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Tensions and Challenges in China's Education Policy Borrowing

Charlene Tan

Abstract

Background This article critically discusses the key tensions and challenges arising from the educational policy borrowing in China through its current education reform. Focussing on the New Curriculum Reform, the paper highlights the interactions and conflicts between foreign and local ideologies and practices.

Sources of evidence The main sources of evidence that form the basis of the analysis for this article were research data from an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews conducted with 166 school principals, vice-principals and teachers from China between 2013 and 2015.

Main argument It is argued that the New Curriculum Reform has borrowed selective ideas and practices from elsewhere, such as a school-based curriculum, student-centred pedagogy and formative assessment. It is further suggested that the borrowed policies are mediated and moderated by the ideological attitude of the Chinese educational stakeholders, stemming from the notion of 'theory-ladenness' within an exam-oriented paradigm.

Conclusions The example of China illustrates the effects of an ideological attitude on educational policy borrowing that challenges the notion of universally appropriate ways of teaching, learning and reforming an educational system.

Key words:

education policy borrowing; education reform; China; New Curriculum Reform; education system

Introduction

China, like many other countries, has been reviewing and reforming its education system by borrowing theories and 'best practices' from elsewhere, especially 'reference societies' (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004; Tan & Chua, 2015). 'Global signifiers' (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003) such as student-centred learning and higher-order thinking are being promoted across educational systems in the world, their popularity propelled considerably by global comparison and international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Steiner-Khamsi (2014) observes that 'well-travelled' reforms "were more often than not initiated in the global North and then funded for dissemination to the rest of the world" (p. 160). A North-South trend in policy transfer is clearly discernible. However, this is not to give the impression that from North to South is the only trajectory taken in the

flow of educational ideas: countries including the UK and the USA have for many years also looked to the East Asian region for educational insight. Indeed, there has been a particular interest specifically in Chinese pedagogy and school systems in recent years, owing in no small part to the strong performance of Shanghai-China in PISA 2009.

Whether it is from the North to the South or otherwise, one thing that is certain is that policy borrowing is by no means a straightforward, predictable and uncontested process. On the contrary, reform initiatives are being (re)interpreted, challenged and modified in such a way that the final form they take in a locality may be very different from that in the original setting. Hu (2002) underscores the role of an *ideological attitude* in mediating and moderating the processes and outcomes in educational borrowing:

[A]n 'ideological' attitude recognises culturally embedded diversity and rejects the notion of universally appropriate ways of teaching and learning (Coleman, 1996; Hinkel, 1999). The frequently observed resistance around the world to pedagogies of foreign origin provides justification for adopting an 'ideological' approach (p. 102).

The ideological attitude of educational stakeholders reflects the prevailing paradigm, way of life, presuppositions and logics in a cultural context. In the case of educational policy transfer, the borrowed ideas and practices, when translated into a different context, encounter *theory-ladenness*. In simple terms, theory-ladenness holds that everything one observes or perceives is influenced by, and interpreted through, one's prior theory or ideology that comprises one's beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations etc. Human beings are psychologically and conceptually influenced by theory-ladenness (Heidelberger, 2003): our perception is always guided by our beliefs and expectations, and our existing paradigm provides the theoretical context that gives meaning to what we perceive. Although our perceptions are shaped by our existing paradigm/theory, they are not totally controlled by our worldview, nor are they impervious to external forces and changes. Rather, our perceptions are jointly influenced by the objective relations in the observational data and our prior paradigm/theory. As stated by Freeman and Smith (1996), there is no "complete subordination of observation to the demands of prior theory" since "data can have an evidential impact on the credibility of a theory even when the observations in question are influenced by the theory" (p. 326). Put simply, the interaction between theory and data contributes to the evolving nature of our worldview and ideological attitude.

Purpose

This article examines education policy borrowing in Mainland China through its current education reform, commonly known as 'New Curriculum Reform' (*xin kegai*). The New Curriculum Reform, which stands for 'a new round of curriculum reform for basic education' (*xin yi lun jichu jiaoyu kecheng gaige*), has also been translated by other researchers as 'China's New National Curriculum Reform' (CNNCR) and 'National Curriculum Reform' (NCR) etc. (Guan & Meng, 2007; Yin & Lee, 2012). The article focuses on the interactions and conflicts between the borrowed and local ideas and practices. The first section introduces China's current education reform; this is followed by analysis and discussion of the main tensions and challenges, as perceived by Chinese educators, in implementing the reform in their schools.

