

INFORMAL COMPONENT IN THE EDUCATIONAL WORK WITH GIFTED CHILDREN IN CHINA

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Abstract. *Informal Education is a general term for education that can occur outside of a structured curriculum. Nowadays it is mainly used to provide people of different ages and social categories with additional knowledge and skills needed for their professional activity or fulfilling interest. China today also uses such kind of providing educational services mainly for children and youths. These activities are seen by the state educational system as the basic level of gifted children`s detection and separating them from the other ones. Modern Chinese educational theory has its own ideas as to the problem of gifted children starting from the definition of giftedness and up to the place of such children in the society including the welfare and legal issues. Seeing giftedness as “ability to work and methodical training” the Chinese educational and welfare system is totally built up by this conception. The article using various research methods (such as theoretical literature and current Chinese legislation`s analysis, comparative methods, method of personal experience etc.) represents the Chinese experience as to educational work with gifted children especially in the field of informal education as well as general ideas of the Giftedness theory in the Chinese educational practice.*

Keywords: *conception of giftedness, gifted children, informal education, PR China, youths.*

Introduction

Gifted children are always treated as the national property to form the intellectual, sport, creative the elite of any nation. Recently the whole world was impressed by so called “Chinese miracle” when the country just in some years turned up to be not the poor developing one, but a rapid leader of the world. Each country solves the problem of educational work with gifted children basing upon its educational traditions and national concept of giftedness.

The aim of this article is to represent the experiences of China as to organization of the system of the educational work with gifted children paying focused attention to the potential and opportunities given by the non-formal education. The stress is also made towards the uniqueness of the “giftedness concept” leading in the Chinese social and pedagogical self-awareness.

Methods used:

- scientific methods (analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization) to study the encyclopedic, psycho-pedagogical and methodological literature on the point of the research;
- problem-target methods to analyze scientific and methodical literature, periodicals and regulatory guidance educational documents;
- comparative pedagogical ones to compare the theoretical ideas and practices of China.

Moreover, such methods as personal observations of the authors during their internship and work in the education system of China, interviews with teaching staff of institutions of social care for talented children in China, summarizing the data of official statistics were also of great use.

Historical framework of gifted children`s education in modern China

China is probably one of the first countries in the world, which professionally dealt with the identification and selection of gifted children through the historical and pedagogical process. Since the time of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC), China has conducted state examinations, known as “Tong Zi Ke” (同字科 - a test for hieroglyphs` knowledge, which was usually hold for children of 6-8 years old) to define gifted children. However, the process of further development of giftedness and abilities of such children was not controlled by the state, since the system of obtaining education in the country was mainly built on the services of private teachers. Systematic and formal programs for gifted children fell into the country's educational practices only in 1978 as a part of the education system`s modernization that was then provided by the People's Republic of China (Theory and practice of the reform of Talent-oriented special education in China, 2007).

Orientation to ensure that China in the agricultural, industrial, technological and trade areas becomes equal to the rest of the world led to significant changes in methods of education in the country as a whole, as well as to emergence of pedagogical work with gifted students as a special activity of Chinese teachers. Firstly, the methods for identifying gifted children, especially children from rural regions, were adopted, improved and justified. Secondly, special programs have been developed to help gifted children and support their development.

It is quite difficult even to name the researchers that pay attention to the problem of gifted children in China. Traditionally the Chinese both theoretical and practical literature especially of 50-90s. of the XX century leveled the idea of giftedness. It corresponded to the practice of Soviet Union where the only form of giftedness recognized was the physical one. As for contemporary ideas over the problem mentioned, the Chinese still form their mass educational system of work with gifted children and mainly still use the one borrowed from the USSR in the late 50s of the XX cent. which is based on the practice of specialized boarding schools for talented and gifted children. This position is reflected in papers of Guo Jijia, Wang Yaomin, Mei Xinlin, Li Doli, Yu Bin, etc. The problem of adoption of abroad educational technologies to the needs of China is reflected in researches of Li Jiegao, Pi Aiqin, Ouyang Pinmei, Pi Moren, Guo Lijun etc., but their papers reflect the problem fragmentary and incomplete.

The concept of giftedness in China

Chinese culture, pedagogics, education system, and public opinion have developed their own concept of “giftedness” in children, which to a greater extent determines the place of gifted children in modern Chinese society. Perception of this or that reality in Chinese culture is most fully reflected in the hieroglyphics. If we take a hieroglyph-by-hieroglyph analysis of the word “a gifted child” (天才儿童), it's interpretation is close to the notion of “a child who has a gift from Heaven”. The Chinese traditionally perceived Heaven as the supreme deity, which gives a person destiny, talent, happiness and so on. The inner content of the concept is identical to “a child who was kissed by an angel”, which is common among Slavic and European peoples. However, this interpretation implicitly hints that, because of God's gift, man's giftedness is a concept that is already full, constant and does not require additional development.

