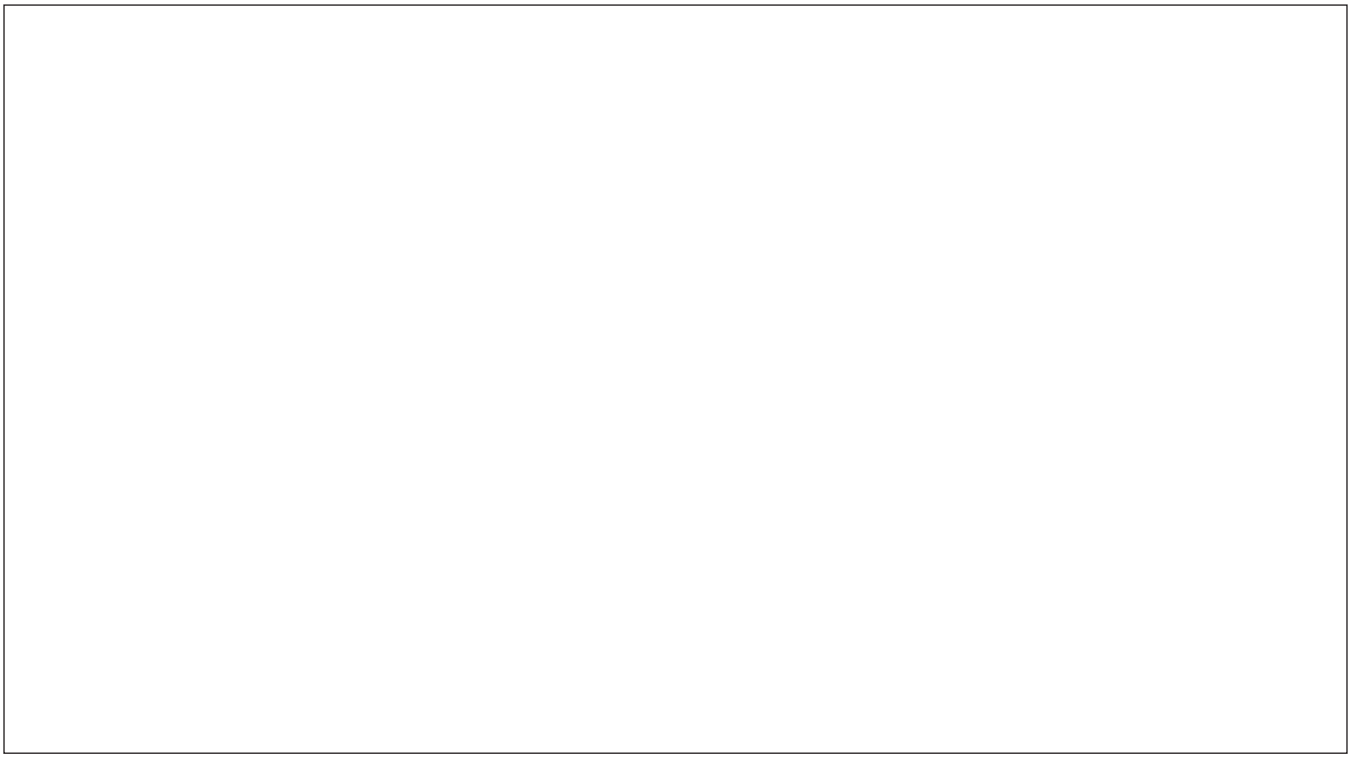
Educational Trends in China And the United States: *Proverbial Pendulum or Potential for Balance?*



To meet the demands of globalization, Chinese education is becoming increasingly decentralized and learner-centered. Ms. Preus points out that this is precisely opposite to the direction of recent U.S. reforms.

