

# Chapter 7

## China's Educational Reform and Its Impact on Early Childhood Curriculum

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**Abstract** China's educational reform has come a long way, along with its large-scale economic reform since the early 1980s. Educational reforms have attempted to broaden educational endeavors on developing well-rounded individuals through a shift from examination-oriented education to quality-oriented education with a holistic approach. However, outcomes of this reform seem too complicated and controversial to claim it a success. This chapter addresses China's *Suzhi Jiaoyu* or quality education as a result of its educational reform. The impact of *Suzhi Jiaoyu* on early childhood curriculum in China was explored, specifically from the following aspects: curriculum standards, teacher quality, instructional approaches, assessment and evaluation system, and parental involvement. Challenges and issues around this educational reform were discussed.

**Keywords** Chinese educational reform • *Suzhi Jiaoyu* • Early childhood curriculum • Special education

### Introduction

China's educational reform has come along with its large-scale and worldly known economic reform since the early 1980s. As a response to the educational reform, the traditional examination-oriented education in China has been challenged and

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widely criticized because of its overemphasis on rote memorization and standardized testing scores. Educational reforms have attempted to broaden educational endeavors on developing well-rounded individuals with a holistic approach. Significant changes have been observed in the last three decades throughout China's educational system from early childhood education to higher education. Undoubtedly, the impact of this educational reform on early childhood curriculum is profound and extensive.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the impact of China's educational reform on the early childhood curriculum. We started the chapter with an introduction to the educational background of China and major components of the educational reform, followed by a discussion on China's *Suzhi Jiaoyu* as a result of the educational reform. Then, we focused our discussion on China's early childhood education by exploring its curriculum standards, teacher quality, instructional approaches, assessment and evaluation system, and parental involvement in early childhood education. We concluded the chapter with a discussion on challenges and issues in early childhood education and the future direction of China's educational reform.

## China's Educational System

### *Background*

Education has been valued throughout the history of China. The term "education" in Chinese language consists of two words: *jiao* (teach) and *yu* (nurture). To teach and to nurture are two major concepts involved in education. While this literal interpretation may carry some true meaning of the educational philosophy in China, the significance of early childhood education for an individual's development was formally recognized in the early twentieth century (Vong 2008). Historically, the Chinese formal educational system consisted of only the elementary education (for children 7–15 years old) and higher education (for students over 15 years old). Instead of receiving public education, children younger than school age typically received private instruction from private tutors or home teachers (Bai 2000).

Confucianism has played a significant role in the Chinese educational ideology except for the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976) when the formal educational system was abandoned and Confucianism was criticized. Throughout the Chinese history, hierarchical order in the society was emphasized; collectivism has been valued and reflected by the educational policies. Interpersonal relationships among individuals in the same society were highlighted (Triandis 1990). This is especially important for the contemporary early childhood educators and researchers in China because the "One Child One Family" policy since 1979 has put more responsibility upon early childhood professionals to provide social interaction opportunities for young children to interact with their peers, who otherwise would interact primarily with their siblings at home settings.

## ***Educational Reform***

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government started its Open Door Policy with an emphasis on economic reform shifting from politics-oriented policies (Sun 2010). To meet the needs of this economic reform for skilled professionals, workers, and the overall quality of the society, the Chinese government launched an intensive educational reform since 1985.

Two types of school educational system reform took place. The first was the reform of educational system at different levels such as compulsory school educational system and the reform of advanced school educational system. The second was the reform of educational system with different categories such as the reform of private educational system and vocational educational system (Sun 2010).

The term *Suzhi Jiaoyu* is a unique concept that has emerged along with the educational reform, specifically with the curriculum reform at the primary and secondary levels reflected by curriculum goals and standards, teaching educational administration system, and the reform of intraschool management system. For example, the educational administration system was reformed to increase the authority and responsibility of the local governments in managing primary and secondary education with decentralized control from the central government over basic education. With the intraschool management system, the reform changed the dual system of power in primary and secondary schools from two lines of authority (a principal who usually is the professional educator and a party secretary who represents the party branch) to principal management system with a principal as the primary authority in charge of teaching quality and daily decision-making process (Sun 2010). This change was assumed to ensure the quality of education in terms of student outcomes and instructional practices.