As for the Chinese educational system, the main slogan of it in this aspect for a long time was: “There are no ungifted or unprofitable, but there are only those who make little effort”. Therefore, the curricula in the country were developed without taking into account the phenomenon of “talent”, “giftedness”, “learning disabilities”, “poorly educated”, etc., and synonymous with the word “gifted” were diligent “and” hardworking” (Ding & Ji, 2008).

As to the Chinese society towards gifted children it occupies a dual position. In one hand, all parents want their child to be defined as gifted and invest big money in circles of interests, additional classes, children clubs etc. In the other hand, unlike other countries, Chinese society does not consider it necessary to support the initiatives of the state and the education system as to

giving gifted children the possibility of early graduation from school and entering universities since earlier graduation means earlier start of work. The current legislation clearly defines the time when a candidate can be chosen for civil service, employment, retirement etc. Under such conditions, the working life of gifted children who are potentially entitled to graduate from high schools and universities is sufficiently resolved. Also, Chinese society fears that children and adolescents themselves will not be psychologically and physically ready for the amount of information that a university provides. Therefore, the possibility of early graduation for gifted children (jumping through the class, externship and other forms) is very interesting for the Chinese theorists and is actively developed in the narrowly specialized pedagogical and methodical literature, but meets rather harsh criticism in media and society.

Theoretical framework of educational work with gifted children in modern China

To improve the situation and develop the national system of educational work with gifted children, the Ministry of Education of the PR China has identified a number of problems to be solved on the national level in order to develop a new education strategy as to the category of children mentioned, which includes:

- A training system concentrated upon a student;
- Creative people as the result of the educational system and process;
- Development of educational strategies that take into account the concepts and methods typical to China.

As the result, there were determined three main aspects of practical and theoretical work with gifted to be developed first: scientific development of national concept of giftedness, educational strategies and the system of gifted children`s selection.

The concept of giftedness. Chinese schools almost always used traditional concepts of giftedness. As a result, programs for gifted students in this country were intended primarily for students who demonstrated a high level of general mental abilities, often referred to as “g-factor” (general). Students with a high level of g-factor were given advantage in admission to specialized schools and classes. While developing a new concept of giftedness, in particular, the following models were adopted:

- Three-component theory of giftedness, which contains three types of giftedness: analytical, synthetic and practical.
- Gardner's theory, which defines seven different categories of giftedness and intelligence: verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical,

spatial, musical, physical, interpersonal and intrapersonal.

- The three-ring concept of giftedness, which defines giftedness as a phenomenon that combines abilities above the average level, creativity and motivation.

However, in the process of developing national concept of intelligence, the Chinese scientists did not accept any of the above mentioned concepts in full, but rather at their expense expanded their traditional ideas of giftedness. By now in Chinese pedagogical literature giftedness is treated as “high level of a child's progress in all subjects, his goodwill, social activity, non-conflictness, etc.”

Educational strategies. It is well known that any knowledge is best perceived when children explore real problems that concern them directly. Problems with open solutions stimulate maximum efforts of a child and are interesting for him/her. So China decided to focus on new educational strategies. Introduced with the help of available resources and children's literature, new strategies encourage student autonomy and creativity through open questions addressed to children. Development occurs through additional forms of learning, such as art or expansion of interaction between pupils and teachers. Chinese scientists believe that when these changes will be introduced into the system of educational work with gifted children already established in China in full, the positive shifts will be more obvious than in the case of a complete transformation of the system mentioned.

Selection. Due to the misbalance between the possibilities of urban and rural educational institutions, many gifted children do not have a chance to be selected for participation in the relevant programs, as there are is no such kind of activities at their schools. Also parents of gifted children in rural areas do not always have the financial opportunity to develop high rates of their child; at best - on the recommendation of the rural teachers and the territorial communities, such children could be transferred to a boarding school for gifted children.

The other strategic task in organization of the system of educational work with gifted children which the state constantly pays attention to is the problem of preparing a teaching corps. The solution of this problem requires not only equipping the teacher with new technologies, providing them with information and controlling their practical work, but also mass training of primary school teachers and preschool institutions to identify gifted children. Today according to the sociological survey made by the Ministry of Education of the PR China made in 2016, school teachers in China are not psychologically ready to work with gifted children. Manifestations of giftedness in practical work of teachers are either leveled (the pupil traditionally gets good marks), or are exploited (olympiads, contests, etc.).