The research data for this study were obtained from a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews conducted with 166 school principals, vice-principals and teachers from China between 2013 and 2015. In both the questionnaire and interviews, the educators were asked the following questions:

- What are the new courses, pedagogy and assessment under the New Curriculum Reform that have been implemented in your school?
- What are the key tensions and challenges that your school has encountered in implementing the new courses, pedagogy and assessment?

Methodology

It should be noted that the research study reported here is part of a larger research project involving a greater number of respondents and research questions (for details of the research project, see Tan, 2016a). Of the 166 respondents, 119 completed a questionnaire and 47 were interviewed. In both the questionnaire and interviews, the participants gave their informed consent and were given guarantees of anonymity. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to 119 educators (70 school principals and vice-principals as well as 49 teachers) from China between 2013 and 2015. Ranging from 31 to 50 years old, all the respondents had between 7 and 29 years of working experience in rural and urban primary, junior secondary and senior secondary schools in China. As the New Curriculum Reform was implemented over a decade ago, this means that all the educators surveyed had had at least 7 years of experience of working during the period of education reform. The questionnaire was administered anonymously in Mandarin and educators were asked to respond to the two research questions set out above. The data from the questionnaire were translated into English by the author and coded for analysis according to key thematic categories and major themes.

In addition to collecting the questionnaire data, the author conducted interviews in Mandarin with another 47 educators (10 principals and vice-principals as well as 37 teachers) between December 2013 and January 2014. The interviews covered the same two research questions. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and subsequently transcribed, translated and coded for analysis according to the thematic categories and major themes identified from the questionnaire data.

The New Curriculum Reform in China

The New Curriculum Reform (NCR) is the eighth education reform in Mainland China since 1949. This nationwide reform has been implemented for over a decade in China, having been introduced at the turn of the new millennium. The significant document that officially launched the new education reform is the *Outline of the Curriculum Reform for Basic Education (Trial)* (*Jichu jiaoyu kecheng gaige gangyao (shixing)*), hereinafter referred to as the ‘2001 document’ (the word ‘Trial’ refers to ‘trial document’) (MOE, 2001a; also see MOE, 2001b). The 2001 document claims that the current basic education system in the Chinese mainland was “unable to fully adapt to the developmental needs of the times” which necessitated the need for reform so that China could “meet the demands of quality-oriented education” (MOE, 2001a, p. 1; quotations have been translated into English by the author). The term ‘quality-oriented education’ (*suzhi jiaoyu*) in China is contrasted with ‘examination-oriented education’ (*yingshi jiaoyu*) that emphasises academic achievement, examination scores and college-entrance rates.

By stating the NCR’s goal to champion quality-oriented education, the reform is effectively calling for a paradigm shift from examination-oriented education to quality-oriented education. The desired outcome of quality-oriented education includes replacing the existing curriculum that centres on textbooks, theoretical knowledge and classroom learning

to one that strengthens the link between the curriculum content, students' lives, and modern social and technological developments; values the students' learning interests and experiences; and selects the necessary foundational knowledge and skills for lifelong learning. Pedagogically speaking, the goal is to shift from passive learning, rote-memorisation, and mechanical training to students' active participation through developing their abilities in collecting and processing information, obtaining new knowledge, analysing and solving problems collaboratively. In tandem with the changes in curriculum and pedagogy is the assessment mode, where the holistic development of students, rather than simply their academic performance in high-stakes exams, is assessed and recognised.

A number of initiatives have been recommended to support these objectives. For reason of space, this section will focus only on the most salient features of the New Curriculum Reform in the context of this study's aims (for a more detailed discussion, see Tan, 2016a). With respect to the curriculum, a noteworthy change is the introduction of a school-based curriculum. Apart from the prescribed national and local courses, schools need to design and make available an array of school-based prescribed and elective courses for their students. These courses should be interesting to students, pitched at different levels and accompanied by learning credits to be earned by students. It is hoped that these courses will offer more choices to students and opportunities for them to receive a well-rounded education through developing their life skills, practical abilities and creativity. Supporting the school-based curriculum is the introduction of novel 'student-centred' teaching approaches that promote active inquiry, interaction and collaboration among students. Teachers, it is suggested, should focus on developing the students' abilities to question, investigate, inquire, and learn through practice. The reform also holds that teachers should acknowledge the students' individual differences and learning needs, as well as creating a positive classroom environment that foregrounds not just content mastery but also knowledge application.

