

Chapter 5

Characteristics of Contemporary Education Policy Making in China: Changes and Challenges



Chengwen Hong, Yao Liu and Jing Wang

Abstract Many people want to understand the process of policy making for higher education in China. Some people believe it is moving toward becoming a scientific process; others consider it a mere formality; and still others think that education policy making in China is a joke. Here, we adopt the perspective of knowledge mobilization to assess the situation of education policy making in China over the past 40 years. We present the characteristics of education policy making. We outline the factors that contribute to improved policy making. Toward further improvement, we conclude with three critical suggestions.

5.1 Introduction

Policy making in China is more or less highly centralized. Today, provincial governments enjoy greater autonomy with respect to education; however, the central government retains the power of decision-making in financing, curriculum construction, and administration. Education policy making is in the hands of legislators of the National People's Congress and State Council (especially under the Ministry of Education). All these bodies need accurate knowledge about policies and policy proposals. Where and from whom the knowledge derives are critical questions. From answers to the following questions, we can attempt to determine the characteristics of policy making in China: Do those bodies consult different groups of people? Do those bodies listen to different types of people? By addressing these questions, we can assess whether or not policy making is a democratic and scientific process. This paper adopts the perspective of knowledge mobilization (KM) in exploring relations between education policy making and policy knowledge producers. The technique of KM is useful and pertinent; however, sometimes it is oversimplified.

C. Hong (✉) · Y. Liu · J. Wang
Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China
e-mail: chwhong@bnu.edu.cn

© Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2020
X. Zhu et al. (eds.), *Education and Mobilities*, Perspectives on Rethinking and Reforming Education, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9031-9_5

KM is a research technique originally applied by Canadian policy researchers in the late 1980s. Benjamin Levin was one of those researchers.¹ Levin et al. point out that good policy emerges from good policy proposals. It is very important to establish good dialogue between knowledge producers and policy makers. Acquaintance and mutual trust between the two are very important. In addition, two factors exert a great impact on the quality of policy making: (1) the quality of proposals or suggestions made by knowledge producers, such as education practitioners and researchers; (2) how well policy makers can understand the real meaning of policy proposals.

It is beneficial to examine China's education policy making from the KM perspective. The key questions are as follows: Are China's education policy makers able to access good policy knowledge? Can China's policy makers understand and trust the proposals of education practitioners and researchers? Is communication effective between policy makers and proposers? Accordingly, in this study, we address the following three questions: Who produces policy knowledge in China? In what way is such knowledge transmitted to policy makers? What or whose knowledge do policy makers trust the most?

5.2 Background to Development of Education Policy Making in China (1979–2018)

Since China adopted its Open Door Policy in 1979, almost 40 years have elapsed. Education has made considerable achievements. Since that time, outlined and promulgated education policies have made a substantial contribution. It is necessary, however, to review the policy-making experience in China to examine its effectiveness. To some people, policy making is an experience; to others, it is a science. It is necessary to determine which of these viewpoints is correct. That is a matter of debate. But in this paper, we examine how knowledge producers and appliers have advanced over the past 40 years.

The past 40 years of education policy making in China can be summarized in terms of three stages. First, 1979–1992 was the start of educational reforms. That was a new era: Almost every policy constituted a new direction or adventure. Policy makers found that period very stimulating and exciting.

Second, 1993–2010 was a period of adjustment of all policies in education development. During that time, some education areas had to be enlarged, such as private education and institutional guidance. Some education projects were fully implemented, such as nine-year compulsory education for all children. Some new projects were initiated, such as Project 211 and, later, Project 985 for the quicker development of higher education. During this period, policy implementation was impeded by lack of financial resources. Accordingly, the central government cooperated closely with the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to access loans from overseas banks to supplement education resources.

¹Levin et al. (2011).

Third, the period from 2010 to the present has been one of fine-tuning education policies: Some education policies do not meet current needs; some policies are controversial or would result in conflict. Some policies require adjustment; systematic and overall adjustment of all existing laws and regulations needs to be considered and addressed. During this period, greater intelligence and wisdom have been necessary regarding law improvement. Knowledge producers and policy makers are working ever more closely.

5.3 Three Stages of Education Policy Making

1979–1992

It is widely known that education policies in China entered a new stage during this period. Policy makers had a great deal to accomplish; thus, they had to make wide-ranging consultations to acquire policy knowledge. First, policy makers attempted to obtain knowledge from academics, especially university professors having returned from abroad or with good skills in foreign languages. Second, the policy makers consulted eminent scientists working at foreign universities, such as Nobel Prize winners Yang Chen-Ning and Tsung-Dao Lee, when they visited Beijing. Third, the policy makers conducted their own investigations to obtain data to support the ideas of central government leaders. Although the policy makers consulted academics for policy suggestions or proposals, they relied much more on their own judgment.

