

Many of the problems faced by Chinese educators have a familiar ring: lack of leadership, excessive paperwork, poor teacher training, disorderly students.

EDUCATION IN CHINA

JOHN P. SMITH

IMPRESSIVE efforts to revitalize education have been made in China in recent years. Improvements have not been steady, however; a period of gross regression occurred during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). But times have changed.

- Today, 94 percent of all school-age children are enrolled in school compared with 25 percent in 1949.

- Pre-school attendance increased from 140,000 in 1950 to 11.51 million in 1980.

- In 1949, there were 24 million students aged 7–12 in 340,000 primary schools; currently 150 million students attend 900,000 primary schools (*Xinhua*, September 23, 1979).

- Middle school students (ages 12–17) number 55 million compared with one million in 1949. Middle school enrollments declined by 3.7 million between 1979 and today due to China's reforms in secondary education. Enrollment in secondary technical schools meanwhile increased to 1.24 million—44,000 more than the 1979 enrollment. Another 454,000 students now attend secondary level agricultural and other vocational schools.

- Enrollment at the university level jumped from 117,000 in 1949 to 1.14 million in 1980 in 675 institutions of higher learning. Science and engineering students make up 57.8 percent of this enrollment (*Beijing Review*, May 18, 1981).

- To keep pace with this burgeoning student population, the number of middle school teachers increased from 83,000 in 1949 to 3.28 million today. Elementary teachers numbered 836,000 in 1949; today there are 5.22 million (*Xinhua*, September 23, 1979).

The customary applause given foreign visitors when they enter Chinese classrooms is as much a symbol of student spirit as it is a friendly greeting. But, there is much that remains hidden to the eye of even the most discerning observer. Consequently, much of what is good about Chinese education and likewise many of its problems cannot be observed in brief and scattered classroom visits.

But China seeks criticism of its policies; criticism within the system is considered essential to progress toward established goals. And from their published criticisms one is able to glimpse those aspects of education the Chinese consider important enough to label problems.

In identifying problem areas, I found that many resemble our own, and, if one wished to stretch the point a bit, may be considered universal.

Leadership

Many complaints of Chinese teachers have a familiar ring; they center on a perceived failure of leadership. Often, principals are seen as too concerned with the details of administration. The lament, "Why don't principals go into the classrooms," is apparently heard as often in China as in the U.S. and for the same reasons.

Outspoken criticism of the many meetings called by administrators is another symptom of failed leadership. In China, the problem is compounded by non-school meetings, for example, militia and planned parenthood meetings.

Chinese teachers are also concerned about "single chop" directives—those issued from above without consultation with teachers. And there are excessive

"surveys, evaluations, and comparisons . . . leaving teachers and students utterly exhausted and the school leadership barely able to cope" (Xu, 1979).

Chinese teachers see themselves as confronted with numerous tasks forced on them by regulatory agencies and by administrators who fail to truly understand school regulations (Zhang, 1979). Translated, these concerns would seem to mean that with new party and governmental leadership a new scheme of progress is under way in which the schools are expected to play a strong role. Administrators, however, are afraid to exhibit strong leadership due to past criticism and embarrassment.

Back to Basics

Pressures from various fronts indicate that schools are expected to solve a multitude of ills not of their own making as New China gears up for the 21st century.

Chinese education may even have its own "back to basics" movement (Cheever, 1978) as it moves from the rebellious days of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to the more disciplined approach of today. The emphasis on "key schools" for the academically able, examinations for admission to key schools and universities, better teacher training, competition among students, and curriculum reform all signal a return to the fundamentals of academic excellence necessary to develop children who "walk on two legs"; that is, are both Red and expert. In the past, being politically correct was sufficient. Expertness, on the other hand, was considered elitist and was shunned along with other Western thought and habits.

The debate on how to improve the quality of education and re-center the focus on teaching is continuing and is not likely to be resolved early or easily. There are those in Chinese education

John P. Smith is Associate Professor of Education, University of Washington, Seattle.

who take the position

... that the way to grasp quality is to increase the work load. Consequently, they exert themselves in increasing the number of classes, increasing the homework, giving more tests and examinations, and by lecturing more during class sessions. However, some experienced teachers do not agree. They feel that the increased classes and homework might produce visible results in a short time but that over the long run the students' heavy responsibilities and daily preoccupation with stresses would on the contrary blunt their positiveness and prevent attainment of the goal of improving the quality of education (*Wen Hui Bao*, 1979).

Teacher Training

During the Cultural Revolution many Chinese colleges and universities were shut down completely or in part. Professors and students alike were sent to work in the fields and in the factories. In the institutions that remained open, political correctness was valued over academic excellence and students were encouraged in the name of the party to criticize their teachers. The shock of this violent purging of traditional education practice not only shook the foundations of education but left them weak for years to come.

Those who stayed on in teaching during this period learned survival skills ill-suited for today. Consequently, one is not shocked to read the following generalized account of classroom teaching:

The teacher lectures and the students listen; the teacher asks questions and the students answer; the teacher writes on the blackboard and the students copy; the teacher gives exercises and the students work out the exercises. After class, the teacher's desk is piled with exercise books, and on returning home, the students must do many kinds of homework (Tuan, 1978).

The severity of the problem of poorly trained teachers is well illustrated by the report of a 1978 study of education problems in Shantou Diqu (Swatow Prefecture) in Guangdong Province. According to two investigative reporters, only 6.3 percent of the teachers in junior middle school (first three years of the five year middle school) were college graduates. With so many untrained or poorly trained teachers, a number of subjects, especially in the sciences and foreign languages, could not be offered in many of the schools in the Prefecture. The problem is made even more acute by teacher shortages in some counties (Li and Zhang, 1979).

