

SUMMARY

Early Childhood Curriculum Reform in China: Focusing on the “Language” Category among Teaching Materials after 2000

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Education reforms in China started from the national need to develop human resources to contribute to the national economic development in the 1980s. After 2000, the reforms shifted to “child-centered” policies respecting children’s independence by encouraging problem-solving and reflections of life experiences (Liu, Pan, & Sun, 2005). Since the 1980s, educational reforms in China have achieved significant results in terms of educational philosophy. However, one item on the agenda for education reform has remained unchecked since the 2000s: how to develop the kindergarten curriculum to incorporate the “child-centered” educational philosophy (Zhu, 2003). This study examined how language-related teaching materials changed in early childhood curricula in response to calls for educational after 2000. In 2001, China’s Ministry of Education announced the *Teaching Guideline for Preschool Education*, specifying five categories essential to early childhood education: health, language, society, science, and arts. Among them, language skills (e.g., reading and writing) have attracted the most attention in the context of educational reform in China. Language proficiency is critical for success (Ministry of Education, 2002). This study analyzed teaching materials related to the six subcategories in the “Language” category of the Education Ministry’s *Teaching Guideline for Preschool Education* (2001): communication, expression, reading, speaking standard Chinese, appreciation, and writing.

It has been widely recognized that early childhood is an important period for maintaining equity in education in economically developing regions. The educational and economic disparities between China’s coastal and inland regions are widening. Therefore, it is necessary to consider language ability from the perspective of educational equity. This study aimed to clarify the characteristics of curriculum reforms in China since 2000 by focusing on teaching materials for kindergartens located in coastal regions and inland regions. Specifically, the teaching materials for children and teachers used in Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Gansu, Qinghai, and the Five Provinces in Northwest in China were analyzed.

The following three questions were set as research questions in this study:

- RQ (1): What were the characteristics of the curriculum design of early childhood education in various regions of China in the 2000s?
- RQ (2): How did the language-related teaching materials reflect education reform after 2000 in various regions of China?
- RQ (3) How were the curriculum policies of early childhood education improved in China after 2000?

This dissertation consists of six chapters, excluding the introduction and the final chapter. Chapter I reviews the definitions of kindergarten teaching materials, describing the circumstances of the following usage and development of kindergarten teaching materials in various regions of China. For example, Beijing and Shanghai have an authorization system for kindergarten teaching materials; these are discussed, as are the local standard curricula and kindergarten teaching materials.

Chapter II is organized to clarify the characteristics of the history of China's curriculum reforms up to 2000. The history is broken into these periods of curriculum reform: (a) the first early childhood educational facility in China from the end of the Qing dynasty to the end of 20th century (1885–1918); (b) the period influenced by Japan (1903–1918); (c) the period of domestication (1919–1948); (d) the period influenced by the Soviet Union (1949–1965); (e) the period influenced by the publication of the *Teaching Guideline for Preschool Education* (1981–1990) (1981), and (f) the period from 1991 to 1999. This chapter analyzes curriculum documents published by the government and reviews changes based on curriculum reforms. It also clarifies how the reforms before 2000 related to the reforms after 2000.

Chapter III discusses the characteristics of laws and regulations related to the Language category and curriculum from three perspectives: the central government, the local government, and the ethnic regions. The chapter covers how the legal system for early childhood education is organized, comparing the laws and regulations related to Language and early childhood education at the national and local levels, such as in the municipality of Shanghai and the provinces of Liaoning, Gansu, and Xinjiang, among others.

Chapters IV to VI provide the answers to the research study's questions. To consider curriculum reforms in the coastal and inland regions, Chapters IV and V analyze the teaching materials used in various municipalities and provinces (Shanghai, Beijing, Zhejiang, Gansu, and Qinghai, among others) from three viewpoints: curriculum design, Language category contents, and curriculum policy. Chapter VI provides a comprehensive analysis of the comparisons of teaching materials from different regions to clarify the characteristics and status of early childhood education curriculum reform.

This study revealed the following three characteristics. Considering the first research question revealed a significant change in curriculum formation in early childhood education in China. A child-centered philosophy, in which children's learning experiences are self-directed, was adhered to throughout all the teaching materials. There has been a spreading awareness that the teacher's role is not to make children perform specific actions but to coordinate the environment in which those actions can be taken. However, traditional education methods have remained in place, such as group actions and memorization.

Concerning the second research question on the educational content of Language, which is the second research question, in both the urban and rural regions studied, reading ability was the central intent. Curricula designed for the full development of children, such as the cultivation of the ability of expression, were reflected in all the regions'

teaching materials. However, different regions had different policies regarding writing ability. These differences were particularly pronounced in comparisons of the inland regions (e.g., Gansu) and the large coastal cities (e.g., Shanghai). In addition, the teaching materials in the inland regions, represented by Qinghai and Gansu Provinces, revealed that manners were emphasized in the Language content.

The third research question concerned the characteristics of curriculum policies. The study found that local teaching materials were developed with the government's support; local governments made efforts to reduce the educational gap by supporting the dissemination of high-quality teaching materials and curricula. The study also showed that acceptance of international trends and the maintenance of traditional culture coexist. Analyses revealed issues in the kindergarten teaching materials' authorization system and the editors' composition. Kindergartens in rural regions usually used teaching materials designated by the national government; they found it difficult to develop their own teaching materials sufficiently to be certified by the government. Based on the teaching materials analyzed in this research, it appears that the chief editors of the teaching materials were primarily associated with public institutions.