The most important policy for education reform and development in the 1980s was Decision on Education System Reform by Central Committee of Communist Party of China. According to individuals closely engaged in preparing that document, the proposal for that policy came exclusively from China's top leaders. In October 1984, China's central government implemented a critical policy: Decision on Economic System Reform. The government believed that successful reform of the economy could be achieved without reform of the education system.

Hu Qili,² a party secretary of the Central Committee, was asked to undertake an investigation in four provinces. Hu spent half a month visiting in the four provinces; he organized almost 100 meetings and made many good suggestions. He submitted a report, which outlined four important policy proposals. They were as follows: (1) reform in higher education, which suggested the state government could not and should not allocate or secure jobs for every graduate; (2) greater efforts to develop vocational and technical education, satisfying the great demand for technicians; (3) universalization of nine-year compulsory education; and (4) reinforcing education reform by establishing a top group of national leaders. In May 1985, the policy about education system reform was presented. From the perspective of KM, the process was clear and direct. Government leaders proposed an idea; the government conducted an investigation as appropriate. Thus, we may conclude that this process

²Hu (2008).

was government centered. The government produced the knowledge; it applied the knowledge, and then it made its policy. Thus, this is a top-down model.

The model of the government-centered approach is clear; however, to a small extent, other channels existed during this period. Occasionally, such channels relied on university professors who had the advantage of ability in foreign languages and education research expertise. In December 1980, China issued Decree of Degree, a basic education law addressing degree regulation. Many bylaws emerged from this decree. The people who provided the knowledge for this decree were a group of professors led by Gu Mingyuan of Beijing Normal University (BNU). They translated and introduced degree systems from developed countries. For the policy makers, most of their consultation and proposals were brand new; most of the policy proposals were adopted.

Other knowledge producers were eminent academics living overseas. Li Zhengdao is one of them. As a Nobel Prize winner, Tsung-Dao Lee was invited to Beijing to meet Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader. He told Deng that China should create a postdoctoral system as well as the National Natural Science Foundation.³ Fortunately, Deng was completely convinced by these arguments; shortly after, all the proposals became policies. Tsung-Dao Lee is respected by the Chinese for his scientific achievements and his good proposals for education development. Thus, it can be concluded that his knowledge was well mobilized: he was astutely able to share his ideas with important policy makers.

Overall, the characteristics of education policy making during this period can be described as government centered or top-down. There appear to have been multiple channels, but knowledge from the top leaders was influential. Education policy proposals were largely related to major political and economic issues. A few educationists were consulted, but that was on a small scale. The ways for soliciting educational proposals were simple and quite primitive. Nevertheless, the relations between policy makers and knowledge producers were excellent. They respected and trusted one another.

1993–2010

In 1993, Outlines of Education Reform and Development, one of the most important policies of the 1990s, was issued by China's state government. Almost all the identified education goals were to be achieved by the end of the twentieth century. As a result of those outlines, a series of policies emerged. With regard to basic education, the deadline for achieving nine-year compulsory education was set as the year 2000. Nationwide, curriculum reform was initiated in the mid-1990s. With higher education policy, the main tasks were outlined in terms of readjustment, reform, and improvement. Student enrollment was greatly expanded. Private higher education was promoted.⁴ A few universities, such as Peking University and Tsinghua University, were enforced or encouraged to become world-class institutions.

³Ren (2006).

⁴Hao (2007).

During this period, the knowledge sources were large as they were in the previous period. Policy proposals came from both insiders and outsiders: insiders were researchers as well as top political leaders; outsiders included eminent Chinese scientists living overseas who conducted comparative research. At this time, proposals from researchers and comparative researchers were increasing. Proposals from top political leaders were decreasing, whereas those from educationists were growing. The reason is not completely clear, but it is evident that education reform became more diverse.

From the perspective of KM, the central government relied more on researchers: Government officials could not acquire the relevant knowledge as extensively or as quickly as professors. Some universities, such as BNU and Shanghai Institute of Intelligence, gradually developed into semi-think tanks for education reform. Institutes of higher education, such as Xiamen University and Peking University, offered education proposals to the Ministry of Education (MOE). One example of such proposals is that education should receive not less than 4% of GDP. Academics, such as Professor Wang Shanmai, promoted this proposal, and finally the National People's Congress adopted it as a regulation. Professor Gu Mingyuan made a proposal that students on teacher education courses should not be charged of tuition fees: it was quickly accepted and became a national policy in 2007. It is notable that the MOE and State Council trusted academics during this period: there was a good relationship between the two sides. However, the academics in question here were a small number of eminent professors.