Steps are being taken to improve teacher training at both the preservice and inservice levels. More and more existing colleges and universities are being reactivated and new ones built.

Those responsible for teacher training are developing concrete goals that combine teacher training with scientific research. Better books, reference materials, and equipment have been produced to aid in teacher training. And, possibly most important, teachers assigned to teacher training represent a high level of political achievement, vocational competency, and teaching experience (*Kwangming Daily*, 1978).

For those teachers whose training is considered weak, there are retraining programs and inservice courses. For example, the Hangchow Teachers Institute for Advanced Studies offers "more than twenty advanced courses" and a

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number of special seminars for middle school teachers (Fingar, 1978). And in Nanning, study groups have been set up to improve the quality of teaching in Chinese language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, English language, history, and geography (*Xinhua*, February 28, 1979).

Student Problems

China has its juvenile delinquents. Some young Chinese fight, steal, or are guilty of other forms of anti-social behavior which the Chinese view with increasing alarm. Contributing to juvenile delinquency is the rapidly growing number of middle school graduates who qualify for the limited number of undergraduate positions in higher education (middle schools in China serve students 12-17 years of age). At the same time, fewer and fewer students accept "rustication"; that is, being "sent down" to work in the countryside.

While party organs stress patience and continued study, the young grow impatient. Factories and local industry can absorb only so many workers leaving many young people who wish to work in the city with little to do. Some have formed in-city collectives; but many, like the two middle school gradu-

ates we met in Guilin (Kweilin), wanted only to attend college. In recognition of the problem, appropriately blamed on the "gang-of-four" as are so many of China's problems, the government is trying to make adjustments while contending that sending youth to the countryside is correct. In 1979, a group under the State Council in charge of affairs concerning educated youths in the countryside took the following position:

From now on arrangements will be made for middle school graduates to work both in the cities and in the countryside instead of sending them to the countryside as was done in the past. The state plans this year to provide jobs for 7 million middle school graduates in the cities and towns, while 800,000 will go to work in the countryside (*Beijing Review*, September 14, 1979).

Attempts to restructure secondary education have also been made. The decrease in middle school enrollments and increase in secondary level vocational and technical school enrollments are the result of a conscious effort to provide more students with skills applicable in industry while easing the number of those who prepare for higher education.

The effectiveness of this policy revision in satisfying youth unrest remains to be seen. Much will depend on the quality of work assignments and future prospects for entering college.

In their rush to alter the school's role in society, administrators and teachers have so burdened students with classes and homework that they've been criticized by *Beijing Ribao*, one of Beijing's (Peking's) leading periodicals. Schools were taken to task for overloading both elementary and middle school students with so many subjects that students spend eight hours a day in class while some even attend evening classes. Homework is considered excessive, often requiring special arrangements for help at home (*Beijing Ribao*, February 18, 1979). Party officials fear students will have insufficient time for sleep and cultural and sports activities. At stake is the students' motivation to learn and the goal of raising the quality of education.

Another problem confronting Chinese schools is the education of slow learners. In some schools these students have been ignored or have carried reduced loads. In the worst instances, slow learners were simply abandoned to society without purpose or promise. In Xuanwu District, the Bureau of Education, in recognition of the contribution that trained persons can make to China's goal of the "four modernizations," has proposed the following steps for

strengthening the program for slow learners. First, develop a unified ideology with regard to the slow learner. Second, plan small classes for slow learners in all schools. Third, set high expectations for slow learners and emphasize adherence to school regulations. Fourth, strengthen elementary school leadership to promote more even standards of quality beginning in the lower grades. Fifth, help slow learners as well as accelerated students prepare for national college entrance exams. Finally, serious problems should not be solved on the basis of individualistic policy, but rather, council from higher-level leadership should be sought (*Beijing Ribao*, January 17, 1979).

Chinese educators do not tolerate disorderly behavior. But China's teachers are also caring individuals. One teacher anecdote describes the differences in results between "stinging" students with their mistakes and seeking to change behavior through affection and appeals to reason. This teacher stated, "Ice 3 feet deep cannot be attributed to only one day's coldness and mental wounds can only be healed with psychological drugs." In changing the backward students, a teacher not only has to work hard, but also show them deep proletarian feeling and great warmth as though they were his or her own children. This is the only way to the hard ice covering their minds" (Yan, 1979).

Universities

New university and college enrollments account for only 3 to 4 percent of the approximately seven million middle school graduates (*Beijing Review*, July 28, 1980). The 300,000 students admitted to college out of the nearly four million taking the college entrance exam in 1979 not only meant many disappointed youths but was considered too few to support China's march toward modernization (*Xinhua*, June 30, 1979).

The problems of inadequately trained faculty and ineffective administrators are acute at the university level. In general, China's higher education faculties are middle aged or older and out of touch with the scientific and technological developments of more highly developed countries. Younger faculty members trained in the anti-intellectual atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution need immediate re-training and represent a weak foundation for the future. It is not surprising that at Qinghua (Tsinghua) University middle-aged teachers make up 63 percent of the fac-

ulty but are carrying 85 percent of the teaching load and supervising 89 percent of the research (*Xinhua*, June 30, 1979). Or that at Chengdu University of Science and Technology efforts to improve the faculty include reorganization, reform in the methods of assigning workloads, and study classes and examinations for young faculty members. Chengdu will emphasize competence rather than politics, a pragmatic approach to encourage intellectuals—with notable support from the highest levels of government (*Guangming Ribao*, May 23, 1979).

Conclusion

This brief description of some of the problems experienced by Chinese educators and social planners is not meant to detract from China's achievements but to illuminate the difficulties attendant with monumental education changes in a rapidly developing nation. The similarity of these problems to our own and those of other developed nations leads one to guess that many problems in education are inherent regardless of the size of the nation, its stage of development, or political orientation. ■

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