

An Investigation into Policies to Improve the Quality of Basic Education in China

-----A Case Study of No.128 Middle School in Shenyang City

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Abstract. In this paper, a critical review of No. 128 Middle School's activities was conducted, with special reference to China. It has explored the practices in relation to the improvement of basic education quality and its gap according to the standards of policies and planning. It has also explored a complexity of improving quality in China's basic education. It has provided a basis for identifying priorities in improving quality in basic education in China. But it is the fiction of the politicians and policy makers to assign priorities to all the potential ways of improving quality in basic education. This paper can only inform their decisions.

Introduction

In this paper the case study and critical analysis of policy will be presented. The first section deals with the historical and social context of No.128 Middle School in Shenyang City. In the second sector, the impact of the government policy on the quality of education in practice in No. 128 Middle School will be presented, particularly in relation to the aspects of school management in finance, personnel, teaching and assessment. In Section Three, the review and analysis of the gap between policy and practice in relation to the improvement of basic education quality with the reference to No.128 Middle School will be presented, including positive teacher and student attitudes (incentives for good results, school climate), active teaching and learning methods and integrated systems for assessment and feedback. This will be done in order to answer the research question, 'How to improve the quality of basic education in China in the all facets within the educational system and external contexts?' The object is to assess the drawbacks of various approaches and policies. Drawing from the literature review and analysis, broader implications for improvement of quality in basic education will be identified.

Context of No.128 Middle School in Shenyang

Shenyang City

Shenyang is the capital city of Liaoning Province, situated in the northeast of China. It is the fourth largest city in China with a population of more than 7 million people and an area of 12,980 sq km. It has nine districts and three counties under its jurisdiction.

Known as the home of machinery', Shenyang has been the nation's base of the heavy industry since the founding of New China. Shenyang city is also the economic, cultural and political center of northeast China, and enjoys economic growth and a very low incident of urban poverty (estimated at 2.2% urban population).

Since the opening and reform, Shenyang has been carrying out the strategy of "Science and Technology Prospering Shenyang ", At present, Shenyang has 755 kindergartens, 1,274 primary schools, 362 middle schools, with 821,000 students, has 89 vocational junior and senior middle schools, with 55,000 students and has 10 adult schools, raising 13,900 students annually. It also has 25 universities and colleges, with 350,000 students, among which there are 180,000 doctoral students and master students (Shenyang, China).

A Brief Overview of No.128 Middle School

No.128 Middle School is a general middle school in Shenyang City. It lies on the north part of Huaihe Street, Huanggu District. It was set up in 1973 and has a more than 30-year history.

The school covers an area of over 40,000 square metres with a floorage of 10,000 square metres. It is a medium sized middle school with 28 classes, 1334 students as well as 126 staff; It has a computer room, a multimedia room, some laboratories, a music room, an art room, a library and a reading room. In addition, according to the modern standard of middle schools, it also has campus network, campus TV station and a modern Playground with hard-rubber surface.

During the past 30 years, the school has been Persisting in educational reform. The school has made its efforts to carry out the educational policies of the nation. It has developed reforms such as the administration of the school, professional development of teachers, and quality assessment of teaching and learning. All the teachers are qualified and among the 126 staff, 95% of them are graduates, 11% are postgraduates, 38 are seniorteachers, more than 20 teachers are leading teachers in their fields in Shenyang city and Huanggu district.

In addition, the goal for the school is to pursue a scientific management structure and stimulate the development of students' personality he scientific management structure which the School leaders are attempting to explore is a way to promote improvement by systematically decentralising individual school control over budget and personnel in order to better educate students accordingly with the development of students' personality. The principals in the School regard 'Establishing the foundation of lifelong development of each student' as the motto of school development.

The Impact of Government Policy on the Quality of Education in Practice in No.128 Middle School

The School tries to put itself in a unique position in Shenyang s increasingly competitive middle school education sector. In the literature review, it is stated that an efficient and effective management system in school is crucial to qualityimprovement in education (Garrett 1995:45) and teacher quality is the most important aspect explaining student achievement (OECD 2001:78)[1]. In improving quality education and enhancing the attraction to the students, the School has made many efforts according to the government policy and planning. Thus, the school has particularly drawn more attention to school management including finance and personnel management, as well as the professional development of teachers, including training in the content of the curriculum and new methods of teaching and learning.

Finance Management in the Middle School

In general, finance management is key towards improvement of quality in education, depending not only on the inputs of finance to education from central and local administrations to individual schools but also on its effective utilisations in the schools.(Commonwealth Secretariat 1991:20)[2]. Over the past two decades, China has experienced a major education policy transition from a highly centralized system to a more decentralized administrative one. Central to the reform is decentralisation of finance and administration and the introduction of market mechanism in the education system. The Policy increased the responsibilities of local governments and schools themselves for financing secondary schools.