### ***Suzhi Jiaoyu: Quality Education***

The term *Suzhi Jiaoyu* is a unique concept that has emerged along with the educational reform, specifically with the curriculum reform at the primary and secondary levels as reflected in curriculum goals, standards, methods, materials, and assessment systems (Dello-Lacovo 2009). The literal translation of *Suzhi* is quality or competence, and *Jiaoyu* is education, thus *quality education* or *competence education*. The term first appeared and was used by policy makers and educators in the early 1980s with different kinds of educational interventions to raise young children and students' overall *Suzhi* or quality (Woronov 2009). Gradually this term was extended from school-based education to family-based education, and throughout the 1990s, the term was widely used by educators, policy makers, as well as parents, for all kinds of purposes. However, the meaning of *Suzhi Jiaoyu* was never clearly defined; therefore, the components of *Suzhi Jiaoyu* have remained ambiguous.

In spite of the ambiguous definition and interpretation of the term, the concept of *Suzhi Jiaoyu* was proposed and quickly became one of the guiding principles of educational policy in China. A common interpretation of *Suzhi* includes cultivating creative and independent thinking skills, integrated practical or problem solving skills, teamwork, and cooperation (Dello-Lacovo 2009). This term encompasses a wide range of educational ideals but generally refers to a more holistic approach to education that centers on the whole person instead of discrete, isolated skills. Therefore, *Suzhi Jiaoyu* has been often proposed as a solution for the problems caused by or related to the traditional examination-oriented education.

Under *Suzhi Jiaoyu*, students' workloads were supposed to be reduced, and standardized examinations that focused on discrete skills training or rote memorization were to be replaced by quality-oriented, process-emphasized projects or activities. According to the 2003–2007 Action Plan for Invigorating Education, the "Project for Quality-Oriented Education (*Suzhi Jiaoyu*) in the New Century" was proposed to focus on fostering students' creative and practical skills and *Suzhi* or quality of students that included a wide range of areas such as moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic development (Dello-Lacovo 2009; Zhu 2004).

Although *Suzhi Jiaoyu* is a new term, the values emphasized by this concept have its roots in the traditional Chinese ideology. For example, the *Suzhi Jiaoyu* policy raised the question on how children should be educated in terms of not only individual quality but also the collective quality of the nation, which has always been valued in the traditional Chinese education. The eventual goal of this policy was to prepare "well-rounded" children and adults with qualities in the four developmental categories: intellectual, moral, physical, and aesthetical. By theory, these four categories also aligned with the theory of Marxism, which was followed by the central Chinese government. In reality, however, these categories were often overlapped, and there has never been a clear guideline providing clear directions guiding the practices.

As a result, the term *Suzhi* has been broadly used in various occasions or often-times has been overused to refer to not only the educational system or policy but also to individual people, in any educational or societal occasions. For example, when a student is considered high *Suzhi*, she or he not only excels in academic subjects but also talented in extracurricular areas such as music, arts, physical education, as well as being considered a good character with high moral standards such as selflessness, diligence, and commitment. Or a mother could be considered by her neighbors as low *Suzhi* because she yelled at her child in public. An employer might accuse his employee of having no *Suzhi* for talking bad behind somebody's back. To loosely define, a person with *high Suzhi* would be somebody who is intellectually competent with strong knowledge base, practically skilled in a specialty area, physically healthy, morally right, and aesthetically talented. Ideally, when a nation or society consists of such individuals, the nation or the society is one with high quality.

Under the banner of *Suzhi Jiaoyu* Action Plan, a list of educational initiatives was proposed from prekindergarten to higher education. Early childhood education and education for children with disabilities has been one of the initiatives listed

under this *Suzhi Jiaoyu* Action Plan, among other aims such as the universalization of 9-year compulsory education, curriculum reform, moral education, physical and aesthetic education, and education for ethnic minorities (Action Plan 1999). Although the focus of the curriculum reform is on primary and secondary education, its impact on early childhood education curriculum is evident and significant in content and context.