Corresponding to the changes in the curriculum and pedagogy is the promotion of new assessment modes that underline the holistic development of students. An example of a new assessment mode is 'integrated quality appraisal' that documents and celebrates the students' non-academic achievements as well as attributes (MOE, 2001a). Teachers are urged to go beyond merely evaluating their students' academic results by identifying and developing the latter's talents in diverse areas such as the arts and sports. Teachers, for their part, are encouraged to be reflective practitioners by conscientiously reviewing and improving their own teaching. According to the 2001 document, the appraisal system for teachers should include self-appraisal as well as appraisals from principals, teachers, students, and parents (MOE, 2001a).

It should be noted that the '2001 document' that gives details of the reform makes no direct and explicit reference to policy borrowing from elsewhere. However, it is argued that policy borrowing is implicit in the assumptions and influences that underpin the ideas in the document. For example, allusion to policy borrowing is evident in the reference to the need for education in China to become more up-to-date and be oriented towards 'modernity' and 'the world' (MOE, 2001a, p. 1). Furthermore, a number of scholars have maintained that the NCR has borrowed ideologies, policies, and practices from elsewhere, particularly from 'the West' (e.g. UNESCO, 2007; Ha, McPherson & Van Que, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Seah, 2011; Tan, 2012, 2015a; Wang, 2012). However, it is important to note that the source of inspiration for the NCR was not wholly Western. As Rappleye (2007) points out, the Japanese curricular reforms of the 1990s constituted a principal reference point for those behind China's NCR.

Given that the reform has been implemented for over a decade in China, it is instructive to examine its outcomes as perceived by the Chinese educators and other stakeholders. I have, elsewhere, expounded on the benefits brought about by the reform to

students, teachers and other educational stakeholders in China (Tan, 2013, 2016a). This article shall, instead, focus on the key tensions and challenges engendered by the reform. For a start, it is useful to refer to the findings of national surveys in China. Surveys commissioned by the Ministry of Education in China from 2001 to 2006 indicate that over 70% of teachers who responded reported that their workload had increased (cited in Ma, 2009). Close to half of responding secondary school teachers (47.6%) reported that they found the teaching materials difficult. The survey also suggested that some classrooms over-emphasised form at the expense of substance: students may be actively discussing, inquiring and cooperating but they did not always learn much from these activities and the teaching lacked overall effectiveness. Commenting on the 2011 survey findings presented by the 21st Century Education Research Institute and China Education Network, Zhou (2013) observes that “while the NCR’s core ideals and direction reflect the sentiments of the teachers, the low satisfaction with the implementation shows that our reform neglects the complex nature of implementation in reality” (p. 20).

The next section of this article elaborates on the complex nature of reform implementation. Using the thematic categories and themes identified from the questionnaire and interview data, key tensions and challenges faced by the educators in executing the reform are identified and discussed, with illustrative examples from the data. Evidence from other sources is also included, where relevant.

Tensions and Challenges in Implementing the New Curriculum Reform (NCR)

As mentioned previously, the New Curriculum Reform (NCR) has introduced school-based curriculum where a spread of new courses – both prescribed and elective – have been implemented across schools in China. As part of the three-level curriculum structure, the school-based curriculum merely complements, and does not replace, the national and local courses. Of the three, the national curriculum is perceived to be the most important as it comprises the subjects stipulated by the central authority for all schools, out of which some have been selected to be examined in the terminal examinations at the *zhongkao* (terminal examination at the junior secondary level) and *gaokao* (college-entrance examination at the senior secondary level).

A main challenge faced by educators relates to the social and cultural effects of high-stakes examinations within an exam-centric paradigm. An exam-oriented education, with an attention on textbook learning, didactic teaching and summative assessment, has a long history in China as it can be traced back to the civil service examination. A consequence of an exam-centric culture is insufficient commitment by the schools to the implementation of school-based curriculum. The energies of many schools are invariably channelled to the teaching and learning of examination subjects under the national curriculum, rather than a school-based curriculum that is not part of the high-stakes examination. An educator in this study pointed out the inherent tension between quality-oriented education and exam-oriented education:

We keep promoting quality-oriented education but struggle to effectively and thoroughly implement it due to the educational system. An exam-oriented education has deeply harmed the students. We are able to nurture many high scorers in exams, but most are high in scores and low in ability (Questionnaire, Oct 2014).

