are learners purposeful?	Yes	Yes	No

3   Definition

3.1   FE

Globally, international human rights law has recognized the right to FE, making FE increasingly valued [8]. Also, according to Arlestig Helene and Johansson, national governance and politics, as well as local prerequisites, are known to exert a high degree of influence on schools and their results [1]. This shows that FE, centered on schooling, is strongly influenced by national, political, and local conditions.

As to China, the importance of formal learning has never been questioned; FE is increasingly valued by the Chinese government [2]. Furthermore, Folkestad argues that although educators can use formal, nonformal and informal education to varying degrees, at the very least they should all be present and interact with each other in a typical classroom [9]. Nevertheless, schooling in China nowadays merely focuses on the formal one.

3.2   NFE

With the advent of the knowledge-based economy and the information age, the concept of learning has undergone major changes, new technologies and e-learning have continued to develop, continuing education and lifelong learning have become more accessible, and the cost of learning has continued to decrease. All these make the role and significance of nonformal as an important complement to formal learning more prominent [2].

In China, recently, NFE has been dominated by off-campus tutoring classes to improve students' academic performance, and, of course, various types of summer camps to improve overall quality are also included in this educational pattern. According to Panait, C., students can acquire skills through NFE techniques that will be useful in society [4]. However, in March 2021, to alleviate the excessive homework and extra-curricular courses for students in compulsory education, the Chinese government launched a "double reduction policy". Since then, off-campus training institutions that aim to improve students' test-taking skills have been dealt a major blow, and even large institutions like New Oriental and the Chinese TAL Education Group were forced to shut down. Subsequently, the scale and attention of NFE in China have rapidly declined, and it is now in an extremely weak position among the various education models.

3.3   IFE

According to Zhang Weiping and Pu Li-E, the 21st century is an era of lifelong learning; learning is everywhere and all the time [3]. In another word, learning is no longer an activity at a certain stage of life but a behavior that accompanies people throughout their lives, from which informal learning is a primitive state of human learning and is a human instinct. Therefore, IFE has become a more important way for people to learn. According to a survey from Hou Ying, 80% of the knowledge they acquire in their

lifetime, or even a greater proportion, comes from informal learning [10]. More importantly, IFE will help students to become more positive, thus helping them to participate directly in society [4].

Due to IFE's tremendous advantages, IFE, which is education that occurs outside of a classroom, is discussed, including in the Committee on the Rights of the Child and UNESCO documents [8]. Therefore, it is evident that worldwide, there is a growing interest in IFE. Also, the important role of IFE has been increasingly recognized internationally, but only to the extent that it is recognized in educational policies or educational practices in different countries and regions.

In China, the emphasis on informal learning only began in the 1960s and 1970s, which is much later than the global average [2]. What's more, not only is the research on IFE lagging, but its influence and status are rising very slowly, so much so that in reality, according to Donitsa-Schmidt, S., & Zuzovsky, R., over the years, of the many factors influencing educators' advancement to leadership roles, FE has had the greatest impact, followed by IFE, while NFE has had the lowest impact [11]. In a word, IFE has been neglected.

In short, due to the implementation of the "double reduction" policy as well as the ongoing system of high school and college entrance examinations, China has been and is increasingly emphasizing the role of FE while gradually underestimating NFE and IFE.

4   Problems

4.1   FE

In The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical and Qualitative Assessment in Music Education, Elliott, the authors all pointed out in 2019 that evidence suggests in FE, it is only through assessment that students' learning outcomes can be recognized by other learners and educators [12]. In another word, the evaluation system in FE is too simple.

