

A Critical Review of Models of Expert Teaching from Finland and China

Xin Yue

Huali College Guangdong University of Technology, Huali Road No.11, Zengcheng,
Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Published: 28 February 2020

Copyright © Yue.

Abstract:

Expert teaching can be defined differently, and is influenced by many factors, including the countries' education policy, the teaching methods and strategies that the teachers adopted, classroom learning conditions and so on. Ranked in top, Finnish education has many advantages for Chinese education to take advice. By analyzing the current condition of education both in Finland and China critically, and comparing the two different educational styles in China and Finland, the research is seeking for a better way for China to adapt its way for education.

Key words: expert teaching; Finnish education; Chinese education

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Information of the Present Education in Finland

Finnish education is up to the top rank in the world. Internationally, Finnish students ranked No. 1 overall in science and math. Data evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicated that in the 2009 ranking, Finland ranked No. 2 in Reading and Math, and ranked No. 1 in Science. In Finland, schools are equipped with high educational technology which cannot be restricted to environment. Students start school at a later age. Normally, the age of seven is regarded as the proper phase for children to attend school, and parents are the key role in the education process for children. In school, children take few classes, and they enjoy a three-month summer break. After school, students barely do any homework and they rarely take exams. In class, there is a relaxed atmosphere for students to study. As for the teachers, they are respected professionals. And which textbooks should be adapted for classes is decided by teachers. And teachers in Finland hold the master's degree or even higher degree. "Since 1979, primary teacher education has been based on a master's degree which takes five years to attain" (Saloviita & Tolvanen, 2017, p, 213). Most importantly, teachers are rarely evaluated. Moreover, according to PISA, the teaching time for each individual teacher is shorter than the world's average working time, making their teaching work more efficient. But students' achievements have no big gap and none of them is left behind. In addition, many students learn from the same teacher for several years.

1.2 Education Policies and Teacher's Standard in Finland

In Finland, the lowest standard for teachers' education experience is master's degree. As Saloviita & Tolvanen (2017) stated in their article. Finland's educational blueprint regulates the tough national curriculum that all teachers must have a master's degree or even higher degree. "According to the legislation (Government of Finland, 1998), the master's degree must include at least 60 credit points (European Credit Transfer System) of multidisciplinary studies on school subjects" (Saloviita & Tolvanen, 2017, p, 213). They also added that each credit point would take about 27 hours for one to study. And it is not the top level for teachers' study and improvement during their teaching life. Moreover, they must take the in-service training all the time. There is no assessment for the government to do to schools and teachers. How to teach, what to teach and what kind of textbooks

should be adapted in class are decided by teachers, which means teachers have a lot of autonomy. Teachers are rarely evaluated and their teaching achievements are seldom assessed by administration.

1.3 Teacher's Standards in China

Teacher's Professional Standards is published by authorities in China. The standards require the qualities a professional teacher should possess. And the teacher's standards can be summarized into three dimensions. First dimension, the standards for qualified teachers in China reflects the concept of "humanity", which means that teachers are likely to hold the concept of "teacher-centered" into their mind when teaching and always make ethics first. The second dimension is the requirement of professionalism to teachers. And the professionalism not only means the pursue of their specialized knowledge, of making their teaching solid, profound, vivid and comprehensive, but the focus on their highly-developed sense of responsibility, professional ethics, the cultivation of students' ability for self-learning, telling right from wrong, making deep analysis to subjects. And most of all, teachers should not just teach knowledge, but to make reflection from their daily teaching and to refine their teaching approach. And the most important requirement for all the professional teachers is that teachers need to have a life-long learning for their professional skills to promote their self-development ability, so that they can meet the new social requirement of the education and teaching. The third dimension is socializing. This ability requires teachers to make successful communication and cooperation with others. They need to make good relationship with colleges and students' parents in order to make a broad way of studying for students.

