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The New Basic Education and Whole School Reform: A Chinese Experience

Abstract Since the 1980s, China has entered an era of transformation which has extended its reach to education and school reforms. The “New Basic Education” (NBE) was born in this era and implemented by the East China Normal University together with schools around the country. NBE aims at nurturing the active, healthy development of a new generation of Chinese people, focusing on classroom teaching and reform, and life practice within the classroom, as well as a reconstruction of school management. A breakthrough has been made with the development of a system that is suitable for the practice of education in China.

Keywords transformational school reform, the New Basic Education (NBE), Ye Lan

Introduction

During the last one hundred years, the Chinese schooling system has developed dramatically. Reforms have taken place at all levels, including those of rhetoric, policy, schools, classrooms, teachers and students, as noted by Labaree (2010, p. 121). Among many efforts at reforming Chinese schooling in recent decades, the New Basic Education (NBE) is one of the most influential, and has developed systematic theories and sound practices. The background, theoretical foundation, nature of the reforms and basic tasks undertaken by the NBE research group will be discussed in the paper.

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NBE was born in the 1990s in China, and was an answer to the call for a way to deal with difficulties facing education in the new era. NBE was initiated by Professor Ye Lan of East China Normal University, a scholar who pioneered new directions in education.

The early 20th century saw the introduction of Western schooling systems to China and comprehensive explorations of issues related to the education system, management, curriculum and teaching methods, strongly influenced by modern Western patterns. In the first half of the 20th century, there were the democratic reforms of the Nationalist era, the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, and full-scale civil war, all of which affected the reform and development of the education system. In the first eight years after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, school reforms were mainly of a political nature and concerned with the content of education, following the example of the then Soviet Union and the pedagogy of I. A. Kairov. This meant that socialist educational philosophy and patterns were introduced and consolidated. Then in the 1960s and 1970s, the Cultural Revolution disrupted persisting influences from an earlier period but failed to establish new educational patterns. Therefore, until China's reform and opening up began in 1978, Chinese school patterns were largely the same as those in the Soviet Union and the broader industrialized world. To quote Ye Lan,

Schools in China had the characteristics of education in an industrial era: Schools were built to serve industrialization and mass production and teachers were known as "engineers of human souls"; there was a unified purpose, a uniform basic curriculum and unified textbooks; classrooms were as orderly and uniform as production lines and school timetables strictly regulated the duration of classes, the teaching cycle and the progress of teaching; everything had to be in accordance with a regulated education and teaching process. (Ye, 2006, p. 231)

This was very similar to the education in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. Over the past 100 years in the development of China's education, new concepts of education, such as those of John Dewey, were introduced, but they were not put into practice, and there was no infrastructure for improving educational practice nor was there any foundation that could give social support to educational development. Therefore, until reform and opening up, no-one paid serious attention to the subjectivity of students, whether in terms of understanding, or of practice and there was no effective nurturing of students' self-development.

For a hundred years, classroom teaching was the basic approach to teaching in China. In the first half of the 20th century, China was under the influence of Herbart's teaching theories which were first adopted by Japan, and then under the impact of Kairov's instructional theory, from the 1950s until the Cultural Revolution. Up to the 1980s, Herbart's teaching ideas had found deep roots "in the daily teaching habits and behaviors of millions of Chinese teachers" (Ye, 2006, p. 246). However, after this teaching tradition had been adapted to the Chinese context, teachers focused only on how to transfer knowledge, while neglecting other important aspects of knowledge acquisition, such as the nurturing of the ability to reason. Knowledge for knowledge's sake dominated and classroom teaching processes were teacher-centered, with students passively accepting what teachers told them, without any dynamism or sense of enjoyment. The challenges and inspiration that come from wisdom were also missing.

After the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, China entered a period of radical change, triggered by economic reform. A new market economic system was established, and the resultant social changes rapidly altered people's social values which became more diverse as they adapted to the changing environment. This not only had a strong impact on cultural and educational fields, but also changed people's worldviews and outlook on life. In the face of this new era, Professor Ye said, "A society undergoing radical change urgently needs timely changes in education. This is not just a matter of human will to change, but calls for us to consciously understand the requirements of the times and take positive action to move forward, in response to those times (...) The core spirit of the contemporary time is a call for the development of human subjectivity" (Ye, 1999b, p. 10), "because society needs individuals who can control their own destinies and search for their own directions in this changing world; society needs to rely on such individuals to create the future" (Ye, 1994, p. 4). NBE was born in this era, simply because the development of society urgently needed individuals to be proactive. The economic, political, and cultural developments of the time also provided valuable foundations for the development of such individuals.