In addition, FE in China is mainly exam centered. While according to Kirkpatrick and Zang, exam-oriented assessments might restrict students' invention, creativity and self-awareness, qualities that are critical to their ultimate success in and out of the classroom [13]. Exams such as College Entrance Examination also put enormous pressure on students [14]. The data from Figure 1 have shown that students are surrounded by different kinds of stress when they are in the FE system, including a large amount of schoolwork, huge population competition, few job opportunities, psychological burden, worry about the future, insufficient preparation time, and pressure about college entrance examinations.
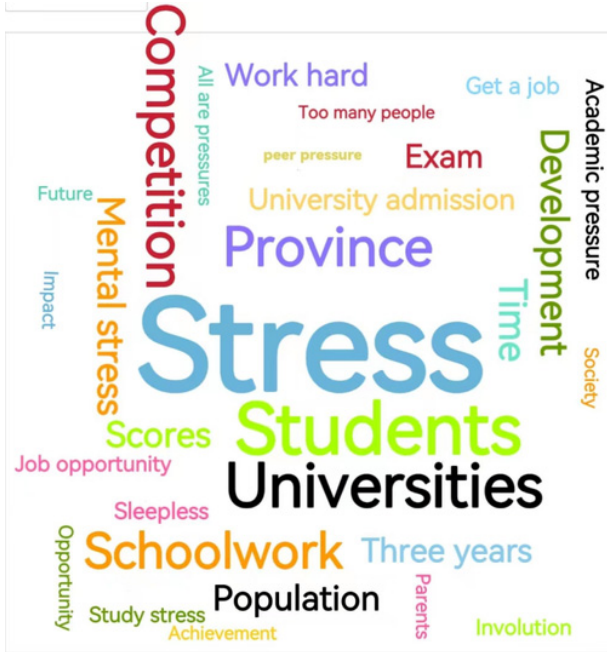
Fig. 1. Different Kinds of Stress

What's more, the inequity of FE is mainly reflected in the fact that the education policies, education level, and examination difficulty vary too much from region to region. The effects of different types of schooling resulting in different opportunities to learn are clearly intense in the FE, between public and private schools [15]. In August 2018, the Bureau of Education ruled on the reassignment of migrant children from Lixin Primary School to Qinxi Experimental Primary School, a key public school. This segregation and integration of migrant students in Suzhou sparked a lot of discontent among parents from Qinxi Experimental Primary School, and the incident is a good example of the inequality in FE between different schools.

Last but not least, impediments to inclusive education in China include the absence of some frameworks. For instance, there hasn't been a well-organized FE system to help children with significant needs, and these kids appear to have nowhere else to go as adults but living at home and being cared for by their families [16]. Together with educational exclusion, this social exclusion creates a vicious circle that hinders inclusion and the development of the FE system.

In summary, FE not only has a single evaluation system but also has problems such as educational inequity, tremendous stress and inadequate systems for vulnerable groups. Policies must address both educational and social issues since everyone should have access to the same rights. This will show that Chinese FE has a role in reducing social imbalances. Quality FE is crucial to address future national and international social, cultural, economic and political concerns as today's students will be tomorrow's professionals, policymakers and customers [17,18].

4.2   NFE

As mentioned earlier, NFE is dominated by out-of-school tutoring, which focuses on improving academic performance, and also includes other camps and institutions, which aim to cultivate comprehensive qualities.

In recent years, the function of out-of-school training institutions in China has shown signs of deviation from its essential "nurturing" function, and even its earlier function of "supplementing" and "extending" school education is gradually being left behind. According to Huang Guirong, the function of out-of-school training institutions is being gradually abandoned and is biased towards "over-teaching" and "reinforcing test-taking"; its function of public welfare is fading; capitalization for profit replaces the public good of education [19].

Among other forms of NFE, there is a general problem of unregulated and extremely high fees. For example, 8-day Cambridge Summer School in China (CSSC), which develops middle school students' English speech and debate skills, charges RMB 20,000; Dale Carnegie Training's 8-day Youth Immersion Program also charges tens of thousands.

4.3   IFE

Although IFE is endowed with tremendous benefits, it still has potential pedagogical limitations. For example, although with IFE, students are free to explore their areas of interest before embarking on a full course of study, Jenkins believes that IFE also runs the risk of preventing students from stepping out of their comfort zones to acquire a more comprehensive knowledge [20]. This potential drawback is a warning to educators that IFE needs to be used scientifically in specific teaching contexts - after all, all teaching methods need to be used in a way that maximizes student learning.

In addition, students have less opportunity and time for IFE due to the busy work of their parents and other elders, as well as the heavy academic load of their peers.

