

Teachers are Deprofessionalized when Control of the Curriculum is Taken away from them: Discuss in Relation to High School Teachers in China

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the writer will use a literature analysis approach to explore the issue of teacher autonomy and professionalism in both centralized and decentralized curriculum models. Through literature analysis, the paper argues that centralized and decentralized curricula each have their own positive and negative effects on teachers' autonomy and professional development. Under the current curriculum model in China, teachers' autonomy and professionalism in curriculum development are both enhanced and limited to some extent. Based on the analysis of the literature, this paper will propose recommendations for enhancing Chinese high school teachers' autonomy and professionalism in curriculum development.

1. Introduction

In this essay, the writer will explore teachers' autonomy and professionalism in curriculum development. In China, there appears to be a process of change from a mainly centralized curriculum to a decentralized curriculum, and the writer will refer to this process as a way of highlighting issues in teachers' autonomy and professionalism. The writer will argue that only the teacher has the authority of curriculum development, their autonomy and professionalism will be promoted; otherwise, it will cause teacher de-professionalism. In the first section, the advantages and problems of a centralized and decentralized curriculum will be presented. First of all, the advantages of a centralized curriculum will be presented, including the argument that all children must have access to the same curriculum

^[1]. Following this, the problems of a centralized curriculum will be examined, including the impact on teacher autonomy and professionalism. This is closely followed by an analysis of the strengths of the decentralized curriculum; the ability to meet the diverse needs of students and to improve the quality of the curriculum is an excellent strength. However, a decentralized curriculum also has its problems, including widening the gap between regional education and the difficulty of achieving education equity. In the second section of the article, the writer will introduce definitions of teacher autonomy and teacher professionalism; although they are difficult to define clearly, this paper gives a unified understanding of them in the education context. Then, an overview of their importance and the centralized curriculum's impact on teacher autonomy and teacher professionalism will also be explored in this

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section. Section three of this essay will explore the trend towards a decentralized curriculum in China. The current Chinese curriculum system will be analyzed to see how it supports and limits teachers' autonomy and professionalism in curriculum development. Finally, the writer will suggest some ways to strengthen Chinese high school teachers' autonomy and professionalism in curriculum development.

2. Centralized and Decentralized Curriculum

2.1 Centralized Curriculum

A centralized curriculum is one in which the administrative authority of a state assumes responsibility for curriculum planning, and all curriculum resources, including funding, information, personnel, and technology, have full control^[2]. Usually, the local area or school, as the provider of education, is responsible only for implementing the existing curriculum. However, the manifestation of a centralized curriculum may vary from country to country. Sometimes, there are more rigorous centralized curricula that set out every aspect of education so that every child gets the same learning resources. In some countries, centralized curricula are looser; for example, only learning objectives are set, and teachers are responsible for planning how to achieve them.

Advantages

Firstly, the centralized curriculum provides a field of study arrangement for all students regardless of differences in social background, culture, gender, ability, and disability, promoting equity in education^[1,3]. The centralized curriculum provides a framework for all schools to ensure that teaching and learning are balanced and consistent. It includes goals to be achieved, subjects to be taught, and ensures that every student develops the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes necessary to self-realization and development into an active and responsible citizen. As such, it is seen as a means of 'improving the overall quality of education for all children'^[4].

Secondly, it strengthens the accreditation of teaching standards. Since the knowledge and skills required to implement the centralized curriculum are almost identical, the requirements for teaching standards also have converged^[5]. Uniform requirements for teaching standards contribute to teachers' professional growth in disadvantaged areas and ensure the quality of local education delivery.

Problems

The planning of a highly concentrated national cur-

riculum is generally based on the knowledge-based curriculum concept rather than a process-driven concept, and most of the key points of knowledge delivered are instrumental knowledge and knowledge with commercial use. Because of this, Kelly believes that a highly centralized national curriculum means 'a progressive loss of freedom- the professional freedom of teacher and, most importantly of all, the intellectual freedom of the pupil'^[6]. The highly concentrated curriculum view believes that teachers should not make any judgments when formulating education policies and designing curriculum. Teachers should be operators or passive agents, technicians, and not experts, the only focus for teachers is how to teach^[7].

