Basic Education Reform in China: Untangling the Story of Success

Chengzhi Wang
Princeton University

Quanhua Zhou
University of Arizona


Abstract
China's recent basic education reform followed and, in a certain way, imitated its economic reform. The economic reform merged the experimental dual (planned and market) price systems into a free market economy and yielded phenomenal success. Basic education reform, however, has not succeeded in transforming the introductory dual-track (key school and regular school) systems into a universal one. This article briefly examines the general process and outcomes of basic education reform. It discusses the following questions: Is basic education reform also a story of success? What significant lessons can the Chinese reform experience offer to other comparable developing countries?
Introduction

The reform of basic education (which includes primary and junior secondary schooling) in China from the middle 1980s has not completely severed it from Maoist popular education. The post-Mao reform policy makers have never discarded the tradition of localization and community participation. In contrast to Maoist egalitarian schooling, however, school or pupil tracking (typically represented by key vs. regular schools) has been promoted in pursuit of economic efficiency in post-Mao educational changes and reforms.

This article presents a brief examination of the general process and outcomes of basic education reform. We first summarize economic reform and basic education reform, in particular their significant similarities and differences in terms of process and results. We then explain the success of basic education reform using three perspectives, namely, 1) the three matters/solutions, 2) contingency theory, and 3) the 3-C framework. Next, we analyze the price that China has paid for the success of education reform. Finally, we conclude that what the Chinese experience can offer to other developing countries is just what other countries have offered to China: erosion of traditions and westernization of schooling.

Economic Reform

Chinese economic reform is a unique process. From a price perspective, in the early 1980s, the government acquiesced to the coexistence of central planned production and market pricing. In 1985, transactions based on market prices outside the state plan won legal sanction. Gradual decontrol of consumer goods prices steadily brought most consumer goods into a market price system (Naughton, 1995; Riskin, 1987). In 1991, the Central Committee of the Communist Party called for elimination of the dual-track system and boldly recommended a gradual shift to a market system. One year later, the National People's Congress declared that the objective of reform was a "socialist market economy with all stress on the free market" (Naughton, 1995, p. 288). The government then unambiguously embraced the free market economy and began systematically dismantling the outdated command plan economic structure.

However, the economic reform was not strategically planned. In other words, it was initiated without a strategy. Yet, "a limited number of crucial government decisions and commitments were required in order to allow reform to develop. In certain periods, policymakers acted as if they had a commitment to a specific reform strategy" (Naughton, 1995, p. 7). In the process of the reform as a whole, "what is most striking is the succession of incremental, steadily accumulating measures of economic reform that have gradually transformed the economy in a fundamental way" (Naughton, 1995, p. 20).

No doubt, the two decades of economic reform resulted in increasing income inequality as documented in the rich research literature studying the reform. Yet, the growth of an income gap is not peculiar to China. It is a worldwide phenomenon observed in both developed countries such as the U.S. and all transitional countries in recent decades. Furthermore, in the case of China, the extent of income inequality and its underlying
Copyright 2002 by the Education Policy Analysis Archives

The World Wide Web address for the Education Policy Analysis Archives is epaa.asu.edu

General questions about appropriateness of topics or particular articles may be addressed to the Editor, Gene V Glass, glass@asu.edu or reach him at College of Education, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-2411. The Commentary Editor is Casey D. Cobb: casey.cobb@unh.edu .

EPAA Editorial Board

Michael W. Apple  Greg Camilli
University of Wisconsin  Rutgers University

John Covaleskie  Alan Davis
Northern Michigan University  University of Colorado, Denver

Sherman Dorn  Mark E. Fetler
University of South Florida  California Commission on Teacher Credentialing

Richard Garlikov  Thomas F. Green
hmwkhelp@scott.net  Syracuse University

Alison I. Griffith  Arlen Gullickson
York University  Western Michigan University

Ernest R. House  Aimee Howley
University of Colorado  Ohio University

Craig B. Howley  William Hunter
Appalachia Educational Laboratory  University of Calgary

Daniel Kallós  Benjamin Levin
Umeå University  University of Manitoba

Thomas Mauhs-Pugh  Dewayne Matthews
Green Mountain College  Education Commission of the States

William McInerney  Mary McKeown-Moak
Purdue University  MGT of America (Austin, TX)

Les McLean  Susan Bobbitt Nolen
University of Toronto  University of Washington

Anne L. Pemberton  Hugh G. Petrie
apembert@pen.k12.va.us  SUNY Buffalo

Richard C. Richardson  Anthony G. Rud Jr.
New York University  Purdue University

Dennis Sayers  Jay D. Scribner
California State University—Stanislaus  University of Texas at Austin

Michael Scriven  Robert E. Stake
scriven@aol.com  University of Illinois—UC

Robert Stonehill  David D. Williams
U.S. Department of Education  Brigham Young University
EPAA Spanish Language Editorial Board

Associate Editor for Spanish Language
Roberto Rodríguez Gómez
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

roberto@servidor.unam.mx

Adrián Acosta (México)
Universidad de Guadalajara
adrianaacosta@compuserve.com

J. Félix Angulo Rasco (Spain)
Universidad de Cádiz
felix.angulo@uca.es

Terese Bracho (México)
Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica-CIDE
bracho/dis1.cide.mx

Alejandro Canales (México)
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
canalesa@servidor.unam.mx

Ursula Casanova (U.S.A.)
Arizona State University
casanova@asu.edu

José Contreras Domingo
Universitat de Barcelona
Jose.Contreras@doe.d5.ub.es

Erwin Epstein (U.S.A.)
Loyola University of Chicago
Eepstein@luc.edu

Josué González (U.S.A.)
Arizona State University
josue@asu.edu

Rollin Kent (México)
Departamento de Investigación Educativa-DIE/CINVESTAV
rkent@gemtel.com.mx
kentr@data.net.mx

María Beatriz Luce (Brazil)
Universidad Federal de Rio Grande do Sul-UFRGS
lucemb@orion.ufrgs.br

Javier Mendoza Rojas (México)
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
javiermr@servidor.unam.mx

Marcela Mollis (Argentina)
Universidad de Buenos Aires
mmollis@filo.uba.ar

Humberto Muñoz García (México)
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
humberto@servidor.unam.mx

Angel Ignacio Pérez Gómez (Spain)
Universidad de Málaga
aiperez@uma.es

Daniel Schugurensky (Argentina-Canadá)
OISE/UT, Canada
dschugurensky@oise.utoronto.ca

Simon Schwartzman (Brazil)
Fundação Instituto Brasileiro e Geografia e Estatística
simon@openlink.com.br

Jurjo Torres Santomé (Spain)
Universidad de A Coruña
jurjo@udc.es

Carlos Alberto Torres (U.S.A.)
University of California, Los Angeles
torres@gseis.ucla.edu