



Individualization: Future of Standardized School Development

ZOU Yuan^{[a]*}

^[a]Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
 *Corresponding author.

Received 15 September 2014; accepted 28 November 2014
 Published online 26 December 2014

Abstract

Standardized school development plays an important role in narrowing school gap and offering equal access to education. During implementation, however, educational authorities tend to fall into the trap of equal distribution of educational resources, centralized management and homogeneous education. It is essential and viable to individualize standardized schools with the benefits of favorable national policies and international precedents. Individualized school features flexible development, self-management, diversified evaluation system, and school structure where differentiation and equilibrium coexist.

Key words: Characteristic development; Standardized school development; Equilibrium development

Zou, Y. (2014). Individualization: Future of Standardized School Development. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(6), 225-229. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/5881>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5881>

INTRODUCTION

Standardized school development plays an important role in narrowing school gap and offering equal access to compulsory education. Since the issuance of *Opinions on the Promotion of Further Compulsory Education Fairness* in 2005, “the nation has attached great importance to standardized school development” (Liang, 2005). Heated discussions have also been conducted in academia and among practitioners. Nevertheless, the past few years have seen standardized school development going through a bumpy path and its effectiveness is thrown into doubt.

In view of such, this paper aims to analyze some of the pitfalls during the development process and discuss the development of standardized school from the perspective of individualization.

1. PITFALLS DURING STANDARDIZED SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Equilibrium Distribution of Educational Resources Being Hindrance of Educational Fairness

“Standardization” in this context refers to standards of running schools which are defined by educational authorities in line with relevant laws and rules and related to faculty, curriculum, educational hardware and school management. The purpose of such standards is to ensure all students have the equal access to education. But without a correct understanding of educational fairness which is too often mechanically mistaken as sameness, this could only lead to the opposite. For example, many regions recently have been trying to promote fairness by equally allocating educational resources and measure fairness with simple indicators. For the sake of “fairness”, they even try to strengthen the “underachievers” at the expense of the “overachievers”. In terms of economics, educational fairness means that citizens have the same access to educational resources, which can be realized through standardized school development. While in terms of pedagogy, the ultimate goal of education is the development of human. Besides considering equal access and resource allocation, it should also give a thought to the uniqueness and otherness of different individuals. As Aristotle described in the “Proportionate Equality” proposition, “there are two types of equality, amount equality and proportionate equality. The former means that the absolute number or amount of everyone is the same while the latter means that everyone gets their due proportion” (Aristotle, 1965). Therefore, fairness is different from sameness. Equal

resource allocation in the case of standardized school can only disindividualize schools and students, even then does no good to their development.

1.2 Centralized Management Restricting Initiative and Dynamism of Schools

For quite some time, schools in China are administered by government and operate in line with external standards and procedures. The reform and development of schools also subject to external power. Since the new curriculum reform, the concept of “three-tiered curriculum” has been vigorously advocated. Nonetheless, with the restriction of exam-oriented education, self-management of schools are reduced to “dancing in shackles”. Schools remain the “copier” and “microphone” of superior educational authorities. Currently, to balance the educational strength of different regions and schools, relevant government authorities give full play to their role and exercise centralized management by making specifications and restrictions on faculty, curriculum, school layout, teaching attachment and school management. Such centralization surely can improve the operating conditions of some schools, but on the other hand it also comprises school’s initiative and dynamism. More importantly, it misunderstands the concept of fair education and wrongly regards it as the sameness of faculty, curriculum, management and running conditions. As a matter of fact, in the context of equilibrium development of education, “equilibrium” is only means while “development” is the core and purpose. Current standardized school practice takes the branch for the root. Schools are subject to external powers and lose their initiative and dynamism. This goes against the original purpose of fair education and will only lead to superficial and low-level equilibrium.

1.3 Homogeneous Education Strangling Student’s Personality

The purpose of standardized school development is to promote fair education and equal allocation of educational resources. Well-meaning as it is, it doesn’t necessarily lead to the comprehensive development of students. Contrarily, the status quo shows that many schools are getting homogeneous and merely going through the motions, which will strangle student’s personality. Fair education is not defined by equal allocation of educational resources, but by the full and free development of students. Homogeneous education is seemingly fair, but indeed it goes against fairness. Just as the *Learn to Live* published by the UNESCO put it: “Equality should not be interpreted as sameness as many people may think. Rather, it means that everyone gets the education that is most suitable to himself.”