At the same time, the centralized national curriculum has also harmed student development. One of the purposes of a centralized national curriculum is to allow every student to receive the same education. However, to truly implement individual rights and to make everyone accept a common course, it is also necessary to consider the differences of students so that everyone can accept the course that suits them. The consequences of providing all students with the same course are apparent. For example, after the promulgation of the Education Reform Act of 1988 in the U.K., the rate of student absenteeism has increased significantly, and the overall development trend of student behavior has also deteriorated significantly^[6].

Furthermore, the centralized curriculum will inevitably lead to standardized assessments. Because the highly centralized curriculum adopts the 'aims-and-objectives' mode, the academic results of students are only determined by exams, such as the A level exam in the United Kingdom. In countries that adopt a centralized curriculum, teachers' classroom practices are increasingly standardized by these high-stakes testings; they use prepackaged, scripted curricula explicitly aimed at increasing the test scores of standardized tests pupils^[8], rather than focus on students personalized growth. Standardized tests have had even worse consequences.

'Standardized tests thus literally objectify students by reducing them into decontextualized numerical objects for comparison.By reducing students to numbers, standardized testing creates the capacity to view students as things, as quantities apart from their human qualities' (8, p.38).

2.2 Decentralized Curriculum

Comparative education scholar Mark Hanson argues that in the decentralized curriculum, 'responsibility and tasks are transferred from the central body to the local unites or school level'^[9]. Thus, Hanson^[10] and Bray^[11] identify three basic kinds of decentralization in terms of

the degree to which the central state disperses its governing authority.

(1) Deconcentration (transfer of tasks and work but not authority).

(2) Delegation (transfer of decision-making authority from a superior to a subordinate level, but authority can be withdrawn by the center).

(3) Devolution (transfer of authority to an autonomous unit that can act independently without permission from the center).

Advantages

It is believed that a degree of decentralization would enable schools to adapt to changes in their external environment and be more responsive to the needs of students and communities^[12].

Decentralization allows teachers to be involved in the curriculum development process, which allows for greater flexibility and better decision making, as teachers are more closely aligned with the issues in the current curriculum implementation process^[13]. Teachers will put in more effort because it will be how their curriculum and strategic plans for curriculum development are implemented. From this perspective, a decentralized curriculum will promote teacher autonomy and contribute to professional development.

The decentralization view holds that by giving schools a certain amount of authority, teachers will, in turn, have corresponding rights to the curriculum^[14]. They can develop curriculum adaption and school-based curriculum according to students' needs to help them achieve individualized growth. This is precisely in line with Kelly's view that education should be a process of individual development, which can only be facilitated by the provision of a curriculum tailored to the needs of each student, rather than by the planned imposition of the same program on all^[6].

Problems

McGinn and Welsh^[15] mentioned that successful implementation of curriculum decentralization requires both political support for the decentralization and the capability of those involved in the reform to carry it out. If either of these two conditions is not met, the implementation of curriculum decentralization will not achieve its best results. One aspect of the curriculum decentralization policy that has been widely questioned is that the central government has shifted responsibility to local governments and communities without giving adequate targeted support. In deprived areas, if the central government does not pro-

vide sufficient policy, financial and teacher development support, then local governments and schools would not have the resources and capacity to exercise their authority for curriculum development, the achievement of quality improvement and equity in education will be a mere empty phrase. According to the survey conducted by the World Bank in 2013^[16], the decentralization of the curriculum has increased the overall enrollment in Brazil and Chile. However, it has not by itself eliminated inequalities between different income areas, and the quality of poor communities remains backward.

3. Teacher Professionalism and Teacher Autonomy

3.1 Definitions of Teacher Professionalism and Teacher Autonomy

In the educational context, definitions of teacher professionalism focus on teachers' professional qualifications such as 'being good at his/her job'^[17,18], 'fulfilling the highest standards'^[19], and 'achieving excellence'^[20]. These dominant discourses in the field of education indicate that teacher professionalism is associated with improving the quality and standards of teachers' work. Phelps^[21] believes professionalism is enhanced when teachers use excellence as a critical criterion for judging their actions and attitudes. However, there are still arguments about teaching is a semi-professional occupation because their autonomy is often under organizational control^[22,23,20].

Autonomy is one of the main focuses of professionalism's identity. Lieberman^[24] state that the tasks of professionals are important, exclusive, and complex; therefore, professionals should have the freedom from external pressure for autonomy in decision making. Willner^[25] argues that teachers' autonomy is based on collaborative decision-making and the freedom to make prescriptive professional choices about the services rendered to students. Fay^[26] and Hanson^[9] believe that teachers are qualified authorities in the teaching process and they have the autonomy to organize learning process as they choose.