The sentiments expressed in the quotation above resonate and connect with comments from other studies (Tian, 2013; Zhao 2010). For example, a school principal, writing about school management, observed:

Under the directorship of the *gaokao* and heavy burden of exam-oriented education, some teachers and students still lack a serious attitude in the actual process of implementation. They may be physically present in class but their hearts are far away; they view the school-based curriculum as something optional outside the *gaokao* national curriculum, something that is just recreational or an additional burden. This has resulted in a serious neglect of the value of school-based elective courses (Tian, 2013, p. 43).

Further, a vice-principal points out that “if a school has unsatisfactory college entrance rate, it will be unwilling to spend energy on school-based curriculum” (cited in Zhao, 2010, p. 23). Some schools are also reluctant to deploy the best teachers to teach these courses due to their low-stakes nature. For example, a primary school principal interviewed in the current study noted:

Some primary schools are still influenced by the exams, so they would arrange for the better teachers to teach Chinese language, mathematics, academic subjects, and English language. Even if a teacher is good in teaching contents related to the school-based curriculum, the teacher would still not be assigned to teach these subjects. Hence after some time, such an arrangement will restrict the development of school-based curriculum (Interview, Dec 2013).

A strategy adopted by some schools is to re-package examination courses as elective courses. For example, a school may offer elective courses such as ‘Special topic on mistakes committed in *gaokao*’, ‘Case analysis of compositions’ and ‘Small experiments in Physics’. These elective courses are, in fact, existing remedial lessons or advanced lessons of the national curriculum to prepare students for the examination.

There are also tensions and challenges in the promotion of novel teaching approaches advocated in the NCR. As recommended in the 2001 document, schools were required to shift away from the traditional didactic teaching approaches to new (borrowed) ‘student-centred’ pedagogies that encourage students’ independence, cooperation and inquiry (for a discussion of ‘student-centred education’ and ‘teacher-centred education’ from a Chinese perspective, see Tan, 2015b). These new pedagogies are often premised upon constructivist and postmodernist theories and assumptions (Tan, 2016b). There are two main challenges with the adoption of these ‘student-centred’ pedagogies: formalism and absolutism. As explained by a vice-principal:

Formalism refers to an emphasis on the form but not the substance. The various new learning methods in the classroom are simply ‘appearances’ without the essence, with the students having the outward activities but no inner experience. Formalism will inevitably lead to shallowness and low standard. Absolutism refers to binary opposition, an either-or thinking in looking at a problem, to advocate the new by totally denying the old. This is manifested in the change in the teaching method, to purely emphasise the methods of autonomy, cooperation and inquiry, as if there are only these three methods for the implementation of the new curriculum. As a result, every student must be autonomous, cooperate and inquire for every period of every

subject, regardless of the nature of the subject, content characteristics and students' foundation (Questionnaire, Feb 2015).

A de-emphasis on teacher-centred pedagogy and examination-oriented education has led to a perceived lowering of the standards of school subjects in China. A mathematics teacher noted:

I feel that in actual fact China currently may not be so strong as compared to before. This is because initially we focused on the 'two basics' [*shuangji*, i.e., foundational knowledge and basic skills], and so we did a lot of practice in counting. Now we are promoting quality-oriented education and the NCR, which mean that a lot of changes are being made. This includes changes in teaching methods and content of the teaching materials. Therefore, a lot of the content is not as well-practised as compared to the past (Interview, Jan 2014).

There is also the question of time constraints for the implementation of 'student-centred' pedagogies. As Zhou (2013) asserts, "the worry is insufficient time for students to learn quietly and reflect independently; there is limited time and space for teachers to guide and enlighten the students, a lack of time for students to engage in quality and in-depth learning from an academic and professional angle" (p. 20). Given that students still need to learn the national curriculum and sit for examinations, schools face a perpetual challenge in promoting student-centred pedagogies and ensuring that the syllabi could be covered in time. Unsurprisingly, many teachers prefer to spend the majority of their time teaching examination techniques rather than experimenting with novel student-centred pedagogies. Consequently, the equipment and resources meant for the introduction of innovative teaching methods may be underused in schools, as noted by a teacher:

The state will give the schools various advanced teaching equipment [to implement NCR] but they are neglected 99% of the time until they become obsolete. Hence the educational resources are not adequately utilised (Questionnaire, Oct 2014).