Under the challenge of the times, the drawbacks of China's basic education have gradually become evident, yet the general situation has been one in which the majority of those running schools lack initiative, and tend to simply respond to requirements laid down by their leadership; traditional patterns of school management, educational organization and classroom activity from the industrial age remain in place. Although there have been reforms in China's basic education since the 1980s, "the focus has been on updating educational content

and reforming teaching methods: the former has focused on ensuring that the educational content can reflect new technological developments, while the latter has tried to ensure that students can have better access to knowledge” (Ye, 1994, p. 5). In this regard, Professor Ye pointed out that such reform ideas may bring about some change, but it is impossible to completely meet the requirements of this new era for the education of a new type of individual since students are still not treated as living individuals nor is school life seen as co-constructed by the lives of students. In her view, the beginning of the 21st century is the time for a Chinese *Émile* to come forth. In terms of the quality of these new individuals, they should have cognitive ability, moral responsibility and spiritual depth. Cognitively, they should have the ability to find and organize various kinds of information as well as determine the relative value of information; they should be able to reflect on and have a good understanding of their own needs, capacities, thinking processes, attitudes and behavior, as well as the ability to exercise conscious self-regulation and control and high standards of thought. As for moral responsibility, they should have a strong sense of responsibility as a member of society, and a commitment to fulfill their duty to society; they should have respect for others and for themselves; they should have regard for the law, the social system and the social order as essential to the common good of society and an expression of the common will, and consciously abide by them. With regard to spiritual depth, they should have the self-confidence, energy and courage to face new challenges; they should have the determination to overcome setbacks and crises; they should also have their own ideals (Ye, 1994, pp. 6–8). These expectations in terms of the quality of contemporary students are similar in many ways to the qualities which Western educators have called for in the 21st century, suggesting parallel understandings of today’s needs.

Professor Ye has written many articles to analyze the spirit of the times, and the problems of human development and education reform. Karl Marx once said: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (Engels, 1886/1976, p. 64). Ye resonates with this view, hoping that she can enrich her understanding through a practice that changes education. In 1994, she started her initial cooperation with one primary school, and from there she took steps to initiate the exploratory stage of NBE, and subsequently launched a campaign for NBE which lasted for nearly 20 years.

Theoretical Foundations

NBE is an educational theory in which researchers and practitioners work

together to carry out the study of school reforms, and create a theoretical basis for a study, along the lines of Professor Ye's ideas for education. There are two aspects one philosophical, the other methodological.

Philosophical Foundation: The Decisive Factor in the Development of an Individual Is the Experience of Life

The decisive factor in individual development is life practice. This is not only a basic question or premise of education, but also an important concern in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and many other social sciences. Scholars have various answers to it. In China, it became one of the concerns among scholars in the field of education in the 1980s. There have been heated debates over "the theory of three factors," namely genetic, environmental, and educational factors.

In 1986, Ye Lan published "On Factors in the Development of an Individual and the Dynamic Relationship between these Factors and the Individual," in which she analyzed the question from theoretical and methodological dimensions, and proposed that "we must shift from a biological position to a humanistic one, regarding the subject's life practice as the most important factor in his or her personal development, and we should realize the dynamic relationship between the person and the factors affecting the process of human development, because it is the person who will have a self-awareness and the capacity to dynamically transform and build both an outside world and their own internal spiritual world" (Ye, 1986, p. 86.). Therefore, "in a sense, our fates are determined by our own decisions, and the important task of education is to give people the power to take control of their own destiny, awareness and the capacity to act" (Ye, 2009, p. 145). Dietrich Benner, a contemporary German educator, expressed a similar view: "only humans can be educated, and can be asked to be active." Educators need to think about how to associate themselves with the initiative of the learners all along, in that only with initiative can a man become a real man. "Education is accomplished when a learner becomes active without external demands." "Only educational practices are based on presupposing their own ends" (2001, pp. 59, 68).

As Ye stated, "Focusing on individual life quality is precisely the biggest concern of education, and educators should focus on how to develop individual students' awareness and capacity. Up to the present, this is what I know, hope and judge to be the basic foundation and frame for education" (Ye, 2009, p. 145). This is the philosophical foundation of NBE and the essence of NBE: to foster the active, healthy development of individuals.

