

Discussion on the Role of “Head Teacher” in China’s Basic Education

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“I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do.” –Leonardo da Vinci

FROM the perspective of the development of education, the initial reason for the emergence of schools is to enable students to master specific knowledge and skills required by society. In this process, it is inevitable to undertake the task of cultivating students’ ideology and morality. Before the 18th century, due to the relatively low level of social development and education, the two functions of “teaching” and “educating” were often intertwined in the education process.

After the British bourgeois industrial revolution in the 18th century, education began to pursue the ability to train the talents needed for large-scale machine production on a large scale and with high efficiency. All capitalist countries have established modern school education systems one after another. Scientific knowledge is developing daily, and subject teaching is gradually taking shape (Silver, 2013). The refinement and scientific requirement of modern school teaching content intensified the division and contradiction between teaching and educating people. Teaching and management have increasingly evolved into two independent and professional activities. By the end of the 19th century, influenced by the Herbart School’s ideas and others,

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people “divided the school’s internal educational activities into four functional aspects: teaching, training, conservation and management” (Herbat, 1806). At this time, there are two functional systems in ordinary schools: one was the “work system” divided by disciplines, that is, the teaching system; the other was the student management, education, and guidance system, which can also be called the management training system. The independence of the student management and training system has prompted the emergence of work arrangements and positions in schools with functions such as management, guidance, and education as individual goals (Silver, 2013).

Take China as an example. In 1903, the school set up a “supervisor” responsible for students’ character education. Later it was renamed “Administrator” and “Director Teacher.” After 1938, the person responsible for managing a class in the school was renamed “Class Tutor.” After the founding of China, under the influence of the former Soviet Union’s head teacher system, the original elementary and middle school teachers and mentors were all changed to “head teacher” (Chen, 2007).

At present, elementary and middle schools in various countries have particular management positions for students. However, there are differences in their specific work objects or scope of work. In the United States, most elementary schools implement the head teacher “package system.” The package teacher is responsible for the students’ daily management, education, and guidance and responsible for the teaching of all subjects in a class. Usually, the teacher’s office is the classroom where the students attend classes. All students’ teaching activities are carried out in a classroom. Therefore, the student management, guidance, and education functions at the elementary school stage are basically undertaken by the package teacher.

In American middle schools, exceptionally comprehensive high schools, the schools implement the “selection system” in the curriculum and the “credit system” in the school system. Therefore, students do not have a fixed class, so the head teacher responsible for student management and guidance is not specified, but a counselor¹, homeroom teacher², dean, and the students themselves and social forces. Separate implementation and joint responsibility (Hammerness, 2011).

In the French school system, “teaching” and “educating” are two separate functions, and the inspector is an exceptional collaborator in ordinary French secondary schools. The school inspector’s activities are basically to supervise and inspect students’ behavior inside and outside the school and maintain school discipline. Due to the increasingly severe educational problems in schools, French elementary and middle schools have replaced the “supervisors” administrators — education consultants. Educational consultants focus on students’ management and guidance and act as an inspiration and advocate (Belinda, 2013).

In China, the elementary and middle school head teacher system is a characteristic and essential part of national basic education. After 1949, to adapt to the needs of social development and accelerate the training of new generations needed for social development, based on learning the experience

of the Soviet Union, elementary and middle schools in China generally implemented the head teacher system. They promulgated the “Interim Middle Schools Regulations (Draft)” in 1952. The “Draft” clearly stipulates that “each class of the middle school has one head teacher, who the principal selects from among the teachers in each class. Under the leadership of the dean, he is responsible for contacting the teachers in the class, referring to the life and study of the students...”. Since then, the head teacher system and the head teacher’s basic responsibilities have been formally determined in China. Later, in 1979, the “Requirements on the Work of Head Teachers” was issued to clarify further the scope of duties of the head teacher’s work and the specific requirements for self-construction (Xu, 1989).

