

Call for a Paradigm Shift Towards School-Based Curriculum in China's Compulsory Education Setting

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Abstract

This article proposes a paradigm shift towards a school-based curriculum (SBC) in China's compulsory education system, drawing lessons from international experiences in Taiwan and the UK. The current centralized, test-oriented curriculum in China is seen as inadequate in addressing local needs and promoting holistic student development. The authors advocate for decentralizing curriculum development to empower schools and teachers, encouraging active learning, critical thinking, and community engagement. Taiwan's localized and flexible curriculum and the UK's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) serve as models for implementing SBC in China. The article outlines a comprehensive framework involving policymakers, schools, teachers, students, and curriculum specialists, emphasizing the need for professional development, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement. The proposed framework aims to create a more adaptable, engaging, and effective educational system that prepares students for lifelong learning and active citizenship.

Keywords: School-Based Curriculum, Curriculum Reform, Decentralization, Lifelong Learning.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of school-based curriculum (SBC) originated from the wave of curriculum reform in some countries in the mid-1970s to 1980s (Mckenney et al., 2023). In the 1980s, the United States set off a wave of education reform with the “excellence movement” as the core, advocating that schools should be given greater curriculum autonomy to improve the quality of education (Firestone, 1990). This laid the foundation for the rise of the SBC concept in the United States. In the mid-1980s, the British government issued the Education Reform Act 1988, encouraging schools to develop characteristic courses according to local realities, which is an important symbol of the rise of the SBC concept in Britain (Airasian & Gregory, 1997). Australia also began to actively promote the decentralization of school curriculum reform in the 1980s, and states successively issued policies to support schools to develop SBC curriculum (Townsend, 1996). In 1987, New Zealand adopted the “Tomorrow's Schools” reform program, which emphasized the autonomy of schools in curriculum development, and promoted the development of SBC concepts in the local area (Perris, 1998).

During this period, people began to reflect on the defects of the traditional central curriculum model (Kelting-Gibson, 2005), believing that the rigid and unified curriculum arrangement could not adapt to the special needs of different regions and different schools. Therefore, the idea of SBC is put forward, and it is advocated to grant the school a certain autonomy in curriculum development, so that the curriculum can be closer to the actual situation of the school. These countries became the earliest advocates and practitioners of the SBC concept in the mid-1980s, laying the foundation for its subsequent spread around the world. Since the 1990s, with the acceleration of globalization, the concept of SBC has been gradually promoted in the world (Skilbeck, 1998). According to their own national conditions, countries have carried out local interpretation and practical exploration of this concept.

In general, the core of the SBC concept is to respect the autonomy of the school and give the school a certain curriculum development right. Curriculum development should be closely combined with the specific situation of the school and the community, and reflect the local characteristics. Teachers and school administrators are encouraged to actively participate in curriculum development and give full play to professional initiative, focusing on the flexibility and diversity of the curriculum to suit the needs of different students (Skilbeck, 1984).

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In recent developments, the SBC is moving to emphasize the integration of curriculum and community, and fully integrate community resources into the curriculum. By focusing on interdisciplinary comprehensive curriculum design, the curriculum aims to cultivate students' comprehensive ability (Mckenney et al., 2023). With the help of modern educational technology, people develop online and offline blended courses, providing personalized course selection for students with different learning needs. And meanwhile, the SBC encourages international exchange and cooperation.

Current Problems in China's Compulsory Education Setting

At the beginning of this century, in the State Council's No. 21 Document, titled "Decision of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education," the government of the People's Republic of China (2001) stated that it had initially achieved nationwide universalization of the nine-year compulsory education system (six years of primary school and three years of junior middle school). The Ministry of Education (MOE) then created the initial iterations of the new curriculum plan and standards, known as the "Experimental Plan for Compulsory Education Curriculum" (2001), aiming for building a new basic education curriculum system that meets the requirements of quality education. Over the past two decades of schooling development, the MOE has twice updated the curriculum plan and standards declarations, in 2011 and 2022. The changes were always for raising educational standards and reversing the traditional test-oriented classroom paradigm.