## Early Childhood Education

In the Chinese educational system, early childhood education refers to the education for young children from birth to age 6. The public school system in China consists of a 12-year formal education: 6-year elementary school, 3-year middle school (junior high), and 3-year high school. China provides 9-year compulsory education that consists of 6 years of primary education and 3 years of middle school education. Early childhood education in China is non-compulsory; therefore, the quality of early education varies greatly from program to program and region to region.

Before they enter the grade schools, young children may go through three types of early education programs: childcare or nursery programs for infants and toddlers (birth to 3), kindergarten programs for children 3–6 years of age, and a 1-year pre-primary program for children in rural areas prior to primary school who might not have the opportunity of entering kindergarten at the age of 3 (Zhu 2008). The term “preschool” which typically refers to programs for 3- to 5-year-olds in the Western world was replaced by the term “kindergarten” in this chapter which refers to programs serving 3- to 6-year-olds in China. Traditionally, nursery programs focused more on childcare and kindergarten programs focused more on education. Since the educational reform, early childhood programs started to emphasize both care and education throughout nurseries to kindergartens by focusing on the development of “well-rounded” or “fully developed” child (Zhu 2001).

The reform in early childhood education in China aligned with the overall educational system reform under the *Suzhi Jiaoyu* policy (Liu and Feng 2005). As discussed earlier, *Suzhi Jiaoyu* was an ideological concept attempting to transform practitioners' educational ideas on how young children learn (Liu et al. 2004; Zhu 2003). Different from the traditional early childhood education curriculum that either focused on providing childcare (e.g., nurseries) or school readiness pre-academic skills (kindergartens), the reformed early childhood curriculum emphasized developing the whole child in terms of the following areas: respecting children, active learning, teaching to meet individual learning needs, play-based teaching and learning, and teaching and learning through routines in kindergartens (Liu and Feng 2005).

Kindergarten reform began as a small-scale, experimental format that emerged spontaneously in different parts of the country in the early 1980s and gradually

expanded to a large-scale reform. Eventually it developed into a top-down model, led by the central government based on the *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice* issued by the National Education Committee of the People's Republic of China in 1989. Since then the early childhood programs have been increasing every year. By 2008, the number of kindergartens nationwide was 133,700, an increase of 4,600 from the previous year, serving 24,749,600 children 3–6 years old, an increase of 1,261,300 (Ministry of Education 2009).

Under this new model, play has been identified as a major way of young children's learning instead of structured group lessons. Early childhood educators started to observe children's play behaviors during activities as part of the evaluation process. Identifying individual differences of young children was another major component of the reform, which has also been the most challenging part of the reform because it caused conflicts with the traditional value of collectivism. Respecting children as individual persons is a new concept for many Chinese educators and parents. For example, it has always been valued and emphasized in the Chinese educational curriculum that the interests of the collective group supersede the interests of oneself. It was viewed as being selfish if an individual put his or her own interests above those of the group.

Despite these challenges, educators have been carrying out the reform based on the modern theories and practices that respect young children as a group with similar developmental patterns while, at the same time, recognizing them as individuals with their own characteristics. As a learner-centered approach, the current Chinese kindergarten programs have been revitalized with new ideas of interacting with young children. Educators and parents have begun to appreciate that young children are not just being protected by the adult society, they should be respected as individuals with independent personality and dignity and respected as persons with their own rights to learn and develop (Liu et al. 2005).

### *Curriculum Standards*

The goals and standards in early childhood education in China have been changed since 1979. According to the *Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (National People's Congress 1993), early childhood education has been regarded as the foundation of overall education. To ensure the quality of early education, national guidelines of policies for early childhood education were established by the central government as a general framework; the local governments and communities have established their own developmental plans (Wong and Pang 2002). The national *Kindergarten Work Regulation* recommends that kindergarten programs provide care and education for young children 3–6 years old by focusing on the development of the child as a whole and emphasizing play-based, integrated curricula; this was a gradual movement from a teacher-directed to a child-centered approach (Li 2006; Wong and Pang 2002). Five developmental and learning domains

were addressed including health, social/emotional, science, language, and art, upon which four goals were developed:

- To prepare a healthy environment
- To promote cognitive and language development
- To foster children's moral and social development
- To develop children's appreciation for the arts