In 2009, in response to head teachers’ responsibilities and tasks, the Ministry of Education issued the “Work Regulations for Elementary and Middle School Head Teachers” (Ministry of Education of China, 2009). According to the “Regulations,” each elementary and middle school class should be equipped with a head teacher. The head teacher is selected and hired by the school from the class teachers, and its job responsibilities should include the following aspects:

- (i) First, get a comprehensive understanding of every student in the class and deeply analyze the students’ thinking, psychology, study, and living conditions. Care for all students, treat every student equally and respect student personality. Adopt various ways to communicate with students, carry out targeted ideological and moral education, and promote the comprehensive development of students’ morality, intelligence, and physical beauty.
- (ii) Carefully maintain the class’ daily management and the class’ order, cultivate students’ sense of rules, sense of responsibility, and sense of collective honor, and create a collaborative atmosphere of democracy, harmony, solidarity, and mutual assistance a healthy and progressive atmosphere.
- (iii) Organize and guide various class activities such as class meetings, team meetings (days), cultural and sports entertainment, social practice, spring (autumn) tours, etc. Pay attention to mobilizing students’ enthusiasm and initiative and do an excellent job in safety protection.
- (iv) Organize students’ comprehensive quality evaluation work, guide students to carefully record growth records, realistically evaluate student conduct, and make recommendations for rewards and punishments to the school.
- (v) Frequently communicate with teachers and other faculty and staff, actively contact students’ parents and the communities where students live and strive to form an educational synergy.

It can be seen that, compared with European and American schools in class, students are scattered among the schools, living in individual forms or temporary classroom organizations. Chinese elementary and middle schools live in schools as ‘classes.’ Classes are a teaching community and a living community and administrative management unit. This allows Chinese classes

to carry a unique educational advantage in educating people, and it also makes head teacher positions in China irreplaceable (Xiong & Sun, 2017). Compared to one post in other countries, head teachers in China may hold multiple posts. It is necessary to reflect teaching and educating people through teaching work, reflect management and education through class organization and management, and reflect service and education in students' development and service. Also, many excellent head teachers carry the vital mission of "leading parents to assist education." They assume Western countries' responsibility to guide parent educators' identity from the national system level (Wang, 2019).

The particularity of head teachers' duties and labor in China determines that teachers engaged in head teacher work should have strong professional qualities, such as excellent teaching ability, class management ability, moral reflection ability, and spiritual care ability. Among the many professional literacy requirements, strong teaching ability has become the primary criterion for head teacher positions. Especially influenced by the traditional teaching ideology of "integration of training and education" and examination-oriented education, class teachers are mostly core subject teachers. More schools and parents believe that the core subject teacher³ has extended contact with students and can have more time to understand students effectively and coordinate the education work of teachers and parents of students (Shi, 2021).

With the advancement of quality education in China, especially in 2019, the State Council promulgated the "Opinions of the Central State Council on Deepening Education and Teaching Reform and Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Compulsory Education." It must comprehensively develop quality education, focusing on academic instruction, moral education, physical education, aesthetic education, and labor education. More and more schools have begun to use non-core subject teachers as head teachers. However, the school's innovation has not been recognized by all parents, and even some parents have distrust and opposition to the entire teaching work because the associate teacher is the head teacher. The debate about who is the head teacher has intensified in China, but the academic community has not given sufficient evidence.

Using evidence as the basis for selecting and improving programs can promote education innovation, evaluation, and gradual improvement (Slavin et al., 2021). In this issue of the journal, Bai et al. (2021) discussed whether a physical education teacher's head teacher will adversely affect student performance. They use a combination of rigorous experimental research and qualitative research to evaluate the effect of physical education teachers as head teachers. In the research method, this article summarizes previous research shortcomings that only experience but not evidence. While responding to social concerns provide a scientific basis for optimizing head teacher staffing and improving class management in China.

Notes

1. In American middle schools, tutors are full-time teachers between teachers and administrators. They do not teach classes, but their work is precise and specialized, with fixed objects and work scope.
2. Homeroom teacher: Some high schools in the United States have arranged "homeroom" in the students' curriculum. The family room gathers the students enrolled in the same grade to facilitate some student management activities.
3. Affected by China's examination system, in basic education courses, examination subjects are called core subjects, and subjects that do not take examinations are called non-core subjects. Generally speaking, the core subjects include Chinese, mathematics, English, politics, history, physics, biology, geography, and chemistry. Non-core subjects include music, art, sports, etc.

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