3.2 Importance of Teacher Autonomy and Teacher Professionalism

The curriculum autonomy factor is logically consistent with teachers' identification with their profession^[27,28], particularly in relation to the authority in the selection of activities and materials, in making decisions about instructional planning and sequencing, and in reducing job stress. Teachers who perceive themselves as having control over the curriculum are less stressed^[28]. Pearson and

Moomaw's ^[29] study also shows that as teacher autonomy increases, so does teacher empowerment and professional improvement.

The professional development of teachers is of vital importance to the improvement of the curriculum. According to Xu ^[30], curriculum improvement, and improvement, to a certain extent, require internal support from teachers' continuous professional development. In curriculum practice, by participating in curriculum decision-making, teachers can not only re-examine their teaching practice from the perspective of student learning needs and their professional development, but also better understand and design educational objectives from the perspective of a coordinator, and gradually enhance their professionalism. In turn, the development of the teacher's internal professional structure and the enrichment of their professional knowledge will help them to better participate in curriculum decision-making and contribute to curriculum development.

3.3 Impacts of Centralization on Teacher Autonomy and Teacher Professionalism

Under a centralized curriculum system, the central government manages through hierarchical decision-making and control, with schools as agents of the government. Under this hierarchical model, teachers are dependent on the principal and the principal is dependent on the superintendents, teachers have no autonomy, let alone professional development.

Curriculum planning is done by administrators and specialists; teachers do not plan or evaluate their work, they simply execute it. In a centralized system of curriculum planning, teachers are not required to have high levels of knowledge and skills in learning theory and pedagogy, cognitive science and child development, curriculum, and assessment, as they may not make major decisions about these issues.

Centralized testing means a reduction in the professional status of teachers. Rather than adapting the provincial curriculum to local conditions or the needs of individual students, teachers are constrained by accurately covering the curriculum material that appears on the test. In a child-centered system, teachers must have considerable expertise and autonomy to diagnose and respond to individual needs. However, content-centered systems require only technical training to implement decisions already made by the central bureaucracy. The greater the degree of curriculum specificity imposed by external examinations, the more limited the teachers' need and demand for professional autonomy ^[31].

4. Curriculum Development in China

4.1 Current Curriculum System in High School of China

Chinese current curriculum system consists of a national curriculum, local curriculum, and school-based curriculum. Based on guaranteeing and implementing the national curriculum, the state encourages localities to develop local curricula suitable for their regions and schools to develop school-based curricula that meet students' needs.

The National Curriculum is a centralized reflection of the nation's will and is a major factor in determining the quality of basic education in a country ^[30]. Thus, the national curriculum is uniform and compulsory. The implementation of China's national curriculum is carried out by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE), which formulates and promulgates curriculum management and development policies and curricular programs, the proportion and scope of various types of curricula, the system for the preparation, review and selection of teaching materials, and the development of curriculum standards or syllabi for compulsory basic education courses or core courses. The National Curriculum is nationally oriented, ensuring that it is accessible to all students, with an emphasis on universality. The MoE ^[31] specifies that the national curriculum should account for 80 to 84 percent of all school hours for students in high school and it covers only the main subjects and sets minimum standards as well as basic requirements ^[32]. In order to fill the gap, content not covered by the national curriculum is included in the local curriculum or school-based curriculum.

The local curriculum is tightly integrated with the local social, economic, social, and cultural development. The current local curriculum development emphasizes the use of local resources. At present, all provinces and autonomous regions offer local courses, most of which are designed to strengthen students' social, economic, and cultural understanding of their regions. School-based curriculum development is based on school resources and meets the individual development needs of students ^[30]. There are two forms of school-based curricula. One is the adaptation and innovation of the national and local curricula. The other is the school-designed curriculum, which is a distinctive new curriculum developed by the school.

Under such a curriculum, students will have a more abundant and more varied curriculum. For example, there may be various kinds of history courses in a high school in Changping District of Beijing. According to the MoE ^[31], modern Chinese history is required as a compulsory course for students in Grade 10, with a minimum of two

classes per week and a total of at least 36 class hours. The Changping District Education Commission in Beijing has developed a compulsory Changping history course as one of the local curricula, which is taught for 20 hours per term. In the school-based curriculum, students also can take courses based on foreign textbooks such as American history, European history, world history, and historical and cultural courses, such as Beijing History Story, developed by teachers.