As for school's selection of a teacher, the principles have been told by Xu Xiaozhou & Mei Weihui (2009): first, the teacher must be Chinese citizen, then he or she "must have sound political and ideological character," "sound moral character", "must have educational and teaching ability", and the strictest requirement is that a teacher must have passed the national teachers' qualification examinations (Xu Xiaozhou & Mei Weihui, 2009, p. 238)

1.4 The Purpose of the Study

This paper is mainly focusing on analyzing the models of expert teaching in Finland and China, making a comparison of the different education in these two countries and summarizing the strengths

and critically review the teaching models in order to figure out what can be adapted for China to improve the existing education situation and make a better education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Expert Teaching in Finland

According to McKinsey & Company's (2007) report, Finnish children start preschool at a very late age and study for four to five hours per day. Finnish children would rank top of the world in reading, science and mathematics only by the age of fifteen.

And the selection of the teachers is high-demanding. Schools in Finland recruit teachers "from the top 10 percent of school leavers, and develop them into effective instructors" (McKinsey & Company, 2007, p. 38). Saloviita & Tolvanen (2017) emphasized that the education experience of a teacher in Finland is at least master's degree or even higher degree. And McKinsey & Company's (2007) report also mentioned that the curriculum is decided by teachers according to themselves and their needs.

In class, "on average there was one special education teacher for every seven class teachers. Special education teachers provide support one-on-one or in small-group to students who are at risk of falling behind" (McKinsey & Company, 2007, p. 38). Normally, there are three teachers in a classroom in the primary school in Finland. Two teachers focus on the teaching instructions, and the third teacher works with students who are struggling. That is why Finnish students have no gap in achievements. Teachers never give students too much homework, and different from China, teachers and school authority seldom test students. Instead, teachers respect all students' hobbies, giving children enough freedom to develop their interests. Also, teachers encourage students to learn knowledge autonomously, and the whole class is in a relaxed atmosphere. In Mills's (1997) report article, a vivid case is displayed. A teacher named Suzan placed several animals in her class. Her reason is to cultivate children's sense of responsibility. After observation, observers noticed that once the rabbit had "pooed" under the desk or the chair, students would automatically fetch the broom and dustpan to clean up the feces. In fact, this teaching innovation has a significant influence. Putting animals into the classroom can make the classroom teaching become interesting, that is why her class was always crowded with students, and studying in a relaxed atmosphere would perhaps be more

efficient.

“In primary schools, class teachers teach the same group of students usually for several years” (Malinen, Väisänen, & Savolainen, 2012, p. 569-570). And according to Nurmi (1990), in Finland, each child must study 3 languages, including their mother tongue. “One of these is the other official language of the country (Finnish or Swedish), with English being taught as a foreign language to all pupils unless special permission is granted to teach some other language, such as French, German or Russian” (Nurmi, 1990, p. 29). Vocational school in Finland is of great importance, as reported in Nurmi’s (1990) article, if pupils choose to go to vocational school, they would have a better chance to have a higher education in the future. This is due to Finnish special situation. Finland has two official languages, and apart from these two kinds of language, children need to learn English. A fourth language is not necessary to learn, only if there is special occasion, according to Nurmi (1990). But China is different, whose official language is Chinese. Children do not need to learn three or four languages to make their task heavier.

2.2 Expert Teaching in China

Since 2001, China made an educational reform: “a significant shift away from the traditional Chinese model – which focused primarily upon memorization, drilling, and prescribed textbooks – to practices that foster individuality, self-expression, inquiry, and creative thinking skills” (Grant, Stronge, & Xu, et al., 2014, p. 3-4). And according to Grant, Stronge, & Xu, et al. (2014), the central government is working on loosening the control over the curriculum that should be used and the assessment system. And teachers are enjoying their autonomy, because they can select and help to develop textbooks. In a certain degree, teacher’s motivation has been fostered.

Like Finland, Chinese teachers take advantage of students’ interests to teach them knowledge. An example given by Grant, Stronge, & Xu, et al. (2014) proves this statement. In China, teachers would use students’ interests and hobbies to be the example during their teaching process. Students like basketball very much, so the teacher uses basketball as an example to raise their interests of learning in his class and make close relationship with the students.