In other words, achieving self-awareness and an enhanced sense of life is the ultimate goal of the new schooling. Chinese people have a profound belief in the essence of life (Feng, 1948). There is a culture of respecting the essence of life, as well as a rich understanding of inner development and self-fulfillment. The new schooling should foster self-awareness, and help the student to achieve an enhanced sense of life. Such a person will have the awareness of him or herself and the environment; have the personality and self-confidence to be involved into the transformation of the environment; and renew him or herself by interaction between the self and the context.

Methodology: Understanding the Relationship between Theory and Practice

NBE is a research program carried out by professors together with primary and secondary school teachers. When it comes to methodology, the key issue is how to deal with the relationship between theory and practice, with professors working at theory and school teachers working at the practice of teaching. There are three steps, according to Ye.

In step one, theoretical considerations go first, and theory and practice are closely related. As mentioned earlier, NBE is a research program about school reforms in the transition period. In reality, the need for change or reform may not come from schools; it is usually not possible for school teachers to generate any theoretical system simply from their experience in teaching. On one hand, the practice of changes and reforms needs theory to give it impetus and direction; on the other hand, the final formation, legitimacy and feasibility of a theoretical position need to be proved in practice. Thus, in the early stages of the NBE research program, Professor Ye laid down this principle.

In step two, the relationship between educational theory and practice is the relationship between professors working on theories and school teachers working on the practice of teaching based on mutual communication and personal understanding. As the research moved on, Professor Ye realized that education practitioners were not only the actors, but also the makers of theoretical explanation as well as analyzers of theoretical issues. In the course of the reform, university professors were asked not to try to guide them, but rather to try to understand how to change school teachers' conceptions of education, prompting them to develop new educational concepts to guide their new behaviors. As Professor Ye says, this is because "the relationships between theory and practice within an individual are integral and interactive, which is different from an individual's words and deeds. Words and deeds may not be consistent. Words can

be contrary to deeds, whereas deeds can conceal the real meaning of words. The relationship between words and deeds can be very complex. However, in natural circumstances, sustaining the daily patterns of interaction between theory and practice within an individual are consistent” (Ye, 2009, p. 145). Therefore, Professor Ye advocates that education theorists should not simply disseminate and apply the existing theories and think that as long as they have appropriate theory, they would easily be able to guide practice. At the same time, education practitioners should not only be implementers and should not neglect the responsibility for criticizing and reconstructing theories.

Step three might be defined as the research stage of complexity as Chinese wisdom around views of individuality began to have transformational effects. In 2004, the NBE research program reached a stage of implementing reforms at the school level, so that research units and analysis units became more complex. At this point, a new way of reasoning was called for to analyze the process and a series of transformations took place during the reform. Five years earlier, Professor Ye had started to focus on the theory of complexity inspired by Mitchell Waldro’s 1995 book, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* and works by the French scholar Edgar Morin. The complex tasks related to school reforms made her aware that only with complex thinking would it be possible to change schools from start to finish in abstract terms. The theory of complexity helped her to grasp the meaning of school reforms as she commented, “If reformers want to achieve the goals of the reform, they can not only depend on random factors that emerge, they should create new factors, and consciously adopt a variety of measures to strengthen and develop their self-organizational capacity in order to bring about the final completion of the system of transformation” (Ye, 2009, p. 181). Of course, this recognition of complexity inspired a new method for carrying out NBE reforms, but the roots of NBE theory in fact lay in Confucian wisdom nurtured through Professor Ye’s cultural heritage. She and other members of the NBE team tried to make full use of ideas from traditional Chinese culture, consciously adopting Chinese ways of thinking and a Chinese spirit from Confucius, Laozi, Zhu Xi, Tao Xingzhi and other educators. They made great efforts to ensure that the theory and practice of school reform were suitable for China.

It is necessary to explain the fact that the above-mentioned three steps in the NBE methodology formation process do not negate one another nor do the later ones substitute the earlier, but rather they complement and enrich one another.

Nature, Tasks and Methods of Research

NBE is a transformational reform, deeply rooted in China's education and the core questions it seeks to understand and elucidate have strong Chinese characteristics. These can be seen in the nature of the reform process, the tasks undertaken and the research methodology.