Just as the borrowed educational initiatives such as a school-based curriculum and student-centred pedagogies are mediated by the traditional hold of exam-oriented education, the promotion of new assessment modes in the NCR has engendered similar tensions and challenges. Situated within an exam-centric learning environment, the formative and alternative assessment advocated in the NCR conflicts with the traditional summative, written and high-stakes examination system. Educators noted that

The greatest roadblock to reform in China is the exam system. The current assessment system still relies on the students' academic performance to appraise the school principal as well as the teacher's management and teaching standards (Questionnaire, Oct 2014).

Schools and teachers, for the sake of high exam scores, give extra lessons on exam subjects to students after school. But doing so they deprive the students of their free time for other forms of learning (Questionnaire, Oct 2014).

Furthermore, an exam-oriented environment means that many teachers, students and parents have been accustomed to the assessment system associated with the *gaokao*, where precise scores based on prescribed answers are given. The dominant assessment mode in China, whether it is to assess students' examination scores or to appraise the teacher's work

performance, has always been via quantifiable measures. Any development or achievement that is difficult to be assessed and presented using numbers is likely to be ignored and taken out of the formal appraisal system. This means that educators, even if they desire to advance formative and alternative assessment, are unclear and unsure about carrying out and interpreting the outcome of such forms of assessment. Yang (2009) notes the problem of ambiguity, where teachers simply give their subjective judgement and students and parents are left confused about the actual performance of students. The reliance on personal judgement, in turn, generates a concern with the issue of reliability of assessment. An educator observes,

There may be a question with reliability as the appraisal is sometimes turned into an ‘appraisal of human relations’ and an ‘appraisal of connections’. Such appraisal is definitely not objective and fair (Ma, 2012, p. 40).

According to Ma (2012), compounding the difficulty of taking formative assessment seriously is that many senior secondary schools only carry out the integrated quality appraisal just before the students graduate from school. As the teachers have not appraised the students progressively throughout the school term, they ended up giving scores and writing comments for each student based on their vague impressions of them. Faced with too many students to appraise, a heavy workload, too short a time and a lack of concrete evidence, many teachers ended up giving very similar appraisal results to the students. Consequently, it is not uncommon for teachers to “record for the sake of recording” and “appraise for the sake of appraising” for the student’s formative assessment record, resulting in such record not achieving its substantial efficacy (Ma, 2012, p. 47).

Unsurprisingly, the school management rarely refers to the data on the students’ formative and alternative assessment in appraising the teaching quality of teachers. Many higher institutions also prefer not to rely on the results of such appraisal. In principle, the students’ integrated quality appraisal may be considered for application to the universities, depending on the admission criteria of the respective universities. But most universities do not consider this in admitting the students and prefer, instead, to rely on the *gaokao* scores that are more ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’.

What could be done to make the implementation of NCR feasible on different levels? How does the NCR need to change? Analysis of the data in this study and evidence from elsewhere suggest that the demands of implementing the new curriculum have their origins in complexities that go beyond the borrowing of educational policy ideas from elsewhere. A major challenge, therefore, lies in reforming the whole system, rather than just parts of it. In the current study, educators surveyed pointed out the need to go beyond the discrete and micro policy initiatives propagated in the NCR to reforming the entire examination system in China:

An exam system where the terminal exams at the junior and senior secondary levels determine the fate of the students for the rest of their lives is the basis for a uniform appraisal system for the schools, teachers and students. As long as the exam system does not change, the implementation of new courses and pedagogies will remain superficial (Questionnaire, Oct 2014).

What is most needed is to reform the exam system, especially the major terminal exams for students to transit from primary to junior secondary, from junior secondary to high school, and from high school to university. The NCR is nullified as long as there is no change in the exam system (Questionnaire, Aug 2013).

However, any socially and culturally acceptable and effective reform of the examination system, especially the *gaokao*, needs to be underpinned and sustained by a corresponding change in mind-set. As noted by an educator,

The goal of the NCR is to promote quality-oriented education, but as long as the people's thinking and social hardware have not kept up with the ideology, quality-oriented education can never be completely successful (Questionnaire, Oct 2014).