The early childhood curriculum reform was featured by the shift from the emphasis on teaching knowledge and skills to an emphasis on development of the whole person with abilities in all developmental and learning areas, particularly with an emphasis on meaningful problem solving abilities. This change was reflected by the emphasis of the educational process that respect individual child's learning needs instead of an emphasis on the educational outcome under the uniform curriculum standards (Zhu 2004). In recent years the traditional uniform curriculum was criticized by educators and researchers because of the gap between the curriculum designers and curriculum implementers. Typically the curriculum was designed by specialists who have expertise in the content area but who have no direct service experience working with children and their families. The curriculum was prescribed for teachers with standardized goals and objectives. Teachers' role was to follow the curriculum with the purpose of delivering the content instead of following the learners (children) to ensure effective learning within the meaningful context. Therefore, the traditional kindergarten instruction was to transmit knowledge through drill exercises (Zhu and Zhou 2005).

Despite the vague definition of *Suzhi Jiaoyu* policy in early education, the curriculum reform has started changing the foundation of the traditional kindergarten educational paradigm. The reform requested that early childhood professionals examine children's prior experiences, interests, and needs, engaging children in meaningful activities, and evaluate children's learning through multiple measures and sources. Obviously this request would require higher-level skills from teachers than a standardized curriculum because teachers would play a more active role as a decision maker in both the curriculum development and implementation. However, kindergarten programs and teachers in rural areas might not receive the same level of support (both financial and professional) and resources, and consequently many rural kindergartens might have to share resources including books, Internet connections, and multimedia services. Many kindergarten programs in rural areas might experience severe shortage of personnel; as a result, the quality of early education might have to be compromised. On the other hand, kindergartens in big cities and economically advantaged areas have been benefited from the reform. For example, Zhu and Zhou (2005) conducted a survey on kindergarten directors investigating early childhood education teachers' practices in terms of curriculum development and implementation as well as pedagogical methods in teaching young children. They found that teachers in Shanghai area since the educational reform started to pay more attention to children's independent study and positive interaction between teachers and children. Teachers also changed from emphasizing the standardized curriculum to multiple orientation and self-determination of the curriculum

(Zhu and Zhou 2005). Although teachers were reportedly better prepared in terms of beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors, preparing high-quality early childhood teachers continued to be a daunting task.

### ***Teacher Training in Early Childhood Education***

Chinese kindergarten teachers were trained primarily through three ways in the past several decades since the early 1950s. The first was the traditional training programs provided in normal schools or universities. The second included vocational schools that recruited students directly from junior high or middle schools. The third category was through retraining of returning teachers from the field. The formal education of early childhood teacher preparation varies from 2-year junior colleges to 4-year colleges with bachelor's degrees to master's and doctoral programs from normal universities. In addition to the formal education, local county and city governments may offer ongoing in-service training through distance education such as online and correspondence education.

Because the early childhood education in China was non-compulsory, early childhood teachers were placed in a lower social and economic status than other teachers (Zhu 2008). The quality of early childhood teachers also varied greatly. For example, among the kindergarten teachers and directors, only about 6 % held a bachelor's degree, about 43 % of them received 2- or 3-year college education, and over a half of these teachers and directors received no professional training (Ministry of Education 2005; Zhu 2008).

Under the traditional Chinese teacher education, knowledge was viewed as objective, neutral, and universal (Dello-Lacovo 2009; Zhu 2004), and teacher's role was to deliver the knowledge with an emphasis on the learning outcomes or skills and minimal consideration of contextual factors such as individual interests, family background, or situational changes. Instead of an integrated approach to instruction, kindergarten teachers were trained by subject areas such as language arts, mathematics, or social studies. Knowledge was taught through drills, practices, and tests instead of hands-on projects. In this teacher training model, kindergarten teachers were generally stronger in content knowledge than they were in pedagogical knowledge with at least 2 or 3 years of training.

The quality of early education teacher preparation programs has a direct impact on the quality of instructional practices in early childhood. The uneven economic development in China has also affected the uneven distribution in terms of quality of early childhood education. While kindergarten teachers from more developed regions have implemented child-centered instructional strategies to promote the individual potential, teachers in rural or underdeveloped areas were still managing to provide basic educational needs such as textbooks, writing papers, pencils, and chalks. While a kindergarten in Shanghai or Guangzhou has teachers with a degree from advanced teacher preparation programs to teach children holistically, in a rural community there might be a classroom of children with ages ranged



from 2 to 6 being taught by a young teacher who barely graduated from high school or middle school.