Nature: A Whole School Reform

Faced with the great changes marking this era, schools need to be transformed. Professor Ye noted that education must be reformed at a time when the whole society is experiencing great changes (Ye, 2009, p. 200). The so-called "transformational reform" includes changes in value orientation, elements of the education system, relationships within the system, the overall framework of the system, and its management and operational mechanisms. "The overall transformational reform involves systemic changes. It does not merely make adjustments to the existing system, or simply eliminate unsuitable aspects from the original system, but rather it is a task of rebuilding" (Ye, 2013, March). The content of transformational reforms in Chinese schools includes the following:

- Value changes: "The reforms of education will make the goal of teaching shift from mainly transferring knowledge to a variety of means to develop students' initiatives and their awareness and capacity so they can develop their own potential in a variety of different and changing scenarios and situations";
- Decentralizing and empowering schools: The purpose is to empower schools themselves and enable them to fully display their enthusiasm and initiative, including measures such as the following: in terms of objectives, education should be committed to the active, healthy development of students, and provide a solid foundation for students' life-long learning and development; in terms of curricular content, "instead of subject knowledge for taking entrance exams for higher education, it should include knowledge that is related to students' life experience, the vocational needs around them, science and technology, and communication skills for life"; in terms of management, schools should empower teachers and students to "be involved in democratic decision-making, and form mechanisms for the democratic supervision of school management";
- An open structure: Schools should be an open system, connected to the internet, media, the community, society, and other schools; internally, the management of schools should also be open to teachers and students, while

teaching should be open to all the possibilities for student development;

- A mutually interactive process: The life of the school should consist of interactions that involve multiple elements, multiple levels, multiple orientations and multiple clusters, all moving towards raising the quality of education and producing a comprehensive set of penetrations which inspire initiative and creativity in students and teachers;
- Developing internal dynamics: This means a school should be a self-organizational system, “forming its own built-in development needs, motivation and mechanisms” to drive it forward (Ye, 1999, pp. 331–342).

Basic Tasks: Reforming in Three Arenas at Two Levels

Based on the understanding of the nature of transformational reforms, the NBE team worked for 20 years to fulfill three basic tasks: classroom teaching reform, the reconstruction of classroom life and the revitalization of school management. Since the arenas of school management, classroom teaching and classroom life reconstruction can be seen to function at both macro and local levels, we have called school reform tasks a process of “dual level reform in three arenas.”

Classroom Teaching Reform

Classroom teaching directly influences students’ basic quality of school life. Therefore, during the course of the research, the NBE team put greatest efforts in this arena. Unlike the pervasive, predominant model of classroom teaching in China which focuses on transmitting knowledge contained in textbooks, the philosophy of NBE for the reform of teaching is as follows: “instead of simply passing on the existing knowledge in textbooks, teachers should be able to promote the active and healthy development of the new generation in contemporary society” (Ye, 2006, pp. 123–124). Ultimately, education can help foster students who “take initiative in the development of their lives.” This in turn can be divided into teaching reform tasks correlated to specific subjects.

The first task is to do in-depth research on the rich educational value of each specific subject. This is defined in the following way: “Each subject has its value for the development of students. In addition to the knowledge of the field, there are values at the deeper level: to provide students with the ability to know, elaborate on, feel, understand, and change their way of life, and encourage constant interaction with the rich and colorful reality of the world of theoretical resources; to provide students with the opportunity to develop and realize their

own purposes; to provide unique paths and unique perspectives on the learning of different subjects by finding out methods, strategies, special symbols and logical tools; to provide students with a special capacity and experience which enable them to discover the unique beauty of a particular subject” (Ye, 2006, pp. 231–237). The educational value of NBE lies in the unique perspective it offers for the development of students. With this perspective, teachers will think about how they can use what they teach to promote students’ well-being in life. What value does it have in their teaching content? Can their teaching behavior contribute to the realization of value in life and enhance the value of life?

The second task is an in-depth study that links the needs of student development with teaching in specific disciplines. In China, under the framework of the curriculum, textbook knowledge is mainly organized by the underlying logic in the system of knowledge, not by needs of students of various ages. As a result, the content of classroom teaching and students’ daily lives are often separated, and students have little motivation to learn. On the other hand, this means the perplexity, curiosity, aspirations, interests and potential capacity that arise in the process of students’ growing get little response or reflection in the teaching subjects. Therefore, the significant entry point of NBE’s classroom teaching reform is not to revise the teaching materials but to bring teaching close to students and provide resources that promote students’ growth by tapping the potential of the existing teaching materials to nurture students’ personalities.