Practical issues of educational work with gifted children in modern China

To date, the Chinese educational system uses the following practical methods as to gifted children:

- specialized training programs that meet the special needs of gifted students in obtaining knowledge and high level of their intelligence. Today, China actively adopts abroad developing and specialized programs as to gifted children, adapting them to its own needs in the process of practical use. For this purpose, foreign teachers are also invited (since 2008 to work at a Chinese University or a state school for gifted children a foreign teacher must have a specialized pedagogical education, be at least 25 years old, guarantees at least 3 years of practical work on the profile). Foreign teachers are given freedom of action within the framework of textbooks recommended by the Ministry of Education of the PR China, but usually there is a Chinese teacher present in the class to adopt the techniques of the foreign specialist;
- specialized schools for gifted children. In China there was established a hierarchical system of schools: in all provinces and cities several best schools are allocated, among them the best is proclaimed as “super school”. They receive the greatest state support, and, which is more important, the right to make a competitive selection of students. For the whole China the amount of such “super schools” are not more than 50 and each school has its own specialization. Such schools have the right to invite the best teachers from different countries. These are elite institutions, where study not only the Chinese, but also children from USA, England, Australia, Canada and other countries. Tuition fee is rather high (\$ 5-10 thousand per year), but competition is 15-18 children per place. Also the country widely uses opportunities that university centers provide. Many universities have a school or schools attached. There are university teachers work there and provide the students with the high level of educational services. Naturally this applies, first of all, to the upper classes; middle classes participate in this practice through a system of non-formal education. Also for the musically, choreographically and sportingly gifted children there is a system of profile boarding schools with a full residence;
- circles on interests, additional educational activities, research projects at schools. The modern Chinese educational system is designed to maximally free parents from the process of education children. The state supports this trend in every possible way for two reasons: the

traditional Chinese conviction that every action should be done by a professional (parents – are to work qualitatively at their workplace, the education system – is to provide education services and educate children), as well as fear of the “difference of views” between the family and the school as the conductor of the official ideology of the state. Therefore, the organization of all kinds of circles and extracurricular activities is the responsibility of educational institutions. (Wang, 2006)

Today the Chinese system of work with talented children in the system of formal education gives its results mainly in sports (among the Chinese Olympic games winners and participants 100 % graduated from the sports boarding schools) and music (especially, violin and piano virtuoso musicians). Also it is traditionally seen in the amount of Chinese students to gain scholarships from the world key Universities (especially in computer sciences). But a lot of Western researchers (Schilds M., Boiken V., Gavrish Yu. etc.) explain the success of the Chinese not by the system of work with gifted Children, but by the human resource that guarantees possibility of selection. However, the leading role in educational work with gifted children in the PR China today is played by the parents and the establishments of non-formal education.

Opportunities of non-formal education in work with gifted children

Traditionally, the development of giftedness in their own children in China was given to parents. Having a gifted, unique or talented child in the family has always guaranteed parents honor, respect and certain bonuses from the Chinese society. Therefore, even now the Chinese parents take on the main work to identify and develop talents of their children: they lead them to all kinds of circles, additional classes, studios, experimental schools, etc. Today, this practice is widespread in cities. And also mainly the urban population has the access to such services. Although many educational institutions of the PR China now declare their experimentation and progressiveness, in most cases their differences are reduced to an improved material base, reorganization of the educational space of children according to the Western pattern (language classes, round tables for working in small groups) only, because there is no enough specialists know how to work with new experimental technologies or with gifted children in practice.

The system of non-formal education is also considered more attractive both for gifted children and for their parents due to the nature of the information and psychological climate. Because of the scarcity of resources, the selection of talented and gifted children for training in public top schools in China is mainly done through very rigid test methods and is not always objective. Also, the curricula in such schools is standardized by the state and do not take into

account individual characteristics and peculiarities of a gifted child. As for the informal sector, teachers are encouraged to use the “Individual Development Plan” to track progress of a child. Completing the Plan, a teacher is invited in a free form to mark the progress of the student weekly, noting his creativity, initiative, goodwill and positive attitude towards teacher and other students (Chen, 2016). This technique encourages the teacher, parents and the student himself/herself to focus only on the strengths of the child, while traditional Chinese techniques used in public schools tend them to focus on identifying the child's weak points, focusing on what the students cannot cope with or cannot do properly.

Conclusions

The modern state system of educational work with gifted children in the PR China is now in the stage of formation, actively using its own pedagogical experience as well as abroad borrowings. During the historical and pedagogical process, the Chinese developed its own concept of giftedness, the system of social relations between the state, society and the family, which mostly determine both the perception of gifted children as a pedagogically separate category and their place in the pedagogical and social ties of modern Chinese society. Initiative of parents, their will to provide this process with money and time as well as their access to the system of non-formal education plays the main role in a gifted child's formation and development in China today. It is the institutions of informal education (circles, studios, clubs, private classes, etc.) in most cases that perform primary identification and development of a child's giftedness, supplying state educational institutions for gifted children (special schools, classes, boarding schools) with the approved product ready and suitable for further specialization and crystallization of the talent.

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