3. Comparison of the Two Educational Styles in Finland and China

3.1 Teachers' Autonomy

3.1.1 Teacher's Autonomy in China

For Chinese teachers, what should they teach is arranged by the teaching plan. "Teacher authority and suppression of individual expression are deeply rooted in Confucian and collectivistic cultures" (Ho, 2001, as cited in Grant, Leslie, Stronge, Xu, Popp, Sun, Little, and Xu, Grant, et al., 2014, p. 6). Due to the collective culture custom, teachers need to design a teaching schedule together and keep the pace of each other according to that schedule. A teacher who is from Guangzhou Industry & Trade Technician College (Public Vocational College) told others her experiences of teaching that teachers needed to attend a meeting before starting to teach a new lesson. During the meeting, teachers would discuss the whole teaching schedule and write down the whole schedule as a "teaching plan", then everybody would teach in the same module in the oncoming teaching progress.

During the teaching progress, teachers' performance would be evaluated by the teaching inspector who would come into classroom to observe the class. Then, the evaluation would be whether the teachers do as the teaching plan says. If a teacher does not teach as the teaching plan says, or the pace of the teaching progress is left behind, he or she would be punished. If a teacher follows the teaching plan exactly, he or she would be regarded as a good teacher and would receive rewards.

So in China, teachers have less autonomy rights.

3.1.2 Teacher's Autonomy in Finland

The working time of teachers in Finland gives teachers a lot of autonomy and freedom to design and adjust their teaching approach, making their teaching more efficient. And the most autonomous "right" for teachers in Finland is that they can decide what kind of curriculum they can use for teaching according to themselves and the situation of the whole class. In addition, teachers are seldom evaluated. So for Finnish teachers, their teaching has a large degree of freedom.

3.2 In-class Teaching Style

Finnish in-class teaching, especially in primary school, always is arranged with three teachers: two of them do the instruction job, while the third teacher works with students who are struggling,

according to McKinsey & Company (2007). Under this teaching model, if students have trouble in learning, teachers would help them to solve the puzzle in time, making the in-class teaching more efficient and there is no big gap among the students. Finnish teachers never give up every student, and there are no poor achieved students in Finland.

Chinese in-class teaching is the traditional teaching way. Teacher teaches students, asks questions to enhance their learning of the new knowledge and asks students to do homework after school. In recent years, Chinese schools pay more attention to the “student-centered” teaching mode. Group work becomes a new form appearing in the classroom teaching. And teachers are inclined to cultivate students’ ability of autonomic learning.

3.3 Classroom Environment

Finnish classroom environment is comfortable and relaxed. Teachers can “decorate” the classroom as they want to. Students can sit on their chairs or stand by teachers’ side, making class teaching more like a communication between teachers and students, so that students can answer questions if they know casually, and never feel pressure. The case in Mills’s (1997) report article that the teacher named Suzan brought animals into class indicates that their classroom has relaxed environment. And teachers respect students’ interests, giving them space to develop their interests.

Chinese classroom environment is more serious compared with Finnish classroom environment. Masur (1998) told her experiences of teaching in China. She claimed that “Students are to just accept what teacher says, that’s how students learn” (Masur, 1998, p. 53). Even though teachers encourage students to learn knowledge autonomously, to ask questions and to express their own points of view freely, the traditional concept of the “power distance” makes students always regard their teacher as a high “commander”, and always are afraid of giving a wrong answer. Also, “In Chinese classrooms, there is a high expectation for members to conform to a uniform standard of behavior” (Grant, Leslie, Stronge, Xu, Popp, Sun, Little, and Xu, Grant, et al., 2014, p. 6). So, the classroom is always in silence. Teachers tend to force students to answer questions, and as for students, they are under great pressure.