This brings us back to the question of the ideological attitude of the Chinese. As noted earlier, this attitude stems from the notion of 'theory-ladenness', where ideology – the totality of beliefs, values, expectations and assumptions – influences and shapes perceptions and judgements. In the case of policy borrowing in China, the educational stakeholders, including the school leaders, teachers and parents, inevitably make sense of and respond to the NCR through the lenses of their existing worldview/theory. The tensions and challenges delineated in this study reflect the interaction between, and a clash of, ideologies: a quality-oriented educational worldview propagated by the NCR (with an emphasis on all-rounded development, student-centred pedagogy and formative assessment) versus an examination-oriented educational worldview subscribed to by the Chinese educational stakeholders (with an emphasis on academic development, teacher-centred pedagogy and summative assessment). Educators surveyed expressed the 'examination-centric' educational ideology of the Chinese educators and parents:

The college-entrance rate for *gaokao* is the priority for schools because the thinking of 'excelling in study to become an official' (*xue er you ze shi*) is so ingrained in China (Questionnaire, Feb 2015).

The school and teachers are still influenced by tradition and habit which account for the traditional didactic teaching methods (Questionnaire, Oct 2014).

The only desire of parents is for their children to excel academically; all other aspects are not important. The parents have been deeply influenced by Confucian thinking to proactively improve themselves, and 'improvement' means taking pride in their children being enrolled in prestigious universities (Questionnaire, May 2015).

Accompanying an accent on academic achievement is a predominantly *functionalist* view of education in China, as pointed out by other educators whose views were collected in the study:

Education in China today stresses the utilitarian function of education where the quality of a school is tied to the *zhongkao*, *gaokao* and college entrance rate (Questionnaire, May 2014).

The function of schools in China is to produce useful human beings for society. The goal of receiving an education is not for self-development but to find a job after graduation (Questionnaire, Jan 2015).

Of course, one's worldview, and the accompanying ideological attitudes, are not unchanging and unchangeable. As pointed out earlier, our perceptions, although influenced by and interpreted through our existing paradigm/theory, are jointly influenced by the

objective relations in the observational data and our prior theories. In the case of China, there is evidence to suggest that the Chinese educational stakeholders' ideological attitude and educational paradigm are evolving. For example, a principal observed that Chinese educators manifest what he called a "dualistic phenomenon" (*er yuan hua xianxiang*): subscribing to both exam-oriented and quality-oriented worldviews (Questionnaire, May 2015). Commenting on the changing mindset of parents, a teacher noted:

Those parents who have children in primary, secondary and tertiary education are those who were born after the reform and opening in China. Although they detest the outdated educational paradigm of exam-oriented education, the majority still adhere to this paradigm in their actions. But with an increase in educational level across China, there will be more parents who will hold to the new mindset of quality-oriented education (Questionnaire, May 2015).

The evolution of the Chinese educational worldviews is aided by, among other factors, the interplay between known, local systems and perceptions of foreign educational ideas and practices. It is interesting to note that the Chinese educators who were surveyed cited Western education as an exemplar of, and source of inspiration for, holistic education in China. Below are two examples:

Western education, in comparison with Chinese education, places a greater emphasis on natural laws for the growth of a child. The junior secondary schools there basically do not give the students any pressure. The students are able to learn in a relaxed manner, enjoy a carefree childhood, freely develop all kinds of interests and thought. The schools there allow the students to grow healthily in emotional and psychological aspects (Questionnaire, May 2015).

What China can borrow from Western education is to respect the individual character and development of each student, and to value the students' learning process in curriculum design (Questionnaire, May 2015).

It is of course questionable whether Western countries, in actuality, aim at and succeed in promoting holistic education for their students. It suffices to note, for the purpose of this article, that some Chinese educators evinced an openness to policy borrowing and revising their indigenous worldview by looking to (an imagined version of) Western education for ideas and inspiration.

Conclusion

While the tensions and challenges associated with the intended shift from exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education are not new in China, evidence from this study suggests that the implementation of the NCR has perpetuated the difficulties and dilemmas. Clearly, in any analysis, educational change is situated in a wider socio-political context (see, for example, Vickers 2009) although discussion of this is beyond the scope of the current study. From a comparative perspective, it is interesting to note that Japan's curriculum reforms evidenced contradictions or tensions very similar to those experienced in China, in that whilst there was support for the ideas put forward by the reforms, there were also significant challenges in implementation (see further Bjork, 2011).

The example of China suggests that global signifiers that are promoted in the New Curriculum Reform (NCR), such as school-based curriculum and student-centric teaching,

are mediated and moderated by local factors such as academic pursuit, transmission teaching approach, and a preference for quantitative measurement via summative and written examination. The experience of China, then, demonstrates the presence of ideological attitude that calls attention to culturally embedded diversity. It challenges the notion of universally appropriate ways of teaching, learning and reforming an educational system.

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