At this time, China's education policy making entered a more mature stage, placing greater reliance on research findings. Further, academics showed strong aspirations to make policy proposals. There was a good balance and relationship between knowledge producers and appliers. Hao Keming made the following points in 2007: (1) China's government realized from past experience that macro-level policies carry great risk if they are conducted without thorough investigation⁵; (2) the greater the number of parties consulted, the better, e.g., the 1993 Outlines of Education Reform and Development mobilized many parties, including representatives from economic, scientific and social sectors, congressmen, teachers, principals, and presidents. Even, the MOE consulted famous Chinese living in the USA, such as Chang-Lin Tien, Nieh Hua Tong, and Chia-Chiao Lin. This showed that policy makers wanted to consult with representatives from different sectors.

2010 to the Present

As education in China began developing in a solid and rapid manner, policy makers started accumulating expertise in education policy making—either through practice or on-job learning (e.g., taking Ph.D. courses). Since 2010, the MOE has promoted both top-down and bottom-up processes.⁶ Data-based evidence plays a greater role in policy proposals. The use of new techniques is also encouraged to improve policy making.

⁵Deng (1994).

⁶Zhang (2010/2018).

The characteristics of education policy making are well reflected in the making and promulgation of state planning outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020). It is difficult to believe, but in that regard, 40,000 scholars and education practitioners were involved in related discussions and solicited suggestions. Special research was conducted by 2000 scholars divided into 11 groups.⁷ Nothing similar with education has occurred in any other country. That state planning outline set targets for Chinese education development to be achieved by 2020. One important target was modernization of education. Another goal was expanding higher education enrollment by 40%: that was attained two years in advance of the 2020 target year. Overall, knowledge has become too widely mobilized. That may be because the proposals were too diverse and conflicting; it may be because the policy makers used big-data⁸ techniques.

The Chinese government has also experimented with pre-policy to see if that can be implemented in schools. Pre-policy is policy that is subject to improvement. In 2014, the state government issued the Comprehensive Reform Plan for Gaokao Enrollment and Examination.⁹ Two provinces were selected to undertake an experiment to determine whether the policy proposals in the reform plan were workable. In 2017, the experiment was concluded, and suggestions were made and submitted to the MOE for adjustment to the Gaokao reform plan. In 2018, 14 provinces adopted the reform. This experiment will give policy makers more time to watch and reflect on related issues. In this way, the central government hopes to achieve smoothly implemented and effective policies. Accordingly, the risks with policy making can be reduced.

Three characteristics of policy making clearly emerged. First, policy-related knowledge has increased since the time of the Open Door Policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The MOE has even assigned research project to overseas embassies. A fundamental change is that policy makers rely less on internal system investigators: they are depending more on universities and professors. However, policy makers still place little reliance on independent or private institutions. Second, new policy-making techniques have been applied, such as big data, simulation modeling, and skills in mixing top-down and bottom-up processes.¹⁰ Top political leaders are still dominant in influencing policy making; however, the use of scientific and democratic policy making is acceptable for policy improvement. Third, relations between policy makers and knowledge producers are improving. Policy makers request professors to produce knowledge. Professors feel pride if they can contribute to a policy that can influence schools and students. Nevertheless, the MOE has its own preferences and inclinations. The MOE likes some proposals and does not like others. Thus, establishing a rationale for policy making remains a problem.

⁷Gu (2010).

⁸Gu et al. (2016).

⁹Zhong (2015).

¹⁰Chen et al. (2014).

5.4 Contributors to Improving Education Policy Making in China

During the past 40 years, Chinese policy making has steadily improved with respect to knowledge provision and application as well as the relations between knowledge producers and users. As to why there has been steady improvement, three key reasons can be identified.

First, there is no country like China with such a strong need for policy knowledge and proposals. It is not difficult to understand how many policy proposals are needed to maintain a whole system of education that has an impact on over 200 million students. It is well known that in the 1960s and 1970s, China's education system was almost completely destroyed: that was the result of wrongdoings in the Culture Revolution during the era of Chairman Mao Zedong. Since 1979, education regulations have had to be made and promulgated. Policy makers had no choice: they had to rely on anyone who could submit good policy proposals because they lacked both policy-making expertise and time.

Second, Chinese policy makers are relatively modest and open to any source of new knowledge—especially good education practice from any country, not just developed countries. Good knowledge comes from comparative researchers, education practitioners, and foreign experts. It is clear that many policies and regulations are related to certain experts. Chinese academics and educationists obtained considerable research findings related to education theories and practice from other countries. Those findings were absorbed and transformed into pre-policies. For example, China has regularly invited dozens of presidents from world-famous universities to explore ways of improving China's famous universities. A former president of Yale University has visited Beijing regularly and offered suggestions when he met the ministers of education.¹¹ This clearly shows that China's policy makers are very open to the outside world.

