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Basic Education Reform in China: Untangling the Story of Success

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Abstract

China's recent basic education reform followed and, in a certain way, imitated its economic reform. The economic reform merged the experimental dual (planned and market) price systems into a free market economy and yielded phenomenal success. Basic education reform, however, has not succeeded in transforming the introductory dual-track (key school and regular school) systems into a universal one. This article briefly examines the general process and outcomes of basic education reform. It discusses the following questions: Is basic education reform also a story of success? What significant lessons can the Chinese reform experience offer to other comparable developing countries?

Introduction

The reform of basic education (which includes primary and junior secondary schooling) in China from the middle 1980s has not completely severed it from Maoist popular education. The post-Mao reform policy makers have never discarded the tradition of localization and community participation. In contrast to Maoist egalitarian schooling, however, school or pupil tracking (typically represented by key vs. regular schools) has been promoted in pursuit of economic efficiency in post-Mao educational changes and reforms.

This article presents a brief examination of the general process and outcomes of basic education reform. We first summarize economic reform and basic education reform, in particular their significant similarities and differences in terms of process and results. We then explain the success of basic education reform using three perspectives, namely, 1) the three matters/solutions, 2) contingency theory, and 3) the 3-C framework. Next, we analyze the price that China has paid for the success of education reform. Finally, we conclude that what the Chinese experience can offer to other developing countries is just what other countries have offered to China: erosion of traditions and westernization of schooling.

Economic Reform

Chinese economic reform is a unique process. From a price perspective, in the early 1980s, the government acquiesced to the coexistence of central planned production and market pricing. In 1985, transactions based on market prices outside the state plan won legal sanction. Gradual decontrol of consumer goods prices steadily brought most consumer goods into a market price system (Naughton, 1995; Riskin, 1987). In 1991, the Central Committee of the Communist Party called for elimination of the dual-track system and boldly recommended a gradual shift to a market system. One year later, the National People's Congress declared that the objective of reform was a "socialist market economy with all stress on the free market" (Naughton, 1995, p. 288). The government then unambiguously embraced the free market economy and began systematically dismantling the outdated command plan economic structure.

However, the economic reform was not strategically planned. In other words, it was initiated without a strategy. Yet, "a limited number of crucial government decisions and commitments were required in order to allow reform to develop. In certain periods, policymakers acted as if they had a commitment to a specific reform strategy" (Naughton, 1995, p. 7). In the process of the reform as a whole, "what is most striking is the succession of incremental, steadily accumulating measures of economic reform that have gradually transformed the economy in a fundamental way" (Naughton, 1995, p. 20).

No doubt, the two decades of economic reform resulted in increasing income inequality as documented in the rich research literature studying the reform. Yet, the growth of an income gap is not peculiar to China. It is a worldwide phenomenon observed in both developed countries such as the U.S. and all transitional countries in recent decades. Furthermore, in the case of China, the extent of income inequality and its underlying

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