In more developed areas along the east coast such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, kindergarten teachers often held a bachelor's or a master's degree in early childhood education, and the early childhood curriculum was incorporated with modern approaches and Western philosophies that emphasized child-centered learning and teaching. In rural areas or less developed regions, many kindergarten-age children were not provided formal early childhood education at all, and when they did receive 1-year preprimary education for school readiness preparation, the curriculum was primarily designed for elementary-age children with a focus on academic skills instead of a holistic approach (Cai 2005; Zhu 2008).

### *Instructional Approaches*

The traditional curriculum paradigm focused on structuralization, systematization, uniformity, and standardization, whereas the reformed curriculum emphasized complexity, multiplicity, individuality, and contextual peculiarity, especially the appropriate cultural context (Zhu 2008). The standardized curriculum with universal principles in child development and education typically did not involve family backgrounds, personal experience, social relations, and cultural heritage (Zhu 2008); therefore, the instructional methods were mostly prescribed with the central purpose of grasping knowledge rather than interpreting knowledge. One primary goal of the early childhood education reform was to incorporate new educational theories and learner-centered approaches to early education, with the purposes of improving the quality of kindergarten education and strengthening the instructional skills of kindergarten teachers. As a top-down model, this reform was carried out through administrative policies to all levels of administrative organizations and kindergartens. Compared with the traditional model that was teacher-directed and skill-oriented, the reformed model emphasized child-initiated activities, individual differences, play-based performance, integrated curricula, and the process of learning (Zhu and Zhang 2008). As a result, a variety of Western curriculum approaches has been adopted including the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia, High/Scope, and Montessori (Li and Li 2003). Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) was introduced as the framework for curriculum development.

One essential change in the new approach to kindergarten curriculum is the emphasis on young children's active learning through exploration with the environment and interaction with peers in hands-on activities. Learner-centered instructional approaches have been incorporated into the educational system (Dello-Lacovo 2009). Instead of being the direct recipients of new information, young children were encouraged to ask questions and to connect their personal and family background to the new information. Academic skills were planned to be embedded within multiple contexts such as arts, music, and physical education. Constructivism and social/cultural interactive learning has played a major role in the development

of this new approach. Instead of learning through structured instruction as a collective group, young children now are encouraged to “construct,” to build their own knowledge through active process of learning.

Under the new curriculum, teachers’ role was not only to facilitate young children to acquire knowledge; more importantly, teachers need to prepare children to be competent in using the knowledge in real-life situations. While this change has inspired many Chinese early childhood educators to be creative and reflective, it has also caused challenges because it affects the fundamental ideology in the Chinese educational system. In the traditional Chinese culture, learning was more extrinsic than intrinsic. This has much to do with a fundamental value rooted in the Chinese culture, namely, that you learn with the main purpose of benefiting the collective group other than simply for the purpose of enjoying yourself. When these two purposes do not align, conflicts may arise.

### *Assessment and Evaluation System*

Examination-oriented education was not a new concept in the Chinese educational system. For over a 1,000 years, Chinese imperial governments adopted centralized examinations to determine official status and power, and this concept has been rooted in Chinese culture and society. In ancient China, the examination focused primarily on skills of essay writing, poetry writing, and calligraphy as well as Confucian ideology and classical literature and history that required rote memorization and recitation (Zhu 2008). Because of the influence of testing system in the Chinese history, standardized examination was always valued in the Chinese educational system; it persistently exists during the educational reform throughout early childhood to higher education (Pepper 1996) with the teacher as the center of the learning process and the students the information recipients (Thogerson 1990).

Many of the features of the traditional Chinese educational system were carried over to the Chinese modern schools (Pepper 1996). The evolution of the modern schools in China was a fusion of traditional imperial methods with examination as the primary assessment system prescribed by governmental regulation and modern Western schooling features with multiple subjects such as science, math, and literature instead of overly focusing on history, literature, and essay writing. Under this model, schools were standardized and regulated by the central government; educational resources were controlled by a few authorities in educational research (Pepper 1996). This model was widely criticized by both educators and parents because of its rigid focus on examination, its disconnection between formal education and practical life skills, and teacher-centered instruction (Pepper 1996).