According to the Policy, local government of Huanggu District only financed the Middle School one-half to one third of salary bill, and the remainder must be financed from fund-raising activities at the school level. So Principals have to be accountable for raising funds through their own efforts. The improvement of school facilities and the welfare of teachers actually depend on principals themselves. This part of the extra budgetary contributions amounted to one half to one third of the total secondary education expenditures. Due to limited public expenditure on the on the School, many different ways to raise school funds are sought and utilized in No.128 Middle School instead of solely relying on the state and local government financial support. The School finds has been

diversified by seeking other resources such as a school-run factory, rental of assets, school contribution fees as well as fees for 'choice' students.

---- School-run factory the school runs a factory which is located in the school and shares management staff.

---- Rental of assets Rental of rooms in the buildings is also a source of income for the school.

---- School contribution fees the school not only charges normal fees to local Residential students but also charge contribution fees for the Key class students

---- Fees for 'choice' students from outside the area of schools must be charged fees for the choice of the School.

The bulk of the funding for the school is from the school contribution fees and 'choice' student fees.

Personnel Management in the Middle School

According to the literature review in Chapter 2, good teachers are undoubtedly the Key to good education and learning outcomes are dependent fundamentally on teacher quality (Garrett 1995: 31, UNESCO 2003:15)[3]. In China, following the decentralisation of finance and administration in the education sector, personnel management in schools has also been decentralised. The National Workshop on Education Personnel in 1997 was held, calling for further implementation of The Education Law of the People's Republic of China as well as improvement upon the quality of primary and middle school teachers according to law. After that, No.128 Middle School has taken control of personnel management from the local government, including the recruitment and dismissal of the staff.

In order to pool a high-profile team of teachers, the Middle School implemented an employment system of schoolteachers through a contract between teachers and the school, in which the vacancies of teaching position in the school are topped through competitive applications and assessment of teachers' performance. Concerning the unqualified and redundant teachers, the School has adopted dismissal and diverting to other jobs. The recruitment of the new teachers has improved to the level of first-degree graduates. The whole employment system of schoolteachers in the School, to some extent, has stimulated teachers' positive working enthusiasm as well as great working pressures.

Professional Development of Teachers in the Middle School

Improving Energetically the Quality of Teachers through Implementation of "Gardeners' promotion Project across the Centuries", which was carried out in 1999, has greatly influenced the professional development of teachers in No. 128 Middle School. Great efforts have been made to improve the overall quality of teachers through diversified in-service and continuing education programs, including developing teachers' professional value, training in computer skills, completing first-degree level of undergraduate education and developing a contingent of leading teachers. Among the 126 staff, 95% of them are graduates with a first degree, 11% are postgraduates, 38 are senior teachers, more than 20 are leading teachers in their fields. All the teachers in the School have to pass a computer literacy test after being trained on the computer programme in order to accord with the implementing "Modern Distance Education Project" to build up an Open Education Network and a Lifelong Learning System.

In addition, due to the implementation of the new basic education curriculum system for the 21st century, the new contents of textbooks and the new methodologies of learning and teaching in the curriculum syllabus have raised new challenges for teachers. In order to meet the need of the reformed curriculum and methodologies of teaching and learning, the Middle School has made some efforts on the in-service teacher education in two areas, the knowledge base for teaching and pedagogical effectiveness in promoting knowledge acquisition and learner quality. During this in-service teacher training on the new curriculum and pedagogic reforms, the leading teachers in the school played an important role. They effectively disseminated the new notion of education, the Knowledge of textbooks and skills of teaching and learning through attending training workshops and lecturing tours as well as meetings of exchanging school-based experiments.

Teacher and Student Assessment System in the Middle School

According to the literature review in Chapter 2, it argues that assessment is indispensable in improving quality in education (UNESCO 2003:10-12)[3]. In addition, Kellaghan and Greaney (2001: 7)[4] argue that to improve the quality in education, assessment is an important key, which is responsible for identifying problems of educational system, school level or individual learners. In China, due to the implementation of curriculum reform since 1980 a significant issue in China's basic education system, the reform of educational assessment started in the 1990s so as to increase the quality and effectiveness of education. The impact of educational assessment upon the Middle School occurs not only through students' performance but also teachers' performance, which is recognized as the basic factor to reflect the quality of education. Many efforts have been made in the area of teacher and student assessment in No. 128 Middle School. There are two demonstrations of teacher and student assessment in the Middle School during the on-going curriculum reform in basic education of China.