The third task is to reconstruct the logic of the process of classroom teaching and to promote the active and healthy shaping of students’ life in the classroom. In China, people have been torn between two opposite perspectives: a focus on how teachers should teach as against one on how students should learn. NBE sees the relationship between teachers and students in the teaching process as a special interpersonal one with the relationship between teaching and learning being an organic whole. “It is a process in which students and teachers, aiming to realize the teaching tasks and objectives and centering on the teaching content, through participation, dialogue, communication and cooperation, influence each other and promote teaching activities in a dynamic, generative way” (Ye, 2006, p. 268). So the real logic of classroom teaching should be a dynamic, relational and transformational one between teachers and students.

The Reconstruction of Classroom Life

Classroom life has been given considerable attention in NBE. In China, the class is regarded as the basic organizational unit in teaching. Maintaining discipline

and dealing with conflicts are important issues in managing a class, and the majority of students in the class live under the dominance and control of class organization. In NBE, we believe that China's classroom life has many of its own qualities, which are much different from school life in western countries. Students enjoy group life in a relatively fixed class, maintaining multiple, close and long-term relationships; teachers stay with one class of students for a few years, and they are under the overall guidance and support of a class teacher. There are many student groups and student activities to provide students with a wide variety of experiences in service learning, cooperative learning, role-modeling, learning through problem-solving and project work. All of this has irreplaceable value for the development of students' overall quality. However, under traditional management patterns, teachers only focused on the management process and ignored students' autonomy, inhibiting students' participation in classroom life. For this reason, NBE attaches great importance to classroom life because of the unique influence it has on the growth of students. In NBE, there is a slogan for the reconstruction of classroom life: "Give the class to the students, and fill it with fresh air for growth." This is precisely the most important difference from traditional ideas of class-building (see Li & Chen, 2013).

Revitalising School Management

In NBE, reforms in school leadership and management are important in the transformational reform of Chinese schools, since management not only decides the soul and direction of school changes in every aspect, but it is also part of teaching reform and the reconstruction of classroom life.

In fact, due to the many levels of management in China's centralized system the management of schools is basically a way of "decision-making from above and implementation at the school level," which means school staff have little motivation or sense of autonomy. To deal with this, NBE has mainly focused on efforts to release the power within the school authorities, trying to raise their sense of responsibility as leaders, so that they can inspire creativity in the faculty and staff" and explore with them a series of issues around the school's organization, system, operating mechanisms, cultural construction and leadership. For example, the goal of the re-organization of school management is to bring the locus of management down, and make the organizational structure flat; to get more people involved in the leadership and provide more democratic channels for participation; change the fact that there are too many school administrative hierarchies and too many detailed job divisions; increase overall productivity and

vitality. Another example is system rebuilding which aims at solving such problems as schools' relying on the use of outside authority to control and discipline teachers and students, being rigid in their formality and lacking humanity and failing to offer guidance for teachers' development initiative and value orientations. Rebuilding refers to the process of making the existing system as clear and concise as possible, by revising or canceling unreasonable requirements; new elements are then added to help teachers and students to achieve their development goals. New elements pay respect to teachers and students and regard them as owners of schools.

In addition, NBE attaches great importance to changing the concepts of the school leadership (including the headmaster). NBE stresses the consistency between "personal fulfillment" and "fulfillment of one's professional objective for the school." "Fulfillment of a person is made in the fulfillment of their objectives," and these two forms of fulfillment are mutually reinforcing. This principle is relevant to various dimensions of school work, particularly the development of teachers and students. In the process of change, people are the most important and decisive force for sustaining the development of revitalized schools.

Modalities of Change: Opening Up and Growing

In the NBE, school change includes two aspects. The first is the interaction and open sharing between university research staff and school personnel; the second relates to the specific changes in educational practice at the school level.

The Mode of Cooperation: Interventional Research at the Level of the Field

Clearly, NBE is a program which calls for multidimensional communication between the real and the ideal, theory and practice, objectives and results, educational researchers and teachers, with each individual drawing deeply on their inner resources as they interact. What kind of research can contribute to the realization of such a complex process? Researches show that most of the teachers are attached to their own ideas, and tend to have a risk avoidance mentality; when they face change, they respond by reinforcing their own thoughts and behavior patterns. They lack the capacity for critical self-awareness, and do not have what is needed to face the challenges of the new era. For this reason, we as university researchers enter into the schools to introduce reforms, but our intention is not simply to apply a theory of school reform. Instead, we must

stimulate theoretical thinking among the teachers, and inspire them to embrace change. Thus, “we act not only as outside observers, but as partners, going directly into the classroom, listening to classes, and intervening in teachers’ teaching and their educational research processes. This involves choosing teaching values and goals, re-structuring teaching content, doing research on class design, inquiry into the relevance and reasonableness of the teaching-learning process, student analysis, the development of educational resources, analyses of teaching effectiveness and consideration of how teachers achieve their own development in the practice of teaching” (Ye, 2006, p. 181). In this process, as we clarify the problems met in practice, we can pay more attention to changing teachers’ education concepts and ways of thinking; in turn, teachers will have new ideas and new ways of thinking to guide their creative practice, which constantly opens to us a space for new educational thought. Over and over, we nourish each other in this symbiotic interaction between theory and practice. That is how NBE research can be a process that continues to be carried out in the same school for nearly 20 years.