BY BETTY PREUS

CHINA'S emergence in the global economy has captured the attention of U.S. policy makers, who have a vested interest in understanding how China has advanced so quickly. The Chinese government views education as a key to economic growth and has initiated several rounds of education reform since the late 1970s.[1] The most recent reform began in the 1990s and resulted in curriculum guidelines published in 2001[2] and amended in 2002.[3] These reforms are designed to move the Chinese education system toward 1) decentralization of elementary and secondary education; 2) a "quality-oriented" rather than a "test-oriented" system, with an emphasis on learner-centered methods; 3) an increase in the amount of preservice education required of teachers, with greater emphasis on pedagogy; and 4) an increase in formal inservice education. A perhaps unanticipated outcome of these reforms is some movement away from the existing collaborative professional development model embedded in the school structure.

While these reforms have been getting under way

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in China, government policies in the U.S., most notably No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have been pushing American education toward 1) centralization of elementary and secondary education; 2) a more test-oriented system, with greater emphasis on direct instruction; 3) a decrease in the amount of professional preparation required for teacher certification, with greater emphasis on subject matter; and 4) the development of mentoring and induction systems that are often add-ons to noncollaborative organizational structures.

It appears that China and the U.S. are moving in opposite directions. Indeed, a visiting professor from China stated, "It is interesting that something we learn from you is just what you want to change."[4] It must be acknowledged that the American and Chinese education systems have been at opposite ends of the continuum in many respects, so these opposing trends might be considered a movement by each toward the center. However, lessons can be learned by examining how and why policy makers in two major powers are seeking to reform education in such strikingly different ways.

I was part of a delegation of professional educators who visited the People's Republic of China in 2005 to engage in dialogue with Chinese educators about teacher education programs and education systems in the U.S. and China. Delegates visited schools and universities in Beijing and Kunming through People to People International, which sponsors professional exchanges between Americans and their peers in other countries. Using evidence from the delegation's meetings with Chinese educational leaders and from the literature, I wish to analyze trends in each education system and address implications for policy.

TRENDS IN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

While the standards movement and standardized testing have become associated with greater federal and state control over education in the U.S., the Chinese government has moved to loosen its control over curriculum and assessment. For example, up until recently, the Chinese central government had complete control over the development and selection of textbooks. Under new guidelines intended to stimulate innovation and creativity, teachers and local and state governments may develop and select textbooks (with the approval of the central government).[5] China is also encouraging curriculum development at the state, local, and school levels and promoting a more flexible curriculum with choices for students.[6] The reform movement, referred to as *quality education,* seeks to deemphasize testing and promote learner-centered approaches. However, China's assessment system has not changed to be consistent with the new emphases.[7] Students' scores on the national university entrance examination have a major impact on their career and income potential, so teachers still feel a great deal of pressure to ensure that their students do well on exams.[8] Studies have shown that this test-based system results in passive, unmotivated learners who are interested only in passing the tests and that teaching to the test emphasizes rote learning.[9] In the U.S., teachers now feel similar pressure to stress exam preparation over construction of knowledge. As in China, educators in the U.S. contend that a more test-based system stifles critical thinking, problem solving, and innovation.[10]

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The Chinese government is making every effort to reduce the emphasis on exams because it is believed that China must foster creativity and innovation to compete in the global economy. Li Jingwen stated, "The essential difference between education for exam-

inations (*ying shi jiaoyu*) and education for quality is the capacity to cultivate in people the ability to innovate; such cultivation is the soul of quality education."[11] Learner-centered teaching is now promoted in China as a way to nurture active learners who can innovate and solve problems.[12] Some evidence suggests that teaching in China is indeed moving in that direction, with researchers observing group work, class discussions, and role-playing in many classrooms throughout the country.[13] Preservice teacher education programs are beginning to adopt learner-centered methods as well.[14] In the U.S., learner-centered approaches, which emphasize teaching for meaning, have been promoted for some time. However, the recent focus on high-stakes testing has pushed teachers to more teacher-centered approaches that emphasize covering material rather than making meaning.[15]