3.4 Teachers Professional Knowledge

Finnish education policy requires teachers to possess a wide range of knowledge, not only the knowledge they are teaching to students. While in China, the subjects must have a very close relation to the major they have studied. In addition, teachers should be equipped with the knowledge of education, for example, the knowledge of pedagogy and educational psychology. Moreover, teachers must take the national teachers' qualification examinations. Only when all the requirements are reached, the teaching can make an effect.

3.5 Teaching Time

The working time of teachers in Finland is 32 hours per week, which is 6.4 hours each day. And the teaching time for teachers is 21 hours per week, which means the average teaching time a day is 4.2 hours. Finnish pupils stay in school for just three to four hours a day and enjoy a three-month summer break.

On the contrary, Chinese schools give few and few free time for students and teachers. Especially in secondary school, students need to get up early in the morning at five or six o'clock, 2 hours break at noon, and then they must take the afternoon classes. In some certain areas, students need to go to school after dinner and come home at eight, nine or even ten o'clock at night, which reduces students' learning efficiency in a large degree. As for teachers, even though they have no classes, they have to be in their schools and stay in the offices, which is called "work-hour system", reducing teachers' passion for the job. But Finnish teachers enjoy teaching, because teaching can bring them happiness and make them feel relaxed, since they have no pressure. Consequently, their working efficiency is enhanced largely.

3.6 Evaluation System

In Finland, teachers are rarely evaluated, but their work is efficient. One of the main reasons is that they have a large degree of autonomy. Finnish students also have few tests. This education system gives teachers a large space and freedom to arrange their teaching progress and approach, and they are able to adjust their teaching methods for students, find students learning weakness and help them to solve learning problems.

But, with the exam-orientation system, Chinese schools think highly of the test scores, especially the terminal grade. Teachers only focus on the knowledge which appears in the exam due to the frequent tests, and they sometimes teach in a rush because the test is coming in case that they will not finish their teaching plan. The evaluation of teachers also forces them to teach for good reputation and neglect students' learning status.

4. The Inspiration to Chinese Teaching Style

4.1 Limitation of the Education in China

As Xu Xiaozhou and Mei Weihui (2009) mentioned in their book that “the examination-oriented education has its deep roots in ancient China” (Xu Xiaozhou & Mei Weihui, 2009, p. 11). China is under a circumstance that getting enrolled into college is the only way for students. So students, schools, teachers as well as parents pay much attention to exams scores. Consequently, the test of students and the evaluation of teachers become very important. And this kind of education has its limitation: “1) it places emphasis on selection and excellence, but neglects that basic education is for the public good; 2) it overstresses the importance of knowledge learning, and the students do not develop in an all-round way” (Xu Xiaozhou & Mei Weihui, 2009, p. 11). Framed by the formulation, teachers' teaching is limited, so their sense of inventiveness is reduced in a large degree. In China, teaching schedule is strictly selected by school authorities, and teachers need to reach an agreement and come up with teaching plan and are restrained by it. And their teaching achievements are evaluated, so teachers are compelled to teach what they are supposed to teach, therefore they are under great pressure. Consequently, students' tasks from teachers are heavy. Different from Finland, the students in China have eight to ten hours in classroom a day, and some areas even have ten to twelve hours a day. In addition, after school, students have heavy homework to do, making their learning less efficient.

In class, the whole classroom environment is lack of dynamic atmosphere. Even though “student-centered” model is largely advocated, “it has been well documented that teaching in Chinese culture is defined by demonstration, modeling, repeated drilling, and memorization” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2008, as cited in Grant, Leslie, Stronge, Xu, Popp, Sun, Little, and Xu, Grant, et al., 2014, p. 5), students' motivation is not stimulated entirely, and every process of learning in class is passive.

Teachers' teaching is more like finishing their daily teaching schedule, as Grant, Leslie, Stronge, Xu, Popp, Sun, Little, and Xu, Grant, et al. (2014) stated that "transmitting knowledge through repetition and rote memorization to students who act as passive recipients" (Grant, Leslie, Stronge, Xu, Popp, Sun, Little, and Xu, Grant, et al., 2014, p. 6). All in all, teaching of teachers is passive, and learning of students also is passive.