(International Education Development Committee of UNESCO, 1996)Current standardized school development attaches great importance to sameness and homogeneous education while disregarding individual differences which are objective and cannot be eliminated. This is not

right. To make education more effective, schools should strike a balance between generality and individuality, and sameness and otherness. Otherwise, the original purpose of standardized school may not be fulfilled.

2. INDIVIDUALIZATION BEING FUTURE OF STANDARDIZED SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Homogeneous tendency may restrain the in-depth development of schools which goes beyond homogenization and features characteristics. Thus, it is essential and viable to individualize standardized schools with the benefits of favorable national policies and international precedents.

2.1 Necessity of Individualizing Standardized Schools

2.1.1 Characteristic Development Being Embodiment of Ecological Civilization Construction in School Reform and Development

In the report to the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, ecological civilization is expounded at length as an independent section and included into the overall plan of the nation, symbolizing that China has evolved from industrial civilization featuring the conquest of nature to ecological civilization where human and nature coexist harmoniously. Ecological civilization is characterized by favorable cycle, all-around development, sustainable prosperity, and the harmonious co-existence between humans, human and nature, and human and society. As the embodiment of ecological civilization construction in school reform and development, characteristic school development has two features. Firstly, human is in the dominant position in industrial civilization; while in ecological civilization stage, both human and nature are important and the focus is on respecting, caring and utilizing nature while transforming it. Obviously, current standardized school development is mainly a practice based on industrial civilization and focus on transforming schools with non-flexible external power. As for characteristic development, it gives full play to school’s initiative and dynamism in reform and development. As the UNESCO put it: “More and more people have realized that development is a process of awakening, creativity stimulation and potential release rather than a problem solution process by external power.” (Ribes, 1981) Thus, characteristic school development is the embodiment of ecological civilization concept in school reform and development.

Secondly, ecological civilization construction, as a basic national policy, remains committed to giving priority to conservation and protection, and focusing on boosting green development, circular development and low-carbon development. Characteristic development

aims to integrate existing resources based on school's history and culture and use such resources for school's all-around development. This fundamentally coincides with the concept of ecological civilization. Standardized school development underlines the force of external players while characteristic development focuses on the utilization and transformation of internal force. The former is denotative development which attaches importance to hardware construction while the latter is connotative development which highlights the optimization of internal educational structure. In short, characteristic development focusses on tapping school's own potential. This can not only avoid pointless resource consumption, but stimulate the pride and dynamism of the whole school. Thus, it is an ecological path featuring intensive and sustainable development.

2.1.2 Unity of Standardized School Development and Characteristic Development

On the surface, standardized school development and characteristic development contradict each other since the former underlines sameness and standardization while the latter highlights diversity, uniqueness and otherness. But at bottom, the two achieve unity. Firstly, as an educational body, school should follow certain code of conduct and be restricted by relevant national rules and laws. This is also why schools come into being. Meanwhile, we should understand that each school is unique in different ways due to its history and culture, resource condition, regional characteristics and geographical location. Thus it is safe to say that school is the unity of generality and individuality. Secondly, according to Marx, humanity is the dialectical unity of general humanity and specific humanity. In other words, humanity is both general and specific. Students, as immature and developing individuals, are the unity of generality and individuality in nature. Therefore, schools should take such elements into consideration and don't compromise student's personality while developing the sameness.

2.2 Feasibility of Individualizing Standardized School

2.2.1 Characteristic Development Being Important Choice for Fair Education

The purpose of standardized school development is to promote fair education. Characteristic development was also known to us as a way to realize educational fairness. The concept of "School Characteristics" is firstly mentioned in the *Outline of Chinese Education Reformation and Development* printed and issued by the State Council in 1993. It explicitly states that "middle and primary schools should...encourage the overall development of students and establish their own characteristics." During the draft stage of the *National Medium and Long-term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, experts of all walks of life more than once mentioned "selectivity of education", "school characteristics", "the most suitable education" during discussions, manifesting people's high