Although the curriculum reform goals were established at all levels of the educational system from early childhood education to higher education, there was no effective evaluation system developed to guide the assessment tools and to determine whether the curriculum goals had been met (Beijing Report 2006; Marton 2006). There were no clear evaluation criteria being established to guide the evaluation

methods and procedures (Wen 2007). For example, a survey conducted by Shandong Education Department in 2007 identified six major problems holding back the progress of *Suzhi Jiaoyu* (Dong 2007). Although the *Suzhi Jiaoyu* policy valued all five developmental areas, it was found that intellectual education was the focus with a high emphasis on standardized examination in subject content areas and low emphasis on non-examined areas such as moral, physical, and aesthetic education, emphasizing knowledge transmission rather than cultivation of creative skills and practical skills. As a result, the small percentage of “bright” students was the focus to earn the fame for a school, whereas the “average” students were neglected. The survey indicated that nearly 60 % of teachers believed that children’s study load was actually heavier under the reformed curriculum than it had been 5 years previously; what was worse, some children’s health was reported worsened under the heavy load of study (Dong 2007).

Another example was about cram schools that provided revision and preparation classes during official summer breaks for the next school level (e.g., from middle to high school). Although the Shanghai Education Commission strictly prohibited cram schools running preparation classes during the summer break except for classes for struggling students, a 2006 report indicated that more than two thirds of Shanghai students were attending these classes, among whom including primary school students and students with high ability (Chun 2006).

Under the current examination-oriented assessment system for higher education entrance and secondary school entrance, examinations were provided as early as in kindergarten to “prepare” children for the heavy testing schedule at grade schools. Children in kindergarten were not only given tests but also given ranks based on their test results, and these results were often announced in class as a “motivation” to encourage their learning. As a matter of fact, it has become the courteous greeting of parents and grandparents at social occasions for them to ask each other “What is your child/grandchild’s rank in his/her class?” instead of asking “Has your child enjoyed his/her preschool?” which would be more common in Western culture. Aligned with the testing, kindergarten teachers started assigning homework almost every day including most weekends, despite the opposition from the central and provincial regulating governments. The examination-oriented approach was so penetrating, even at occasions when teachers choose not to assign homework, parents would question teachers whether their children had been taught enough.

Without changing the examination-oriented assessment approach from the top of the system, it was almost impossible to convince teachers and parents to abandon the testing methods because a testing score was the primary criterion for high quality or *Suzhi* for both teachers and students. Examination success was of critical importance to students’ future lives and remains the primary form of assessment of teacher quality and school performance. There has been a widespread discussion on reforming the examination content in line with the new curriculum goals, and there have been some changes to the examination system with some regions now setting their own exams on certain subjects. Some provinces and cities started to consider additional admission criteria rather than test scores alone to recruit high-quality junior secondary graduates to outstanding senior secondary schools. However, the

primary admission criterion was still the result from examination contents that required traditional rote learning methods instead of problem solving skills. For example, Marton (2006) found that the geography public examinations were still testing low-level cognitive skills emphasizing memorized details instead of conceptual understanding, which completely contradicted the goals of the curriculum reform.

### ***Parental Involvement***

Parental involvement in early childhood education has been always important in China, but traditionally in a more informal way until children entered grade schools. In recent years, with the emphasis of *Suzhi Jiaoyu*, childcare was shifted from home setting provided by primary caregivers including grandparents or relatives to formal education in kindergarten programs. As a result, parents and/or grandparents have been more formally involved in early childhood education. This is especially true for children 3–6 years old from more developed regions. Zhu and Zhou (2005) conducted a survey of current Shanghai early childhood education on 127 communities, and results indicated that early childhood educators in Shanghai had increased partnership with families under the reformed early childhood curriculum. However, although the importance of involving parents was recognized, the role of parents and communities in the development and implementation of the curriculum was vague and remained informal.