4.2 Decentralization in a Centralized Curriculum System

The authority of the central government continues to dominate the entire education system. However, China's education policy is also partially decentralized in a fully centralized curriculum system, as reflected in the following aspect.

Decentralization of education administration. Since 1995, the central government and the MoE began to allow their subordinate education authorities to delegate the management of education. The MoE is responsible for coordinating the management and development of education in China and formulating the general framework and master plan for curriculum development, personnel management, and resource coordination. Local governments and the education department manage regional school systems to implement national policies based on local conditions. At the same time, principals have been given more autonomy in school matters, such as teacher recruitment and training, coordination of school resources, and the management of schools assessment, maintenance of school-community relations. The organization of educational administration has given localities and schools some flexibility in tailoring schools to local conditions.

Some regions are allowed to develop their compulsory curricula and teaching materials. Due to their developed economies and strong traditions of education and research, provinces of Zhejiang, Shanghai, Guangdong and Sichuan are allowed to develop their curricula and textbooks. However, the autonomy of local curriculum and textbook design is limited by a rigorous review process. All locally designed curricula and teaching materials can only be put into use after the MoE has confirmed their conceptual content, academic quality, and suitability for classroom teaching^[33].

Since 2000, the MoE has authorized 16 provinces and cities to design their own College Entrance Examination(Gaokao) papers based on local curriculum content and actual teaching conditions^[34]. Nationally administered tests are argued to be insensitive to most students' achievement and drag the curriculum down to the lowest

common denominator of basic skills^[4]. Locally-designed papers provide greater consistency in the local teaching content, and the questions not only focus on the accumulation of knowledge but also pay more attention to the students' competency assessment. However, the questions in local-designed papers must conform to the national examination framework established by the MoE.

A school-based curriculum is also considered one of the hallmarks of a decentralized curriculum. The school-based curricula are developed by teachers and approved by the local education department. It seems as if the local education departments have real authority at the level of the school-based curriculum. In reality, however, local education department, schools and teachers must work within the policy framework set up by the central authority and subject to inspection by the Central Education Supervisory Group.

In general, all major policy decisions continue to be made centrally, but education services are provided locally. This arrangement simply meant shifting the workload of central officials to bureaucratic officials and teachers in the local level, and the local agents are not empowered to decide what to do and how to do it. In this sense, the decentralization in China's curriculum reform remains superficial. Measured against Hanson's^[10] conceptual framework, decentralization in China's curriculum has only taken the form of deconcentration that does not involve any real transfer of power to the intermediate and basic levels.

5. Teacher Autonomy and Professionalism in the Current Curriculum System

From the above analysis, it is clear that schools and teachers are not given real curriculum power, and the overall improvement of teachers' autonomy and professional capacity is very limited. In provinces where they can design their curricula, the college entrance exams pay more attention to assessing students' comprehensive abilities, and teachers have more space to delve into teaching and curriculum design. Their autonomy and professionalism have developed to a certain extent. In most areas, however, teachers do not have the time or resources for curriculum development, and they end up de-professionalizing.

5.1 Improvement and Problems Regarding Teacher Professionalism and Teacher Autonomy

Improvement

Teacher autonomy in curriculum development is of great value. Kelly^[6] argues that the most positive educa-

tional purpose is to increase teacher autonomy in curriculum development and to design the most effective curriculum; through these curricula, all children's capabilities and potential will be developed.

The current education policy gives teachers the right to exercise their autonomy as educators in curriculum implementation, curriculum reconstruction, and curriculum development. In the implementation of the national and local curricula, teachers can make full use of the local natural, social and human resources and perform various teaching activities creatively. In the development and implementation of the school-based curriculum, teachers can decide independently on the setting of curriculum objectives, the selection of curriculum resources, and curriculum arrangements; moreover, teachers also have the autonomy to evaluate the school-based curriculum^[14].

The increased autonomy of teachers will correspondingly contribute to their professional development. The process of redesigning the implementation of the national and local curricula is a process of inquiry. To expose teachers to new ideas is to give them new perspectives^[35]. The results of the new curriculum and peer research can be used as teacher education elements for teacher growth. The exploration of new curriculum programs, syllabi, teaching materials, and research findings can be turned into opportunities for deeper teacher growth.