Firstly, students' performance is appraised by a variety of methods in order to cultivate overall competence of students on the five aspects of moral, intelligence, physical, aesthetics and diligence. The form which this has taken includes the following methods: (a) the teacher's statement of comment on students, focusing on individual student's performance and individual feedback, (b) emphasis on practical and creative abilities of students during the teaching process of different subjects, focusing on students' individual development. (c) Change from the traditional teacher-centred teaching method to a student-centred one, which includes various teaching approaches to stimulate students' interest in their study; (d) students' examination scores.

Secondly, teachers' performance is also appraised by a variety of methods so as to provide an impetus for the teachers to give more attention to the quality of their teaching. The form which this has taken is diversity within the School, such as surveys of student opinion, peer observation of teaching, public teaching classes, teaching plans, issued educational essays as well as student achievements of examinations etc. Since these assessments were carried out in the Middle School, much assessment methodology has been introduced not only related to improvement of quality in education but also to the issues of the school management.

An Analysis of the Gap between Policy and Practice In Relation To the Improvement of Basic Education Quality

However, despite this success formula which was often prescribed by the School for school management and professional development of teachers, the School still experiences insufficiency of funds, issues of recruitment and retention of teachers, lower teaching and learning quality as well as imperfect assessment systems for teachers and students

Insufficiently of Funding in the School

In the literature review Of Chapter 2, it is demonstrated that the improvement of quality in education depends largely on the inputs of finance to schools from different levels, central and local administrations as well as individual schools.

In China, finance decentralization has generally allowed individual schools to manage their financial affairs, including raising funds in order to compensate marginal finance from the central and local governments. For the key schools with their good reputation, it works very well because of the large number of students it attracts. For the general and weak schools without reputation in society or attraction to students and parent, the opposites are often true. Disparities began to appear in the system itself.

No.128 Middle School as a general middle school has encountered a great difficulty in shortage of funding since the implementation of decentralization of finance management to school level. According to the decentralization of finance management, the principals in the School have paid much more attention than ever before to raising money through their own efforts. Compared to

other Key schools, when public funding is declined, the principal in the School is very anxious that income is sufficient to maintain the school.

Clearly factors such as the school's reputation and teaching quality are critical as students make decisions to attend the school. Although multi-channeling to raise money has been adopted in the School, it is much less than those key schools to invest in the reconstruction of old school buildings, updating of teaching equipment's and materials as well as the increase in teachers' bonus. As the literature suggests, inadequate funding inevitably leads to an insufficient supply of inputs to the quality education in the School, such as adequate facilities, high quality teacher, good learning environment s well as supplementary teaching and learning materials.

This unsuccessful result has involved the decentralization of finance to school level without any guarantee of the necessary reallocation of financial resources as well as the existing disparity between key schools and non-key schools.

Issue of Recruitment and Retention of Teachers in the School

In viewing the policy of decentralisation of the educational management, the School is given some degree of autonomy in personnel recruitment and retention. Although the School has made great efforts to the personnel management, including the recruitment and retention through a competitive manner and redesigned teachers' remuneration system to attract good teachers, it is still facing the issue of the teacher run-off especially the leading teachers, which has caused a shortage of high-quality teachers and resulted in the decline in the quality of education and learning in the School. Here are two reasons for this problem as follows:

The First is Lower Salaries, Bonus and Inferior Welfare.

According to China statistic yearbook in 1998, primary and secondary school teachers are the lowest-paid professionals. Secondary school teachers' average wage is only 6663 yuan, which is only higher than the farming and wholesale sectors (LiangXiaoyan, 2001)[5]- Though in the last few years the teacher's salaries and welfare is improving, it is still lower than those newly arisen professions in society; Thus, some teachers with higher capacity migrate to other professions with higher salaries and better welfare.

In addition, because of the unbalanced development of Key schools and non-Key schools, the gap of bonus and welfare between these schools is becoming wider and wider. This has caused a migration of teachers, especially leading teachers, from the School to reputable or key schools,

The Second is Greater Pressures and Work Overload.

Not only do teachers in the School have to finish teaching missions regulated in the teaching plan, but also to devote a great deal of time in preparing lessons, correcting homework, doing their own research and each day providing individual instruction for students with problems.-

In addition, they have to give feedback of weekly and monthly tests as well as middle and final examinations during each term. Furthermore, the teachers have to attend the in-service teacher training on the new curriculum and the new methods of teaching and learning as well as computer skills. Some of them have to go to night school for further study on their first or second degree. Thus, the teachers in the School are usually exhausted when they finish school. When they come to school in the morning they are still very tired. Last but not least, the results of the examinations for entering higher schools have become a standard by which to evaluate the school and its teachers. Therefore, the teachers are always under great pressure from endless examinations and appraisals.