5   Solutions

Because educators all work in specific areas, in most cases they will favour one of the three types of education over the others, or even develop a bias towards those they have never used before. However, since they all help students to grow at different levels, educators should do their best to use all three types of education, even if it is very difficult to do so objectively and in a balanced way, so that their own limited experience and biases do not limit their students' learning opportunities [5]. Additionally, there is an urgent need to extend employment through improved education and to enable economic opportunity and social mobility through increased access to higher education; the synergistic development of the three types of education is conducive to the development of a "learning city" [21,22].

Therefore, for the sake of student development, employment growth, economic prosperity, social stability, and the formation of a learning society, solutions related to

allowing FE, NFE, and IFE to develop together are critically essential. The following are some specific measures.

5.1   Using Several Leadership Styles Depending on the Circumstance

According to Etling, too many educators are effective as one kind of educator but not as others [5]. Although democratic and non-directive (laissez-faire) teaching styles should be used in UFE and IFE, directive leadership is frequently successful and even necessary in FE. Therefore, teachers need the flexibility to change their teaching style when faced with different types of education.

5.2   Using New Technologies, the Internet, and Media for FE and NFE

A rich and diverse learning environment is essential for knowledge-seeking, active learning, and meaning-making. Such a learning environment may be lacking in developing countries, namely China. But it can be enriched and diversified through distance and open education [23]. Indeed, new technologies and media play an extremely important role in promoting nonformal and FE, and they can lead to a qualitative leap in NFE and FE research if they are well observed and utilized. Nowadays, radio, television, cell phones, and other terminal devices, which fill all aspects of people's lives and require fewer application skills from learners, are undoubtedly also better paths for nonformal and FE [3].

People can learn in and with the world thanks to networked learning patterns, which can both bring education to the people (learning in the world) and involve the people in education (learning with the world) [24]. In addition, networked learning allows the economically disadvantaged to have access to high-quality FE and NFE.

In a word, the internet, new technologies, and media provide access to cutting-edge, high-quality non-formal and FE equally, which enables students to connect to any place in the world regardless of time and space.

5.3   Grasping the Change of Learning Element to Prevent Stasis in IFE

Teachers must not only capture the elements of change and discovery throughout the learning process, but also inspire students to embrace the discomfort and uncertainty that comes with changing the content and difficulty of the learning material, in order to address the potential risks of students staying in their comfort zones in IFE and causing learning to stagnate.

5.4   Practicing Formal, Nonformal, and Informal Education in Combination

According to Yang, X.P., other forms of education may be more or less included or hidden in any one of them, and there is no absolute monolithic informal, nonformal, or FE [25]. It is not desirable to completely discard any one of them; integration of the three is critical.

In general, the three types of education reform described above to be effective, the focus on competition and the blind pursuit of financial gain and students' ability to meet tests needs to be reduced. In addition, effective reform requires the training of more teachers and a reduction in class sizes, thereby reducing the workload for each teacher. Additionally, in order to give individual instructors incentives to promote inclusion, it is crucial to construct a more equitable system of teacher assessment. Only when people uphold the aforementioned tenets can they implement the above measures without going off the rails.

6   Conclusion

Through the study, this paper finds that although FE has received more attention than NFE and IFE with the double reduction policy, FE still suffers from the problems of having too single evaluation system, limiting students' creativity, bringing various pressures, and unequal distribution of educational resources. Not to mention the current adverse situation of NFE and IFE: the former suffers from irregularities, high fees, and single training goals; the latter tends to limit students' breakthroughs and does not fully play its role in students' growth process. Therefore, in response to these situations, people need to develop the ability of educators to use different teaching styles and change the level of difficulty of learning materials, to make full use of new technologies, networks and media, and to integrate FE, NFE and IFE. The main contribution of this paper is to show the way how these three forms of education can be developed for the overall development of Chinese students. It is true that the literature selected for the current study is limited and there is a lack of data in the research methodology. For a more close, accurate and scientific investigation on FE, NFE, and IFE education, future studies is needed to properly conduct quantitative research on this topic in order to bring about change towards greater inclusion by addressing each of these barriers in practice.

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