However, any shift brings challenges. Multiple and sustained top-down changes in education have had little impact on the old paradigm of teaching and learning. Even now, the process of quality education remains extremely slow in China's compulsory education setting due to the pushback caused by the high school entrance examination, or called as Zhongkao (Ryan, 2019), since this examination is almost the only factor that influences students' educational career.

In China, after completing nine years of compulsory education, students have to take and pass the Zhongkao in order to obtain a junior middle school diploma, as well as the opportunity to go on to a higher level of education. Zhongkao scores are used to decide a student's eligibility for general academic senior high school or vocational-technical secondary schools, and even the quality of education they can get. Students must meet different grade requirements to enroll in different levels of schools. Suzhou Education Examination Authority (2023) stipulates, for instance, that a student must reach a minimum score of 573 out of 740 in Zhongkao to be admitted into a basic regular senior high school in Suzhou, Jiangsu, and a maximum score of 680 for the high school with best university admission rates. However, a student just has to score 549 to get into the top vocational-technical secondary school. Vocational-technical schools are an unpopular and socially discriminatory kind of education. There are still a lot of avenues to higher education through continuing education, but very few of these are acknowledged by society as official educational pathways. That is, following their enrollment in a regular senior high school, students take and pass the college entrance examination (or known as Gaokao), which allows them to enroll in a university. In Chinese society, there has long been prejudice against vocational school diplomas due to the country's enormous population, scarce resources, and competitive pressures (Su, 2020; Zhang, 2022; Han & Fu, 2023;).

In the "Decision on Vigorously Developing Vocational-Technical Education" government letter, the State Council of China (2005) made it very clear that secondary vocational-technical enrollment should nearly match that of regular high school enrollment. This is an institutional plan for senior secondary school enrollment that allows Zhongkao to serve as a streaming general high school and vocational high school for the benefit of the governmental system. The general public has never been fond of vocational schools, despite government emphasis that vocational-technical education is equally helpful in fostering industry upgrading and developing comprehensive, high-quality talent (Hu et al., 2022). The majority of parents think that attending this kind of school won't ensure their children a good job and future. They believe blue-collar workers are often less socially respected than white-collar officers.

Huge population size and limited resources result in highly competitive access to high schools. For this reason, stakeholders that support the rigors of the current system consistently oppose the adoption of curriculum changes. They understand that receiving a decent mark on written exams is a guarantee in the old indoctrination

style of school. The so-called holistic quality development is of little concern to them. A number of conundrums have arisen as a result of the inconsistency between declared curriculum objectives and test-oriented educational evaluations. For Chinese parents and students, this has long been a defining experience that has shaped the nation's educational system as a whole as well as their own scholastic chances. Thus, a rigid and test-oriented system is always imposed. Overall, the following Fig 1. shows the various dilemmas and pushback facing by new curriculum reform at the compulsory education level in China currently.

This context, therefore, justifies the need for a SBC that is better able to deal with the flaws of the normative curriculum by developing critical thinking, local relevance, and the full skill spectrum for each learner, thus easing academic stress and yielding an approach to education that is more pragmatic and comprehensive. Only by decentralizing authority to local schools and front-line teachers, allowing them to decide on the curriculum, aligning with the real development needs of students, and changing the existing education test-selection system, can quality education in the true sense be realized.

To contribute to curriculum discussions, offer practical guidance for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders in the education system, this proposal seeks to introduce a transformative educational framework in China through the adoption of SBC. By addressing the diverse needs of students, incorporating local culture and value into the curriculum, and drawing on the lessons learned from Taiwan and the United Kingdom (UK), this paper attempts to create a comprehensive plan for implementing SBC in Chinese primary and junior middle schools.