4.2 Suggestions for Developing Expert Teaching in China

There is a quotation of Chinese former Premier Wen Jiabao that "the overall goal is to expand the availability of compulsory education and consolidate progress already made, accelerate the development of vocational education, and strive to improve the quality of higher education" (Xu Xiaozhou & Mei Weihui, 2009, p. 17).

It is necessary for China to give teachers more autonomy. Although after the reform of education, China shifts its teaching policy, gives teachers right to select and develops textbooks (Grant, Stronge, & Xu, et al. 2014), the influence of culture background which is the collectivism forces teachers to make teaching plan together, and to keep the teaching process strictly with others. Working for a long time whether they have class or not reduces their working efficiency. Lacking of autonomy, teachers would feel a lot of pressure, so they just focus on assessment scores and forget the essence of education. As a result, students' task from teachers are heavy, but learning is not efficient. Consequently, teaching and learning are separated, therefore the goal of education is never reached. So, teachers' motivation should be fostered, and more autonomy should be given, then they can develop their ability of innovation into class, making their teaching work more efficient.

Teachers need to pay more attention to students' interests and hobbies. "Chinese teachers influenced by Confucian thinking tend to regard the possibility of overachieving or underachieving as under one's individual control rather than being predestined by natural ability" (Grant, Leslie, Stronge, Xu, Popp, Sun, Little, and Xu, Grant, et al., 2014, p. 7). The saying that "interests are good teachers" indicates that teachers should not neglect students' interests. If a teacher respects students' interests and creatively take the advantage of students' interests into class, his or her teaching can be more efficient. That is why the teacher named Suzan was well welcomed in Mills's (1997) report article who brought animals into her classroom, and students would be willing to take her lessons because her

class was interesting.

Educational center and schools need to improve classroom teaching efficiency. In Finland, especially in primary school, there are small scales of classroom, and each classroom would be equipped with three teachers: two are teaching instruction to pupils, another one would help the students who are struggling with the new knowledge. In this way, the classroom teaching can be practicable for every single student, and there is no big gap among children. This model of teaching can be regarded as a creative and useful way. However, perhaps due to the large population base and lacking of sufficient faculty, there are always large scale of classes in China. And classrooms are always equipped with 45 students(standardized by Chinese education policy)or even more due to the number limitation of classroom and teacher in some remote places. In addition, since teachers have their daily task to finish, it is hard for them to be concerned about every student. Consequently, there always are students who are left behind and still are confused with some knowledge puzzles after class. So, teachers should be aware of that it is not necessary to teach more but make every student understand what they are learning.

There is a universal phenomenon that many students are getting used to their first teacher's teaching style, but one year later, after taking upgrade, they would face the problem in shifting into another teacher's teaching style. So the suggestion is that teachers should teach the same class of students for the whole phase of school study. In this way, teachers would know students better and know how to adjust their teaching approach to make the classroom teaching more efficient, that is because they know every students' learning status and know how to help them to learn. As for students, they do not need to take time to get used to another teachers teaching style.

Teachers should make class environment more relaxed. Due to the influence of Chinese Confucian culture, teachers should be respected by students and what students can do is just listen to every word information that teachers convey. Even though group work is advocated by teachers, students just do it as a "format", but their motivation is not cultivated. Answering questions is compelled by teachers because students are afraid to be wrong in public. So, teachers need to encourage students to be brave and give praises when they are giving the right answers. And teachers also can find related topics which students are interested in and make students answer them freely.

The most important point is that, the education authorities and school authorities should loosen the working time for teachers and students properly. And teachers should not give too much homework for students to do after school. A long time working each day for both teachers and students would affect teacher's teaching efficiency and student's learning efficiency. It is wrong to believe that learning for a longer time means learning can be better. That is why in Finland, pupils attend school just for three to four hours each day and seldom have homework to do, but students' education achievements ranked top among the world. So, shortening the working time properly for teachers and students is needed.