In general, for children between the age of birth and 3 years, Chinese parents were reported being more involved in home-based childcaring programs than school-based programs (Lau et al. 2011; Nyland et al. 2009). In urban areas, home-based babysitting for this age group of children was the primary form of childcare (Gao and Zhai 2004). The quality of home-based childcare programs varied greatly. In recent years, the increased number of layoff workers contributed to the increase of home-based childcare along with grandparents who are available and willing to take care of the grandchild at home setting. In addition, mothers who do not work in the workforce would not use public childcare programs for financial or educational reasons. The education levels of these caretakers ranged from elementary education to higher education, and, therefore, the quality of home-based childcare programs ranged from basic childcare to high-quality care and education. As a result, the education and care for children under 3 years old was not guided by consistent curriculum standards; formal education does not typically start until children reach 3 years old and enter kindergarten.

Another characteristic in early childhood education is the rapidly growing trend of private early care and education programs as a result of the economic impact and change of governmental policies (Nyland et al. 2009). In terms of funding sources, kindergartens in China used to have four categories: kindergartens sponsored directly by the government for its personnel at all levels, kindergartens sponsored by state-owned enterprises and large corporations as a support for their employees,

kindergartens cosponsored between parents and local communities in urban areas, and kindergartens sponsored by local rural governments in the countryside (Zeng 2008). All these kindergarten programs were considered public early childhood programs with full or partial support from the different levels of government and agencies. Private early childhood programs came into existence as a new concept along with the economic reform.

The central government in China started to shift its responsibilities for funding and managing early childhood education to nongovernmental agencies or private sectors since the 1990s (Li and Wang 2008). As a result, some public early childhood programs were forced to transform into self-funded enterprises when the budget was cut from the local governments. This change of policy has caused controversy among parents and educators. For example, Li and Wang's study (2008) indicated that many people were concerned about the quality and standards of self-funded programs when the transformation to private sectors changed the nature of teaching profession, whereas others expressed their support because the transformation might elicit fair market competition and might lead to a more reasonable distribution of educational resources.

## Challenges and Issues

### *Ideological Conflicts*

Under the reformed curriculum model, play has been identified as a major way of young children's learning instead of structured group lessons. Early childhood educators started to observe children's play behaviors during activities as part of the evaluation process. Identifying individual differences of young children was another major component of the reform, which has also been the most challenging part of the reform because it caused conflicts with the traditional value of collectivism. Respecting children as individual persons is a new concept for many Chinese educators and parents. For example, it has always been valued and emphasized in the Chinese education curriculum that the interests of the collective group supersede the interests of oneself. It was viewed as being selfish if an individual put his or her own interests above those of the group. As a result, although many teachers and parents may understand the importance of child-centered curriculum, the implementation of the new curriculum could be compromised.

One of the challenges for teachers' implementation was the lack of effective guidelines for instructional practices, and oftentimes teachers were not prepared to implement the new curriculum. Due to the lack of firsthand experiences in the new approach, many teachers had to rely on their own understanding of the theory and transform from the theory to practice based on their past experiences. A gap might exist between teachers' pedagogical ideas and instructional practices, and this gap could be widened without appropriate teacher preparation. According to a survey on 246 county education bureau leaders conducted by the National Education

Administration Institute, only about half of these leaders thought that the teachers in their divisions had received effective guidance, and only about 43 % of them thought that the teachers were able to adapt to the new curriculum (Yu et al. 2005).

Consequently, in many areas, teachers continue teaching children using the same materials and approaches such as drills and practices under the new term “*Suzhi*” education. For example, a report from Shandong province indicated that teachers’ instructional methods still reflected their traditional beliefs in teacher-centered instruction with an emphasis on discrete skills requiring rote memorization and testing (Shan 2002). Although some student-centered components were included in the curriculum and inquiry-based activities were suggested, teachers tended to focus on the textbooks and considered the components of new curriculum irrelevant to the contents and their instructional practices (Marton 2006). Compared to examinations on core content subjects, some teachers and parents agreed that music courses should be cut back, physical education could be exempted, and even students’ sleep time could be shortened (Wen 2007).