Lessons Learned from International Scene 1: Taiwan

In the 1950s and 1960s, Taiwan practiced a six-year compulsory education system. Nine-year compulsory education was developed in 1968. It was expanded to the current 12-year basic education system till 2014. The Nine-year Articulated Curriculum Guideline (NACG) was released by the Ministry of Education, Taiwan in

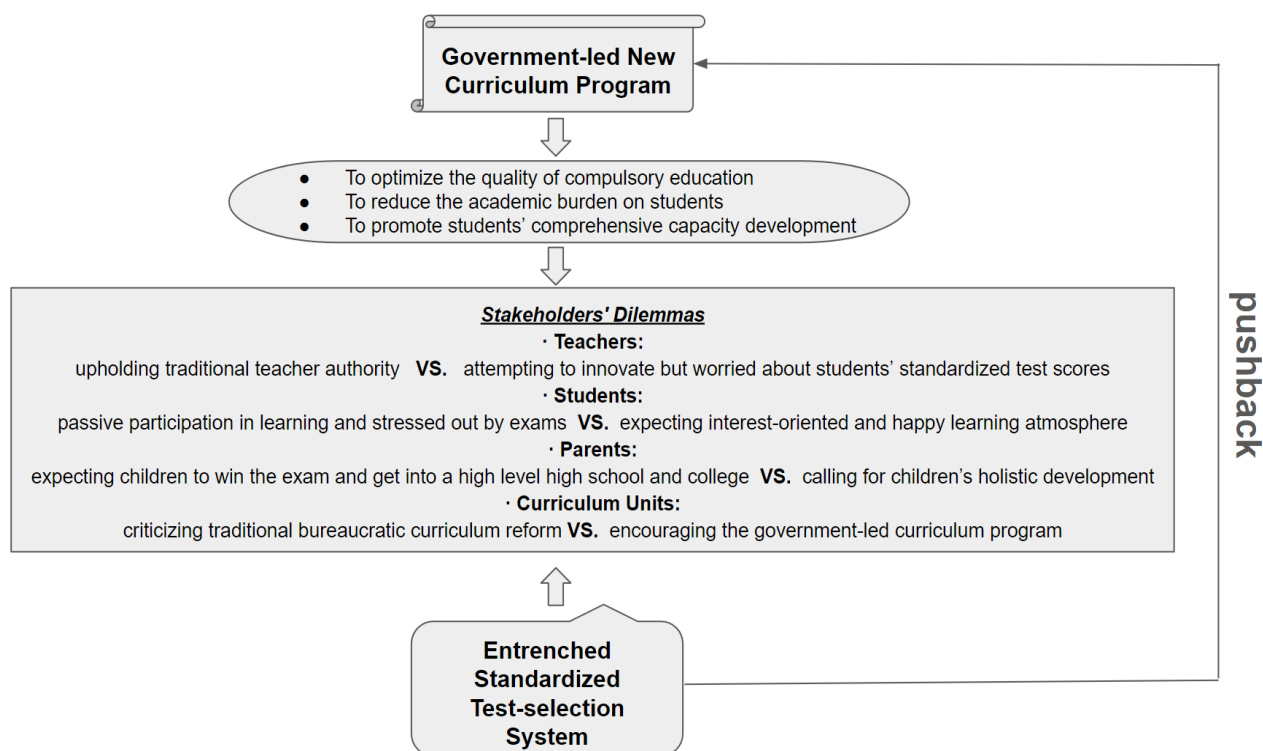


Figure 1. Dilemmas and Pushback Facing by New Curriculum Reform

September 1998 and was expected to be rolled out nationally in the 2001 academic year, marking the official launch of school-based curriculum development (SBCD). All primary and junior middle schools were required

under the NACG to create and execute their own SBCs, with the schools responsible for 20% of the curriculum. Since then, educators and other curriculum writers have adopted SBCD as a common guiding concept and shared objective. The guidelines were put out by grassroots education reformers as a strategy to transition students away from a teacher-centered, textbook-driven, test-oriented education, which was highly similar to mainland China's current curriculum setting.