hope on characteristic school development against the fair education background. In 2009, the former research team of CNIER mentioned "equal education for all", "high quality education for all" and "suitable education for all" in the *Access to Education-60 Proposals for the Formulation of National Medium and Long-term Plan for Education Reform and Development*, making fairness, high quality and individuality the fundamentals of basic education development in the new era (Research Team of CNIER, 2009). Premier Wen Jiabao once pointed out at a symposium which was to solicit opinions on the *National Medium and Long-term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* that educational fairness is the most fundamental and important fairness. Educational fairness is not equal to equalitarianism and sameness; rather it calls for characteristics of schools. The later *National Education Plan* absorbed these ideas and explicitly stated that "We should establish an educational development concept where quality of education is the core, focus on connotative development and encourage schools to establish their own characteristics." Besides, government's support for characteristic development boosts its popularity. For example, to improve student's humanity attainment and help them develop good reading habit, Chongqing Huilong Primary School takes "Children's Literature" as its development characteristic; to carry forward traditional Chinese culture and improve student's aesthetic taste, Jinan Airport Primary School takes calligraphy as its development characteristic. The latter is also honored as "State-level Specialist School on Standardized Chinese Character Education" and "Training Base of Confucius International Calligraphy and Painting Academy of China". In addition, characteristic development also draws attention from some administrative departments for education. For example, the Study on Middle and Primary School Characteristic Development Strategy program of Chongqing Education Committee organized 180 schools to establish their own characteristics, made changes in thought and formed the "Chongqing Experience" on characteristic school development. The aforementioned exploration efforts are important for diversifying schools and developing school characteristics. Obviously, favorable national policies provide fertile soil for characteristic development and make the combination of standardized school development and characteristic development possible.

2.2.2 Characteristic Development Being Common International Practice to Promote Educational Fairness

Internationally, many countries promote educational fairness and improve the quality of education through characteristic school development. Different countries develop characteristic schools with different intentions. Generally speaking, there are three categories. The first category takes characteristic schools as the primary choice for secondary education, Britain being the example. In late 1980s, Britain started its special schools program. After taking office in 1997, the New Labor Party led by Blair

released the white paper Excellence in School to expand the scale of special schools and give them more financial support. They believe that every school should have their own characteristics so that students can choose the school that suit them best. This is fair education in its true sense. The second category takes special schools as a choice after fair education has been realized, Japan and South Korea being the examples. After the Second World War, Japan and South Korea actively promoted equal education and encouraged students to attend neighborhood schools. They made efforts to standardize middle and primary schools and required all students to learn the same content. Now they have realized the disadvantages of homogeneous education and begun to highlight personality and offered students more choices. Japan arranges students in different classes based on their progress; while South Korea sets up elite schools, elite classes and elite educational institutes to carry out elite education (Feng, 2012). The third category takes specialist school as an important supplement, America being the example. Special schools in America are established to cover the shortage of public schools and bring in vibrancy and dynamism. There are three types of special schools in America. The first type is magnet school where there are no admission requirements and school district restrictions. It offers specialties courses like music, drama and computer to meet the needs of different students. The second type is blue ribbon school. Such schools are public schools of elementary and secondary stages that do well in narrowing the score gap of students or whose students have a very good academic performance. The third type is charter school which is run by ambitious faculty, communities, enterprises, parents and other social organizations and funded by government. Such schools are largely independent of local authorities (Cao & Zhou, 2006). The number of American special schools is not very large, but their existence promotes educational fairness and efficiency.

In general, specialist school is an important element of the diversified school system in many countries. It not only improves the quality of education, but also satisfies people's needs for premium education. Currently, China's school development is standing at the crossroad of "standardization" and "individualization". International precedents could serve as valuable input for us to refer to.

3. CHARACTERISTIC-ORIENTED STANDARDIZED SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Standardized School Structure Featuring Unity of Differentiation and Equilibrium

Currently, relevant authorities attach great importance to standardized school development and impose specific requirements on faculty, educational fund and teaching

attachment. Nonetheless, economic disparity determines different educational levels of different regions and rural and urban areas. Such gaps cannot be bridged overnight. Besides, different schools have different history and culture, philosophy of schooling and teaching ideas. Thus, it is unreasonable to incorporate all schools into a single standardization system. What the standardized school structure need is the unity of differentiation and equilibrium. Firstly, the structure or system should be flexible and allow differences caused by regional disparities. Secondly, the structure or system should allow "deviation" since each school is unique in its own ways. Thirdly, the standards should keep pace with times. Fourthly, each school should develop its own courses in line with their own characteristics. This can help schools form internal mechanism (Ye, 2011). In a word, the standardization system should not apply the same standards to all schools. Besides the bottom line, it should leave some space to schools to let them give play to their own initiative and dynamism.

