

Initiating media education Through Educational Policy: A Case in China

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Key words: media education, educational policy, curriculum reform, China

Abstract

Media education is difficult for Chinese schools to practice without official support. This research considers how educational policy, particularly curriculum policy, can promote media education practice in China. In educational policy, a three-level curriculum (national, local and school) system is established and new curriculum standards are issued which provide an official guideline for the development of media education. This study analyses how educators take advantage of educational policy to implement media education in their schools and, at the same time, how media education provides alternatives for curriculum reform. It is a qualitative case study, making use of document analysis and interviews as the main methods with which to explore the implications of educational policy for media education in China.

Introduction

In China, media education is advocated on the basis of technological impact on children, adolescents and curriculum. The Ministry of Education (2001) issued Basic Education Curriculum Reform and new Curriculum Standards of Eighteen Subjects at the same time. An integrated curriculum was strongly recommended in the lower grades in basic education to avoid subject-oriented teaching and learning. The state encouraged a school-based curriculum, which promoted the flexibility of curriculum construction in school itself. Media education seized this opportunity.

The influence of media on the expansion of literacy cannot be isolated from institutional discourse and practices, in which media are constructed through educational and cultural activities. The evolvment and shifts of literacy accord with social and cultural changes and in relation to the interests of elites who control the hegemonic institutions (Kellner & Share, 2005). Therefore, the definitions of literacy at work in educational and social-economic systems vary. The Chinese educational system is centralised, but the

curriculum reform decentralises curriculum construction from the government. The state still holds its orientation on literacy by setting the national curriculum standards for schools. But the expansion of literacy include media technology, either as a tool to facilitate teaching or as a learning object to teach about in the new National Curriculum Standards of Eighteen Subjects in China.

Recently, media literacy has been clearly located in the Shanghai Education Reform and Development of Medium and Long-term Planning Framework (2010-2020) following the National Planning Framework (2010-2020), which sets direction in the next ten years (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2010). This is good news for media educators, but how does media education practice depend on the individual school? It might be assumed that once the state realises the significance of media education, media education should grow faster with support from government. But this idea emphasises the power of the state instead of the school. It neglects school initiative.

Although there are some indicators in curriculum reform for the development of media education, it is not widely practiced in schools and such practice still mostly depends on personal or organizational interests in mainland China. In this study, the context is a primary school in Beijing, where media education is taken either as an independent subject or in integration. The study is focussed on how the school initiates media education and how it makes changes in response to educational policy via media education.

Methods

Qualitative research is often in the form of a case study, which is to deeply investigate a phenomenon, provide answers to research questions, and explore a process or explain a change. In this study, the research questions explore how the school takes advantage of curriculum policy to develop media education.

Interview

Teachers who teach Information Technology, Chinese and Moral Education are encouraged to integrate media literacy into their teaching in this school. These teachers are, then, always thinking about the integration of their teaching subjects and media literacy. The interviewees include a principal and ten teachers. The interview questions are mainly concerned with why they practice media education, what they think of the relationship between media education and curriculum policy and how they combine media literacy with their teaching subjects.

Document analysis

The analysed documents include governmental texts and curriculum documents specifically, and the latter is the focus in this study. Beside these official materials, the researcher also reviewed teaching plans and research papers written by the interviewed teachers to supplement the data from the interview. Since some of the interviewed teachers are very active in media education, they joined in some seminars and conferences for media educators and published their teaching plans and research papers – these additional artefacts turn out to be rich data for this study.

Preliminary findings

From the perspective of the state, media education can be practiced to promote moral education, which conforms to national educational aims. This indicates the state's conservative manner in consideration of media literacy. The policy stresses moral judgment from / in response to the media instead of a more comprehensive literacy development. However, the school in this case activates its practices of media education by getting legitimatised support from curriculum policy. It enhances media literacy either across the existing subjects or through an independent school-based media education course. The relationship between the state and the school cannot simply be described as powerful state and “passive” school. The initiative from the school is crucial for the development of media education. The school not only meshes media literacy into its routine teaching, but also makes more connections with other institutions in order to advocate media education in local communities.

By taking advantage of educational policy, media education not only activates school culture, but also promotes teachers' professional development. The school complies with Tao Xingzhi's educational philosophy, who believed that school must be closely connected to society and students' real life experience. The school principals understood that media education embodies “life is education” and is close to students' real life (Du & Wang, 2009). Besides teachers have to think over how to take students' media experience into their classroom - that is, how to combine media literacy with their teaching subjects. In the course of research and practice, teachers' professionalism develops, articles and teaching plans are published and teachers are also invited to present their experience in different situations. They do not simply transmit knowledge, but also study how to improve teaching and learning in an era of digital media. Media education becomes an agent for promotion in school culture and teachers' professional development.

Media literacy can be achieved by various channels, but school appears to be the best place to develop students' critical reflections on media systematically and formally. In this case, it appears that educational policy cannot be thought of as one-way, from the authority to the school field. Instead, school innovation, based on its culture and students' interests, is crucial. Then the school initiative should strengthen and influence the policy in reverse. To some extent, the school promotes the practice and theory of media education in China, but it is unclear how powerful school practice is at this moment from the perspective of policy makers.

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