According to Chang and Hwang (2010), Taiwan's curriculum reform push for SBCD stems from four main factors: criticism that the curriculum was too standardized and too rigid to support student development, public demand for curriculum diversity and school autonomy, the growing desire of teachers to participate in curriculum decision-making, and the recognition of SBCD as an effective means of school innovation. These issues, which were or are being addressed during the process, concurrently persist in the current mainland China's educational system.

In order to observe SBCD on Taiwan's campuses from a more microscopic perspective, let's move to Tang's (2006) case study. In this case, a primary school adopted a drama curriculum that could not only help revivify students' creativity but also professionalize the teachers. The project had lasting impacts on the school that started from August 2002 till January 2004, and it was learner-centered instead of focused on teacher-led methods. This process has four phases including, firstly, foundational training for teachers, next, integrating drama into lesson planning and teaching, and then concluding with the sharing outcomes and finally, improving approaches upon feedback. Students' creativity progresses via the integration of drama skills into the school curriculum, as evidenced by the creativity evaluations and teaching records of their instructors. The program stressed that student engagement was vital, that education should encompass art, and teachers should collaborate with each other. Evaluation and refinement of the curriculum based on feedback were the final steps, ensuring the program's effectiveness and sustainability. This process highlights the iterative nature of SBCD, emphasizing continuous improvement of curriculum quality.

In conclusion to the previous, mainland China can take from Taiwan's SBCD to begin with the rethinking of standards tests by embracing the local and flexible curriculum development initiative. This may involve:

Localized and Flexible Curriculum Development Adapting the curriculum to local needs and contexts ensures relevance and engagement, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach.

Empowering Teachers Teachers' knowledge and perspectives are tapped into when they are involved in curriculum decisions, which encourages a feeling of pride and dedication to innovative teaching practices.

Enhancing Student Engagement Using learner-centered approaches encourages students to actively participate in their education, which increases the significance of learning.

Incorporating Real-world Applications By bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, curriculum content may be linked to real-life circumstances, which increases the perceived value of education.

Focusing on Comprehensive Development Prioritizing creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills over standardized test scores addresses holistic student development, preparing them for a diverse and changing world.

Taiwan's approach to SBCD was to completely eliminate the central government planning of the curriculum and to develop curriculum based on the intervention of local schools, empowering teachers in their curriculum decision-making, and community involvement (Chen & Chung, 2000). This transition focused on renewing curriculum governance through decentralized management, reallocating resources and power to motivate educators, adjusting curriculum decision-making processes to ensure shared responsibility, and enhancing professionalism among teachers. The decision-making processes could also be transformed to ensure shared responsibility and professionalism in the teaching fraternity be enhanced. By virtue of these sets of measures the educational reform was consistent in the sense of cabiting every school as a school for educational reform by having teachers as curriculum designers and classrooms as the laboratories for curriculum development.

Correspondingly, mainland China centers on the standardized system and the high stakes testing which serves as a measure of how the students have achieved. Whereas they have the same objective of enhancing learning quality that communicates the message of care, yet, their strategies vary quite a deal. China could benefit from adopting more adaptable and localized curriculum development practices to address a variety of needs and lessen academic pressure.

However, even though policy makers and institutions have been dedicated to promoting SBCD, problems with the educational system reform have also arisen. A recent study by Chang et al. (2024) has pointed out the challenges and difficulties of science curriculum implementation, including reduced student engagement due to traditional, teacher-centered methods still existing; an overemphasis on test scores affecting students' learning attitudes and neglecting higher-order thinking; and limited real-world application, creating a gap between classroom knowledge and its practical use in everyday life. These challenges highlight the need for encouraging active exploration, problem-solving, and the application of knowledge in real-world contexts. These details are also worth noting in our future implementation within the context of schools in mainland China.