3.2 Being Flexible and Inflexible During Standardized School Development

Inflexible standard is the bottom line. It is the basis of fair education and a must to build standardized school (Yang & Liu, 2008). Flexible standard goes beyond hardware and infrastructure like faculty, teaching buildings and teaching attachments. It also covers "soft presence" like school culture and school-based curriculum which could be multifarious. Gu Mingyuan once pointed out that education should not compromise talents for the sake of fairness. Rather, difference should be recognized, allowed and encouraged. What he said is also applicable to school development. Namely, differences in schools should be recognized, allowed and well utilized. These differences distinguish a school from others and represent what the school truly is. In other words, difference is the core and soul of a school. The status quo, however, is that such core and soul are eliminated and replaced by magnificent teaching buildings and first-class facilities. This is a waste of school resources and misses the true meaning of school development. Therefore, schools should be encouraged to create their own soul and spirit by developing their own characteristic culture, curriculum, teaching and research based on their resources and advantages. Only by attaching importance to both flexible and inflexible standards can really premium schools be created.

3.3 Self-Management of Schools

Standardized schools are administered by superior administrative departments for education. This makes management and regulation easier, but meanwhile it homogenizes schools and education, which might compromise school's initiative and dynamism. According to contingency theory, there isn't a management pattern that never changes. Thus, it is necessary to make adjustments in line with the changes of environment and

internal conditions in management practice. In the case of standardized school development, self-management of schools should be introduced and enhanced. German theoretical physicist Haken firstly distinguished self-organization and other-organization. In his opinion, if a system forms organization through external orders, it is other-organization; if a system automatically forms an organized structure without the intervention of external forces, it is self-organization (Hermann Haken, 1988). Generally, a system with a better self-organizing capability can retain and produce new functions better. Thus, standardized school development should attach importance to the combination of other-organization management of administrative departments and self-organization management of schools so as to leave some space for schools to let them create their own characteristics.

3.4 Establishing Diversified Evaluation System

Currently there are national standards and local standards in relation to standardized school development. But for schools in the same region, the same set of standards is applied. This might simplify the evaluation process, but meanwhile it jeopardizes school's interest. The prerequisite for fair education is the respect for diversification. Educational fairness is impossible without differences. Thus, during standardized school development, diversified evaluation system is needed to serve different schools. It can not only avoid labeling a school, but help schools view themselves from different perspectives. Besides, it can encourage schools to choose their own schooling goal, philosophy, value orientation, cultivating mode, management system and operating mechanism based on their own needs and conditions. By doing so, schools can make great headway in schooling level and quality and social benefit. Diversified evaluation system is an important part of standardized school development. It takes school differences as prerequisite and covers diversified subjects which include government, community, school and family, contents which feature characteristic culture, curriculum, teaching and research, and methods which feature government supervision, evaluation by community, self-evaluation of school and supplementary evaluation by family.

CONCLUSION

Characteristic development is the key to balance development of compulsory education. It can promote fair and benign competition among schools, give full play to school's initiative and dynamism, and enable

educational resources to be fully utilized. Standardized school development is not equal to average allocation of educational resources, centralized school management and homogeneous education. Such a misunderstanding undermines educational fairness, compromises school's initiative, and strangles students' personality. It doesn't help in narrowing the gap between schools, rural and urban areas, and different regions. The future of standardized school development is individualization. It is based on the respect for difference and features equilibrium and differentiation. It involves flexible and inflexible standards. Each school can seek its own advantages since it is different from others. Besides, characteristic school development should replace the other-organization management with self-management so as to give school more space and decision-making power. As for evaluation, a multiple system should be in place to go with the characteristic development.

REFERENCES

- Liang, W. G. (2005). Schooling standardization becoming focus of fair compulsory education. *People's Education*, 24, 8.
- Aristotle. (1965). *Politics* (p.148). In S. P. Wu (Trans.). Shanghai, China: Commercial Press.
- International Education Development Committee of UNESCO. (1996). *Learn to live—Today and Tomorrow of Education World* (p.105). Beijing, China: Education Science Press.
- Ribes, B. (1981). *Domination or sharing? Endogenous Development and the transfer of knowledge* (p.65). Paris: Unesco Press.
- Research Team of CNIER. (2009). Access to education-60 proposals for the formulation of national medium and long-term plan for education reform and development. *Educational Research*, 3, 3-25.
- Feng, J. J. (2012). Reform of basic education mode in premium equilibrium view. *Educational Science Research*, 8, 5-10.
- Cao, D. H., & Zhou, Y. (2006). Exploration on specialist primary schools of Britain and America. *Foreign Middle and Primary School Education*, 4, 24-27.
- Ye, B. (2011). Study on school-based curriculum development and specialist school construction. *Educational Development Research*, 20, 13.
- Yang, B. H., & Liu, C. (2008). Experience of Japan on middle and primary school construction standards and what can China learn from it. *Southwest University Journal (Social Science Edition)*, 2, 133.
- Hermann, H. (1988). *Information and self-organization: A macroscopic approach to complex systems* (p.11). Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.