Some educators and researchers may be against this kind of “interventional study,” and believe that it will restrict the autonomy of the practitioners. In our understanding, however, broader social change has an impact on changes in schools, yet schools often do not have the capacity to initiate change. This requires some support and stimulus from professional research staff. On the other hand, the involvement in research is not a simple matter of imposing change from outside, because understanding is the best basis for change and it must come through a symbiotic relationship between school staff and researchers. We, the university researchers, need to articulate a comprehensive analysis that is relevant to the practitioners, and then give them advice and suggestions, which fit precisely with their own understanding, such that they feel respect and appreciation. This is different from the “participatory research” that some scholars advocate. Participatory research is also a form of on-site and in-depth practical research, but the motive tends to be research for its own sake, which means the results are self-oriented; researchers are not involved in practice, and it is impossible for them to truly experience practice. What’s more, these studies often lack real understanding and commitment. Naturally, they are unlikely to help schools experience real creative development. By contrast, the interventional studies carried out under the NBE exhibit a dual vitality in both the development of theory and in practice. At present, on the theoretical level, the NBE program aims at forming a school of “life-practice education,” with a series of publications forming a related literature. On the level of practice, NBE

reforms are being carried out in 100 primary and secondary schools in Shanghai, the cities of Huai'an and Changzhou in Jiangsu Province and Qingdao in Shandong Province. About 10,000 teachers are involved in the research, which impacts 100,000 primary and secondary school students in terms of the quality of their school life.

Nurturing: Giving Teachers and Students the Capacity to Cultivate Their Own Self-Awareness and Self-Development

The transformational reforms of the NBE go beyond changing traditional school practices; they are nurturing a new capacity for schools' self-development. This includes two dimensions: One is nurturing students' sense of autonomy and self-awareness through their experience of learning and teaching in the classroom; the other is how to activate and enhance teachers' sense of autonomy, self-awareness and capacity. The latter is one of the conditions for the former; the former is one of the purposes of the latter. They are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

- Strategies of classroom teaching reform and reconstruction of classroom life

It is clear that classroom learning and class life are the main forms of students' school life. We have found that, in contemporary China, the main problem related to classroom teaching and class life lies in the relationship between teachers and students. Students have the status of passive learners, lacking decision-making power about what to learn and how to learn, and they are not accustomed to thinking in diverse ways; they also have a problem dealing with uncertainty. In response to this situation, the basic strategy of the NBE has been to give students the rights over their own learning, and have them become their own masters of the learning process. Students are seen as important teaching resources, bringing their attitudes and capabilities for learning certain subjects, their experience, as well as the materials they have collected and the knowledge they already have. These are the "basic resources" for teaching. It is inevitable that students will exhibit many differences among themselves at any time and under any circumstances. These are the indispensable "interactive" resources for the teaching and learning process. Students' behaviors and attitudes in the classroom, the different angles, different ideas, different methods of thinking, and different ways of seeing and responding to problems, even the errors they may have, can constitute "resources that lead to growth."

So, what powers shall we give to students? What kinds of change will happen

to the relationship between students and teachers? In NBE classrooms, students are given the right to raise questions, the right to challenge, the right to think, and the right to participate equally. Thanks to the right to raise questions and the right to challenge in classroom teaching, questions belong to students, rather than being preset by teachers. Only when questions become their own, will students have an interest in solving them; with the right to think, students will be able to present their own original understandings, and teachers will be able to get a true understanding of their development, also to answer questions and resolve issues for them. When they have the right to participate equally, students will enjoy a class life where they have a sense of belonging, involvement and being respected. In this way, a new type of relationship between teachers and students takes shape. "The students are not only recipients, listeners, reply-providers or learners, but finders, participants, question-raisers, active planners, doers, and individuals with self-control and the capacity for self-assessment and evaluation." "At the same time, the role of teachers changes from lecturers, dictators, question-designers, leaders, controllers or evaluators, to information organizers, finders, recipients, listeners, reply-providers, partners, feedback-givers, organizers and planners. Only when there are such role changes happening on both sides, is it likely that two-way, dynamic and proactive interactions will develop in the teaching-learning process" (Ye, 2006, p. 253).