Lessons Learned from International Scene 2: UK

The UK's compulsory education system is structured to provide 14 years of education, longer than China's 9-year and Taiwan's 12-year system, starting with a "reception" year at age 4 and continuing until age 18. The system is divided into primary education (ages 4-11) and secondary education (ages 11-18), with a further division within secondary schools where the "6th form" comprises the final two years (ages 16-18) for students preparing for A Levels or the International Baccalaureate (IB). Compulsory subjects across these stages include English, Maths, Science, and others, with students taking General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams around age 16 and then A Levels or IB for university preparation (UK Education Guide, n.d.).

Education system of the UK has been in constant change to fit the needs of society, including the setting up of the National Curriculum in the 20th century that standardized education between England all over. The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in Scotland is the beginning of a new era in education where the approach is more flexible and holistic. And the students are covered from age 3 till 18 beyond the compulsory age for students from 5 to 16 (OECD, 2020). Such an approach gives emphasis on broad general education and provides an array of pathways during the "Senior Phase" of secondary education that is meant to accomplish this by helping young people to choose their colleges, universities or be employed.

The UK education system is characterized by regulations that promote inclusion and accessibility to education for all children, a varied range of credentials such as GCSEs, A Levels, and the IB, and a strong focus on offering a balanced curriculum that supports both intellectual and personal growth. In terms of SBC, the UK has led the way for many years in introducing school autonomy in curriculum creation. Movements toward greater teacher- and school-driven curriculum design emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with the CfE in Scotland being a prime example. This method aims to provide educators the freedom to modify the curriculum to suit the requirements of their pupils while promoting creativity and context-responsiveness.

Through the remodeling of teaching and learning, the CfE in Scotland emphasizes the importance of teaching students to be lifelong learners by helping them in the implementation of educational programs towards educational excellence. Improving the independence of instructors and flexibility of students to a higher level to an extent that supports CfE enabling arousal of autonomy for students, citizenship, informed decision-making, and confidence development, is one of CfE's goals. It is oriented towards students from grades 3 to 18, with the emphasis on thinking skills and social aptitude, and removing the academic barriers, so they won't be left behind in the digital world dominated by AI and modern technologies. The course is set in addition to academic performance attainment to ensure all round growth of confident individuals who can make the future by being successful learners, effective contributors and responsible citizens. The teaching method is mainly structured on the idea of making learning relevant, exciting, and challenging. In order to understand CfE's specific initiatives in the Scottish region in more detail, we have relied on Main's (2022) article to make the following summary:

Lifelong Learning Preparation Equips students with the skills necessary for continuous learning throughout life.

Autonomy and Flexibility Offers teachers more control over their teaching methods and provides students with flexible learning paths.

Comprehensive Development Focuses on developing well-rounded individuals who are capable in academic and personal life.

Active Citizenship and Decision-making Prepares students to be informed, responsible citizens capable of making wise decisions.

On the other hand, potential challenges for the UK's SBCD include maintaining consistency and quality across schools, given the increased autonomy (Priestley & Minty, 2013). Balancing national standards with school-specific curriculum can be complex, ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students. Additionally, providing adequate support and resources for schools to develop and implement their curriculum is vital. Implementing SBC requires significant teacher training and professional development to adapt teaching methods and assessment strategies effectively.

A Transformative Educational Framework for China's SBC

To propose a transformative educational framework for China's SBC, drawing from lessons of Taiwan and the UK, we created a closed pentagon graph (see Fig.2) to demonstrate an initiative curriculum plan considering comprehensive perspectives from policymakers, schools, teachers, students and curriculum specialists. The direction of the arrows and the closed pentagon reveal the order in which this reform should actually be implemented, and its sustainable future development.

This framework gives us an overall sense of how SBC can be conducted and implemented in China's compulsory education setting. Below we explain in more depth what initiatives can be taken in terms of each of the specific stakeholder's aspects.