5. Conclusion

Finland, as the world's top educational country, has its advantages in teaching. While in a certain education background, influenced by Confucian culture, the examination oriented education policy, controlled by teacher appraisal standardization, China has its own suitable way to develop its education. But China has many things to learn from the model of expert teaching in Finland.

In China, if a teacher has excellent professionalism, rich teaching experiences, teaching and research achievements, and most importantly, if the teacher has gained good reputation in the teaching assessment and teacher appraisal standardization, he or she would be regarded as an expert teacher.

While in Finland, teachers are rarely evaluated, but they enjoy teaching. Teachers have a large degree of autonomy to select the curriculum which suits for their teaching, and they have few time of working but work with sense of creativeness. They respect students' interests and hobbies, and encourage students to learn things autonomously. This is the characteristic of Finnish expert teacher.

In class, Finland has three teachers to teach pupils in primary schools, in this way of teaching, there is no students to be left behind, and the in-class teaching becomes more and more efficient. Normally, a teacher always stays with the same students for several years' class teaching. Teachers would use any possible ways to draw students' attention, so the whole class is in a relaxed and dynamic atmosphere.

For China, who has the traditional way of teaching, the inspiration given by model of expert teaching in Finland is that, education should break the rules. To be more specific, firstly, the education authorities and school's authorities should give teachers autonomy in a large degree, stimulate their

motivation of teaching, and cultivate their sense of inventiveness. Secondly, teachers should respect students' interests and hobbies. That is because due to the restriction of Chinese education model, and the exam-oriented education, class teaching only focuses on "pouring" the formulated knowledge into students and cares less about the learning efficiency of students. The suggestion is that they need take advantage of students' interests and integrate their interests into the daily teaching. By doing like this, the efficiency of students' learning is largely improved. Thirdly, the large scale of classroom teaching needs to be developed. Unlike Finland, Chinese classroom has 45 students or even more, and the teacher who is teaching in this classroom cannot be concerned about every single student, therefore some students who are poor of learning new knowledge would be left behind, so the classroom teaching efficiency is reduced. In addition, teachers should teach the same class of students for the whole phase of school study. Fourthly, the relaxed classroom environment should be fostered, and both teachers and students have the rights to feel comfortable to teach and learn, to manipulate the whole class together, instead of only concerning the scores of all kinds of evaluation system. For teachers and students, do not teach and learn so passively is vital. Lastly, teachers' and students' working time should be loosened in order to improve their teaching and learning efficiency.

The two models from Finland and China are analyzed and the suggestions are given in order to improve Chinese education.

References:

- [1] Grant, L., Stronge, J., Xu, X., Popp, P., Sun, Y., Little, C., Xianxuan, X., et al. (2014). *West meets east: Best practices from expert teachers in the U.S. and china*. Alexandria: ASCD.
- [2] Malinen, O., Väisänen, P., & Savolainen, H. (2012). Teacher education in Finland: A review of a national effort for preparing teachers for the future. *Curriculum Journal*, 23(4), 567-584.
- [3] Masur, L. E. (1998). *My stories of teaching in china: "foreign expert"?* Ottawa: A Bell & Howell Information Company.

- [4] McKinsey & Company. (2007). How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top. *Journal of Educational Change*, 9(3), 317-320.
- [5] Mills, R. A. (1997). Expert teaching and successful learning at the middle level: One teacher's story. *Middle School Journal*, 29(1), 30-39.
- [6] Nurmi, V. (1990). Education in Finland. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 4(2), 27-32.
- [7] Saloviita, T., & Tolvanen, A. (2017). Outcomes of primary teacher education in Finland: An exit survey. *Teaching Education*, 28(2), 211-225.
- [8] Xu, X. Z., & Mei, W. H. (2009). *Educational policies and legislation in China (Education in China series)*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press.