Giving students the right to build their own classroom life has two main dimensions. The first is about the relationship between teachers and students in class. Teachers give students rights so that they can participate actively in class life-building, decision-making, organizing and evaluating. For example, if teachers and students are working together to plan a spring festival event, the class teacher should discuss with students the main theme for the activity, the content, the participants, and let them participate in the decision-making and organizing process, rather than controlling it. After the event, teachers should listen to students and solicit their evaluation of the activities. Of course, teachers should give the necessary guidance and help in the process, and when students are older and more experienced they should be given more rights.

The second dimension is the relationship among students in classroom life. In traditional classes, students used to be divided into three categories according to the roles they played: Class committee members, team leaders and ordinary students. These roles were fixed and often lasted three to five years. With the passage of time, students in management roles developed a sense of power and superiority, while losing any concern for equality or democracy; ordinary students, by contrast, were in a mode of passivity and obedience, with no sense

of autonomy and capacity. This situation had a very negative impact on students, and prevented them from becoming democratic and healthy citizens as they grew up. Given this situation, the NBE reform measures included introducing a system of rotation and conversion, which allowed more students to play roles in the class management, so that most of the students have some chances to be leaders. This helps them cultivate a sense of equality, an orientation to serving others and right attitudes about the changing of roles. Another reform measure involved the addition of certain class responsibilities, such as health inspectors, politeness advocates, and conduct evaluators, for students who have no opportunity to participate in leadership positions.

- Measures for teachers' self-development

It is clear that if there is no autonomous development of teachers, it will be impossible to have autonomous development of students. Therefore, cultivating teachers' autonomous development has become another difficult task in NBE, which includes teachers' individual awareness of autonomy and capacity development, and teachers' self-development. There are a lot of studies about teachers' autonomous development, but in most countries, the studies are about teachers as individuals. In China, teachers tend to be more group-oriented and are organized within teaching groups. For this reason, NBE is concerned how to enhance individual teachers' autonomy within the group, as well as nurturing the group's autonomous development through individual development. For this purpose, NBE has created a series of effective development policies, and "forward research plus follow-up" is one of the most successful and popular.

Typically, the most basic way for Chinese teachers to work together is to listen to a class presentation. On a certain day of each week, or every month, teachers from the same group will listen to one presentation together, and then talk about how to enhance classroom teaching quality on the basis of this input. However, this way of listening to presentations is somewhat random, and there is no continuity in the development of ideas or in-depth research. As a result, the study quality is not high. Since teachers benefit little, over time their enthusiasm wanes in face of what seems like a kind of formalism. In NBE, we have reformed and reconstructed these practices. NBE university research staff go to schools for collaborative research each month. Before each collaborative research activity, teachers in the schools are required to carry out some independent research. In the first step, teachers of the same subject will discuss teaching objectives, processes and strategies, or related theoretical knowledge, and in this way preliminary teaching programs are formed. In step two, some pilot teaching is done to verify the appropriateness of the programs. Then in step three the

teaching program is adjusted, modified, and improved based on what has been learned from the pilot teaching. Because these research activities are done before the cooperative research actually begins, they are called “forward research.” In this way, in the collaborative research, teachers who have been exposed to the initial depth of thought can help to increase the quality of the research cooperation. In the collaborative research, school teachers, teachers from other schools and university researchers listen to a class presentation, and then they ask the teacher who gives the presentation to talk briefly about his or her teaching intentions, ideas, results and ideas for reconstruction. The school teachers first give brief comments; teachers from other schools then share their understanding about the presentation and put forward their views and suggestions. Finally, the university researchers offer their own understanding and recommendations for school teachers. It can be seen that there are rich teaching-related comments and suggestions in the collaborative research. For this reason, after the collaborative research, teachers also conduct a number of follow-ups meetings in the form of reflection or reconstruction activities; they may try out similar presentations to test what teachers from other schools and university researchers have suggested; they may write teaching reflections about their new awareness; they may read relevant books to deepen their understanding. These activities are collectively referred to as the follow-up study.