Besides, participation in the development of school-designed curricula can provide teachers with opportunities for enriching professional experiences that can contribute to their professional development. Firstly, participation in school-designed curriculum development can facilitate a change in teachers' roles and attitudes. In school-designed curriculum development, the role of teachers is not only as curriculum implementers but also as learners, curriculum designers, collaborators, and educators—a complex mix of teachers^[36]. Secondly, involvement in curriculum development can help teachers improve their professional competencies. In participating in the process of designing curriculum development in schools, teachers must understand how the curriculum works and have the ability to develop curriculum resources, design curriculum, evaluate the quality of curriculum design in schools, and teach^[37].

Problems

Studies show that the primary goal of decentralization in most areas of China has not been promoting teachers' autonomy and professional development^[38]. This is due to several reasons. Firstly, some places do not have the conditions to develop a school-based curriculum. In schools in remote areas, it is impossible to develop a school-based curriculum due to their teachers, equipment, and other

limitations, and the creative implementation of national and local curricula is extremely strict^[14]. Secondly, teachers lack professional knowledge of curriculum development and professional guidance, leading to a deadlock in curriculum development^[39]. Finally, the main problem is that the standardized assessment has not changed and will not change shortly. Almost half of the provinces still focus mainly on examining students' knowledge rather than their overall ability, with nationally standardized question papers. As a result, most teachers' educational activities are still limited to teaching students the content of examinations. The authority that these teachers have been given to develop school-based curricula is not being realized^[14]. There are even less autonomy and professionalism for teachers in terms of curriculum development.

5.2 Suggestions on Improving Teacher Autonomy and Professionalism

The writer suggests that teachers' autonomy and professional competence in curriculum development can be enhanced by increasing investment in education, increasing teachers' participation, and providing them with specific professional support, thereby improving the quality of education.

Increasing educational investment

China's investment in education mainly relies on the financial support of local governments, compared to economically developed regions, the local fiscal revenue of economically less developed regions is relatively small, their investment in education is bound to be relatively inadequate, so this has led to some schools do not have sufficient teachers and teaching resources to ensure the curriculum development^[14]. In order to ensure teachers' autonomy in curriculum development and to improve their professional competence, it is necessary to increase investment in education in high schools in economically less developed regions, optimize teacher allocation and ensure adequate teaching resources and teaching equipment. The development of the curriculum, the development of teachers, and the individual development of students can only be achieved if the school is given adequate external resources.

Increasing teachers' participation in curriculum development

In the current curriculum system, teachers have a certain degree of autonomy in the creative implementation of the national and local curricula, as well as in the development of school-based curricula. With this in mind,

it is crucial to increase teachers' motivation to participate in curriculum development^[40]. Teachers play a vital role in every aspect of the process, from the establishment of the curriculum team to the evaluation and revision of the curriculum, and the quality of the curriculum is ensured if they are able to participate deeply and actively. Schools should respect and recognize the main role of teachers in curriculum development, provide teachers with adequate curriculum resources, and encourage teachers to participate in curriculum exploration in a variety of ways actively.

Providing teachers with professional support

Teacher training and mentoring by external experts are considered to be effective ways to enhance the professional competence of teachers and promote curriculum development. On the one hand, initial training courses should be provided to prepare teachers to take on the central role of curriculum development and, more importantly, they should be given adequate opportunities for in-service education so that they can acquire the new skills needed to innovate and gain a deeper understanding of broader educational issues^[6]. On the other hand, teachers should be assisted by a wandering expert to develop the skills and techniques needed for proper and effective evaluation for curriculum development^[6]. The expert's role is to provide teachers with expert advice and the detached appraisal they cannot provide themselves.

Ongoing reform of the Gaokao

Since 2002, China has been working on the reform from the unified Gaokao to a comprehensive quality assessment in an attempt to incorporate the assessment of students' abilities into the university admission criteria^[21].

However, until today, the score-based approach to university admissions has remained unchanged^[41]. Only by changing the criteria for university admissions from a score-only form of assessment to a comprehensive aptitude assessment, it is possible to fundamentally stimulate educational vitality, teachers' curriculum authority can be truly implemented, and teachers' professional capacity can be developed in the long run.

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