Third, Chinese education policy makers have great power in mobilizing knowledge producers. This is evident in a few cases. In 2008–09, the MOE invited over 40,000 academics to take part in research, discussion, and document drafting.¹² That is a phenomenal scale for just a single plan—irrespective of how general or multifarious. Beyond the cost, it is remarkable how so many academics could be involved in the same project at one time. The MOE's power to mobilize experts is in accordance with China's type of government, which maintains power of centralization. Sometimes, the MOE is able to assign the same policy research project to three or four universities separately. In the end, the MOE can make use of more research to generate policies or pre-policies.

¹¹Lin (2006/2018).

¹²Yuan (2012).

5.5 Challenges

Education policy making in China is steadily improving; however, some people raise doubts and criticisms. First, the MOE and all policy-making bodies should encourage or be receptive to independent suggestions or proposals. If we could picture this situation as a policy “soup,” we would want the soup to contain diversified ingredients. People generally wish to hear opinions that are line with their own way of thinking. Policy makers follow the same tendency. All policy theories indicate that the more diversified the ingredients in the policy soup, the better it is. Thus far, there have been few self-supported think tanks in China; majority of think tanks obtain government support.

Second, there is a great need for knowledge brokers: their function is to improve communication between policy knowledge producers and policy makers. Since 2010, BNU has submitted hundreds of policy suggestions and proved itself to be a good knowledge broker. BNU makes use of its own academics and those from other universities to produce policy proposals. BNU also makes use of its good relations with the Central Committee of the China Democratic Progressive Party (CDP). Through the CDP and its close relationship with Chinese Communist Party, BNU informs top political leaders and policy makers of its proposals. Thus, with BNU, there are good communication among professors, practitioners, and policy makers. Nevertheless, such brokers are a few in numbers compared with the body of researchers or policy knowledge producers. How to create more brokers remains a problem.

The third problem is not restricted to China: it is the policy-making quality of the policy makers. To make better policies, policy makers should have greater expertise in finding and understanding good proposals for education development. Policy makers should be able to integrate different opinions. They even have to mediate in conflicts with different interest groups. Currently, China’s policy makers are far from perfect: they still have a long way to go.

In summary, China’s education policy making is not as good as Chinese politicians say. However, it is not as bad as critics maintain.

References

- Chen, S., Meng, L., & Zhang, H. (2014). Education policy evidence in the big data era: Implication of the evidence-based idea upon modernization of China education governance. *Global Education, 43*(2), 121–127.
- Deng, X. (1994). *Selected works from Deng Xiaoping* (Vol. II, p. 123). Beijing: People’s Publication House.
- Gu, M. (2010). Learning and interpretation of the national medium- and long-term education reform and development plan (2010–2020). *Research of Higher Education, 31*(07), 1–6.
- Gu, X., Xue, Y., & Sun, Y. (2016). Education decision making studies in the era of big data: The power and advantage of big data and simulation. *Chinese Journal of Audial-visual Education, 348*(1), 56–62.

- Hao, K. (2007). A good case of the scientific and democratic model of key education policy making: My personal experience of involving myself in the process of writing outlines of China's education reform and development. *The Journal of Liaoning Education*, 9, 26–29, 47.
- Hu, Q. (2008). Decision on education system reform by Central Committee of Communist Party of China. *Yan and Huang Trilogy*, 12, 1–5.
- Levin, B., Qi, J., Edelstein, H., & Sohn, J. (Eds.). (2011). *The impact of research in education: An international perspective* (pp. 183–207). Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Lin, L. (2006, November 13/2018, September 11) State Councilor Chen Zhili meets with Levin, President of Yale University in Beijing. http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2006-11/13/content_441313.htm.
- Ren, X. (2006, November 27). Li Zhengdao makes special contribution to China's post-doctor system. *China Talented People News*, 1.
- Yuan, G. (2012). Report of the state council on implementing the outline of the national medium- and long-term education reform and development plan. At the Twenty-Fourth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Eleventh National People's Congress. *China Higher Education*, (02), 4–8.
- Zhang, C. (2010, December 30/2018, September 10) Enhancing education policy making in scientific and democratic ways. <http://wap.cnki.net/touch/web/Newspaper/Article/CJYB201012300018.html>.
- Zhong, B. (2015). Deepening comprehensive reforms and coping with the new challenges of college entrance examination enrollment system reform. *Educational Research*, 36(03), 4–9.