In this way, what had been random teaching and learning activities are replaced by diverse activities involving several people, occasions that follow one on another, and last for a long time. There are certain advantages: firstly, teachers focus on a number of issues over a relatively long period of time to deepen their understanding of the issues; secondly, there are more teachers participating in the entire process of teaching instead of just a few backbone teachers; thirdly, teachers engage in self-monitoring, assessment and improvement from different angles as they participate in the whole NBE teaching process. Therefore, “Forward research plus follow-up” is applied in all NBE schools as a basic pathway of reform.

In addition, NBE’s ultimate goal is to achieve inner power for development, and thus ways of changing school leadership and cultivating wisdom in these leaders is one of the important concerns in NBE. Due to limited space, we are not able to write about the measures used in this paper.

NBE’s Experience for China

To cultivate the individual’s subjectivity is not a new academic topic in the world

today, and Paulo Freire and Jacques Ranciere are two influential scholars in this field. However, as far as Chinese society is concerned, nurturing subjectivity is still a major concern. Since China has different educational traditions and faces different specific issues, coming to an understanding and finding solutions will be different. Chinese scholars will see things differently from scholars in other countries. For example, in terms of the teacher-student relationship, Paulo Freire believes that first and foremost in nurturing the subjectivity of human beings is the need to break the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, between teachers and students, and to make them start a dialog on an equal footing. In this regard, NBE sees Paulo Freire's point of view as the application of political thinking to the field of education, which reflects certain commonalities between political life and education in the life of ordinary people, but not the special features of educational life. The special characteristic of educational life is decided by characteristics of the students at the education site, for example, the level of maturity and potentiality of the students. Education is expected to lead the students on to one new possibility after another so as to achieve a transformation from being passive receivers of knowledge to teaching themselves. Another example is that students in the same class will reveal differences in terms of level, ability, way of thinking and interests. Therefore the teachers should face these differences and consider them as resources that can stimulate dialogue and discussion among the students. In this way, the students can achieve their development by enriching and enlightening one another. Paulo Freire has not thought about the teacher-student relationship in the context of group differences of the students because from his point of view, students are somewhat abstract. Although he claimed to understand students from the perspective of history and culture (see Galloway, 2012), his is still an abstract form of thinking. Both Paulo Freire and NBE promote a dialogic relationship between teachers and the students. Freire's dialogue takes human liberation and equality as the foremost principle, thereby having a strong political flavor. NBE dialogue, on the other hand, takes the healthy and high quality development of students as the first priority, therefore having an educational flavor.

Jacques Ranciere believes that the process of forming human subjectivity is also a process of unification between human reflection and action. During the process, human beings are moving from the already-formed to the unformed and then to the newly-formed. The sense and will of the subject plays an important role since they get involved in the reformation of the self and enhance the subjectivity of human beings (Biesta, 2010). In this sense, NBE strongly agrees that the subjectivity of human beings must constantly reflect on itself in a process

of joined practice of sensibility and reason. It is a reflection and action with a “human temperature.” The difference is that in Jacques Ranciere’s supposition, the intelligence of all human beings is considered the same and the accumulation of knowledge is somehow suspended. The students are guided to focus their attention on a competition based on strength of will, with a view to achieving self-realization. Different from that, NBE believes that knowledge is the expression of human experience built up over hundreds of years and it is also the best medium for communication between human beings and human history. Therefore, part of the effort of NBE is to ensure the development of students’ subjectivity while seeking out a form of communication between individual development and human experiences through the medium of knowledge.

In short, NBE was born in the 1980s when Chinese society was experiencing a great transformation in such arenas as the economy, culture, ideology and way of life. Emerging in this new epoch, NBE’s primary mission was to nurture human beings with subjectivity to welcome this new period of history. For this reason, the fundamental spirit of NBE is to nurture human beings based on the status quo instead of criticizing the status quo. At the same time, it also aims towards the future and towards future possibilities, hence the building and rebuilding of ideals. It does not take criticism, confrontation, or complaint as its primary mission because it believes that those reflect a political stance instead of an education one. Informing by an educational standpoint, potentiality, possibility and malleability are taken as basic assumptions, and the focus is on creating, rather than complaining. Complaints will never help to create a new world; a new world can only be created through ideals and actions. In this regard, this study adopts a Confucian humanistic approach and promotes Professor Ye’s idea that “Education is the business of heaven, earth and human beings and life and self-consciousness should be nurtured.” This idea, as the core of the educational concept of NBE, may suggest a key difference between NBE and the work of other contemporary scholars whose research tends more towards criticizing the present world.

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