TRENDS IN TEACHER PREPARATION, INDUCTION, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the 1990s, the Chinese government began promoting more training for teachers.[16] As a result, schools that trained teachers who were already on the job are disappearing, as are two-year normal schools that trained primary teachers. Primary teachers now get three years of training, and the eventual goal is for all teachers to have at least four years of training.[17] Traditionally, Chinese teacher education has concentrated on subject matter.[18] In the last decade, however, there have been calls for expanding professional preparation by establishing closer links between schools and universities, by having prospective teachers study educational theory and apply their skills through practice teaching, and by having teacher educators model effective pedagogy.[19] Meanwhile, U.S. policy makers have been promoting shorter, alternative routes to teaching, including on-the-job training. The major focus of U.S. policy has been on increasing subject-matter preparation while cutting down on professional preparation in pedagogy.[20]

Teacher education reform in China also calls for more inservice training. However, Chinese schools are already structured to promote the professional development of both novice and experienced teachers. Chinese teachers, who specialize in a particular subject even at the primary level, are organized into teacher research groups, in which all members teach the same subject. These teachers share office space and have common meeting times. Each teacher research group is led by a teacher identified as one of the best in that subject. With a focus on improving their practice, members of teacher research groups discuss ways to teach the subject, observe one another in class, organize inservice education, and mentor new and preservice teachers. The group also meets after students have completed their exams to determine where the weak points were and how to improve those areas. Novice teachers teach public lessons that are critiqued by their colleagues.[21] Studies have shown that China's centralized system has been one factor in sustaining the teacher research groups' intense focus on subject-specific teaching practice.[22] Thus reform efforts in China, which, as noted above, are resulting in less centralized curriculum and assessment, may inadvertently diminish the collaborative structures that have been conducive to ongoing professional development.

Unlike the Chinese induction system, which has been so embedded in the structure of the education system that it is not seen as a separate program,[23] American induction programs are generally narrow and sporadic add-ons to a noncollaborative system.[24] American teachers are more isolated in their own classrooms and have less time to interact with their peers or with mentors. Mentors frequently do not teach the same subject or grade level as their novice teachers and may not even teach in the same building. All of these factors affect the kinds and depth of discussions that are possible. At the same time, the U.S. move toward centralization and common standards may encourage more focused and in-depth discussions on teaching particular subject matter,[25] and recent calls for more opportunities for structured interaction among teachers[26] may lead to more collaborative organizational structures.

A NEED FOR BALANCE

Government policy makers in both the U.S. and China recognize the importance of education in developing a work force that can compete in the global economy. American policy has identified *accountability* as the key to creating such a work force, whereas Chinese policy has identified *creativity* as the key. However, research in the U.S. provides more than sufficient evidence that accountability through standardized testing will not, in and of itself, promote the broad array of skills needed for the 21st century.[27] In fact, Yong Zhao has argued that the creativity of the American people is the reason for U.S. economic success, and he predicts that "the current or proposed reform initiatives — centralized curriculum, standardized testing, accountability, required course of study — could kill creativity, the United States' real competitive edge."[28] China's reform policy recognizes that a tightly controlled, test-based system does not enhance creativity,

problem solving, or innovation; that *how* a subject is taught is every bit as important as *what* is taught; and that children who are active learners will become productive citizens who can solve problems and create innovations.

In a recent issue of the *Kappan,* Paul Houston suggested that the U.S. should "rediscover its competitive edge, not by becoming more like the Asians, but by being more like Americans."[29] Ironically, the Chinese have determined that they will be more competitive if they become more like Americans, and the Americans have decided to imitate the system the Chinese have rejected. Although current educational trends in China might be viewed as an international twist on the proverbial pendulum, they might also be seen as an opportunity to persuade U.S. policy makers to take a more balanced approach. Educators might capture the attention of policy makers by pointing to China's current quality-oriented reform movement as well as its traditional model of teacher research groups.

As the world becomes smaller through globalization, policy makers need a broader and more balanced perspective on the goals and purposes of education. They need to recognize the importance of nurturing in pupils both a solid knowledge base and the ability to construct new knowledge, preparing teachers in both subject matter and pedagogy, establishing policies that provide for both accountability and creativity, and fostering collaborative structures for professional development.

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