Above all, the teachers in the School are human beings with families, working for quite low salaries and suffering particularly from great pressure and heavy workloads. It appears that these two factors mainly affect the departure of the teachers from the School as well as the recruitment of the new staff. As suggested in the literature, constructing and developing a high-quantity teacher cohort is significant for the quality of the School and the quality of teaching and learning. So the School may be able to do something to improve the quality through solving the problems of recruitment and retention of staff.

Lower Teaching and Learning Quality in the School

Another issue in the school in recent years is the quality of teaching and learning two main factors are identified as barriers to greater effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The First is an inadequate Content of the in-service Teacher Training.

As suggested in the literature review in Chapter Three, it was emphasized that it is not possible to develop quality in basic education without in-service teacher training to be in line with the education reform. In order to cope with a greater degree of integration into the government policy and planning concerning in-service teacher training, some leading teachers were sent to study in national top level universities for a second degree, and most staff undertook further study financing themselves, due to the limited funds of the School. However, in-service training itself does not focus on the teachers' weaknesses and problems in terms of teaching the subjects to improve teaching, learning and students' achievement. For example, many teachers are very concerned that they would not be able to cover the syllabus if they practiced with the student-centered approach in class.

The Second is the Exam-Oriented Education System.

In addition, with the reference to the discussion of Chapter Two, it was identified that the teaching and learning process is the heart of good quality education. A closer look into this statement reveals contradictions in practice -in the School, In the School, teaching and learning methodology dominates the class. A teacher-centred approach is guided by an exam-oriented education model so that students learn facts and repeat them in the examinations. It also encourages and rewards the accumulation of knowledge and memorisation instead of encouraging creativity, independent study and collaborative work. Students are generally used to being passive learners. Although student-centred and participatory teaching methods are repeatedly cited as Government policy, these are hard to implement in the School. It might be possible for the School to enforce the implementation of the methodology which the Government strongly advocates through reforming the examination system.

Imperfect Assessment Systems for Teachers and Students in the School

With the reference to the discussion of Chapter Two, it was identified that assessment is an important Key to the teaching instrument, which is responsible for identifying problems in the educational system and at school level as well as showing the abilities of individual learners and guiding their learning and development. But now in the School many tests / examinations and collated marks are being practiced. Whatever the definitions of quality education, it is always the mark or achievements that evaluate teachers and students in the School, although a variety of methods are also adopted within the School. The School judges the teachers by their students' scores in examinations. Teachers in the School also judge the students by their scores in examinations. If students do very well in the examinations, their teachers tend to be regarded as 'good teachers', and the students as good students. The way assessment is used leads to a high competitive spirit among the students, which is to eliminate? Students but does not develop their all-round abilities.

The main reason for this imperfect assessment system of teachers and student also lie on the exam-oriented education system. Since the entrance examination for the key senior secondary is still the most decisive and reliable method of teacher and student assessment, it is difficult for the School to make any further improvements to advance the nation's educational development or the all-round development of individual students. Because the number of students from Because the number of student from a year group entering the key senior secondary school decides the evaluation of the School performance, which influences the prestige of a school, it causes a lot of pressure on the principal, the teachers as well as the students of the School. The school has to put excessive attention on the examination results in order to improve the reputation and attract more students, although the Government has paid significant attention to quality-oriented education. It

might take a long time to radically change the reality from the traditional exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education.

Conclusion

In this paper, a case study of No.128 Middle has been conducted and was interpreted. It is clear that the School has experienced the educational reforms. Consistent with the Chinese reform and open-door perspective it was shown how the international power and the effects of the Government have influenced the present situation in No. 128 Middle School. Generally speaking, the four aspects of the educational reforms in the School were direct and articulate in the study. I was able to form a clearer picture of the process of the financial and personnel reforms that were taking place and the problems the School is facing.

Reflecting on the overall process and results of this study, it is clear that improving quality in education is a very complex process. It involves a diversity of people with a variety of different orientations, perspectives and opinions on how to improve quality in education. They produce a rich array of ideas on the inputs, processes and outputs of a high quality education: sufficient school finance and resources, appropriate teaching and learning methods, the relevant content of learning and education, expected student outcomes, how the outcomes are assessed, and how these processes are organized and managed and so on. Ultimately; it is the melodious interaction of all these elements which improve quality in basic education within these systems, within educational organizations and within the classroom.

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