### ***Imbalanced Resources***

In addition to ideological conflicts, the limited or lack of educational resources is another challenge to implement the new early childhood curriculum. In China, over 50 % of the population lives in rural areas (Zhao and Hu 2008). However, young children from rural or underdeveloped areas had not been guaranteed early education for several decades since 1949. The agricultural communities have unique needs and challenges in terms of young children’s care and education due to the lack of resources and limited funding, among many other factors. Lower enrollment in elementary schools and high school dropout rates had been major issues in many rural areas. Since the economic reform and the Open Door Policy, the government established national guidelines that specifically focused on early childhood education in serving children in rural areas. In 1983, the central government released *Concern about Early Childhood Education in Rural Areas* specifying the critical role of early childhood education with policy guidelines. The new guidelines encourage small towns and villages to take more active roles in developing and implementing early care and education programs to serve the local communities. As a minimum requirement, children 5–6 years old are offered a 1-year preprimary program before they enter the primary school.

The financial resource in China’s education is low and unequal with a significant discrepancy between urban and rural schools starting with prekindergarten programs and getting worse in junior and senior high school. This discrepancy has put students from rural areas in a disadvantaged situation for the competitive standardized higher education entrance exam, which was the major official path to successful careers and better life (Gu 2000). Not surprisingly the *Suzhi Jiaoyu* reform that emphasized educating the “wholeness” of the child with a holistic approach did not benefit students from rural areas. Due to the discrepancy from the starting point,

children from rural areas had to spend longer study hours in order to be able to compete with their counterparts from more developed areas. At the primary school level, it was found that children from rural schools spent more time on content subjects required for the core exams such as math and language arts and less time on non-exam courses such as computing design or oral English, either due to the lack of expertise from teachers, lack of resources from the school, or lack of access of students to after-school private programs (Kipnis 2001; Liu and Feng 2005). Therefore, the definition of *Suzhi* carried very specific meaning to these students, testing scores in standardized exams, which was followed by the rest of the sequence: low scores → low *Suzhi* → low-level job → low-quality life.

### ***The Persistence of Examination-Oriented Education***

The educational reform in China has been attempting to transform the traditional examination-oriented education into quality-oriented educational system by focusing on improving students' creativity and independent inquiry. However, without changing of the higher education entrance examination criteria that mainly rely on standardized testing scores, the implementation of quality education, or *Suzhi Jiaoyu*, has become an empty slogan.

When the quality of students and schools was evaluated by the percentage of passing standardized tests, the quality-oriented education was "operationally" defined as testing scores. When parents chose kindergarten or elementary schools, what they were looking for was not how the curriculum was developed and implemented in what contexts; instead, they were looking at the most explicit factor: how many children were accepted by schools at the next level, for example, at the high school level, how many students passed the higher education entrance exam. This is common sense because no caring parents would take the risk of their child's future by choosing not to look at this factor. Consequently, even some parents may not agree with the examination-focused approach or teacher-directed instructional methods; the outcome of these practices became the sole motivation. In some cases when schools were trying to follow the national education policy by reducing the homework load of students and cutting back the study hours at school and after school, parents chose to pay private tutors to make up for the "loss" because they were concerned that their children might not do well in exams (China Education Journal 2005).

### **Future Direction**

Evidently, the outcome of quality education, or *Suzhi Jiaoyu*, was complicated and impossible to be estimated from only one dimension. The persistence of examination-oriented education has its roots in the larger social and political system beyond the educational system. For example, entry-level jobs and promotions for governmental

officials and professional personnel were still based on examinations that focused more on the foundational knowledge and theoretical aspects than on problem solving skills (Niu 2007). When parents and teachers witnessed that the only path to a successful career is by receiving higher education, children were encouraged to study hard as early as at kindergarten age. However, the primary criterion for their performance throughout the school years is their successful entrance to the next school level as determined by their testing scores (Dore 1976; Andreas 2004).

The solution to this problem obviously involves the change of the higher education admission criteria and procedure along with other systematic changes. To make fundamental changes of these issues related to quality education, however, the educational system needs to be reviewed from an ecological systems approach; that is, the child and the child's family need to be viewed within the larger social context. In addition, the interactions between and among multilevel factors need to be examined. The interrelationship between home, community, and the society needs to be investigated systematically from multiple perspectives at different levels. Only then the early childhood curriculum would be meaningful and relevant to the child and the child's family, from which children would be able to benefit under high-quality early education and care that leads to later success in school and work.

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