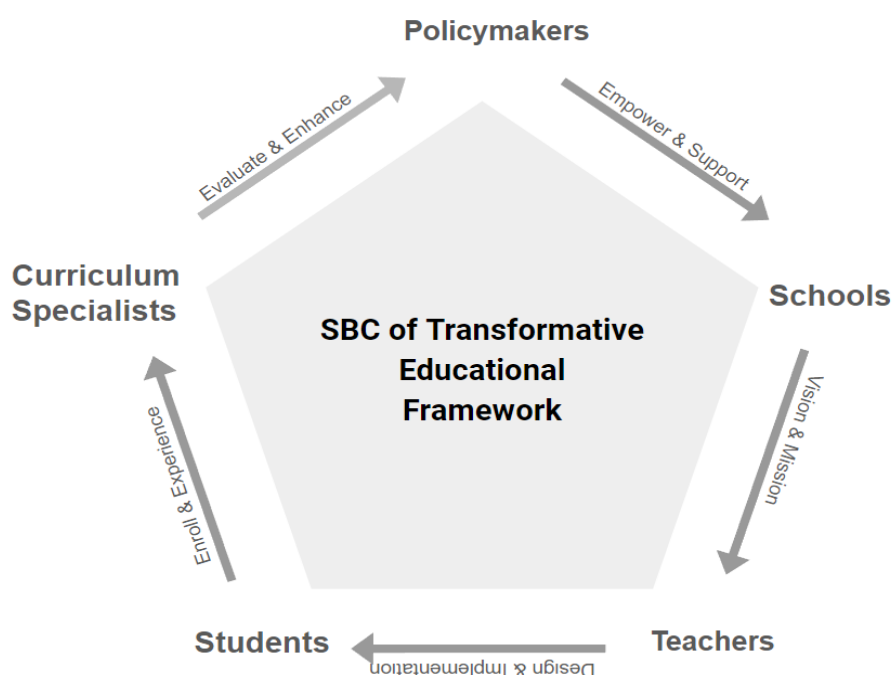


Figure. 2 SBC of Transformative Educational Framework

For Policymakers

Decentralized Curriculum Development

Empower local schools and teachers to tailor curriculum to meet diverse student needs, fostering engagement and relevance.

Promote school and teacher autonomy in curriculum decision-making.

Maintain overarching national standards while allowing flexibility for school-specific needs.

Reduce proportion of standardized examinations and encourage a combination of assessment approaches.

Provide Adequate Support and Resources

Make sure schools have access to the tools, training, and financing they need to adopt SBC successfully.

Invest in SBC design and cutting-edge teaching techniques through teacher professional development programs.

For Schools

Encourage Active Learning and Student Engagement

Shift from the traditional teacher-led instruction to self-directed, interactive learning styles.

Promote and foster problem solving and critical thinking skills through project-based learning.

To incorporate technology for interactive classroom sessions.

Involve community by implementing projects that provide a practical background to the taught knowledge.

Emphasize the Vision and Mission of Students' Lifelong Learning and Comprehensive Development

Cultivate the curriculum based on enhancing creativity, practical skills, and the part of embracing lifelong learning.

Enhance students' non-academic skills and character above their academic achievements.

Adapt curriculum to take into consideration the local culture and history in order to increase the relevance.

For Teachers

Collaborative Curriculum Design and Implementation

Provide teachers with space for collaboration in curriculum development and dissemination by sharing good practices.

Design school programs considering community concerns, cultures and traditions.

Participant in training on learner-centered pedagogies, authentic and alternative assessment strategies.

Continuous professional development activities and lifelong learning forward actions.

For Students

Diverse and Value Various Learning Pathways and Experiences

Decide flexible curriculum pathways tailored to individual interests and aptitudes.

Incorporate real-world applications and experiences into learning.

Foster active citizenship, decision-making abilities, and confidence-building.

For Curriculum Specialists

Maintain ongoing SBC evaluation and enhancement:

Implement mechanisms for continuous curriculum evaluation and refinement based on feedback from all stakeholders.

Regularly assess the effectiveness of SBC initiatives and make data-driven improvements.

China may move toward a more adaptable, interesting, and successful educational system by implementing these all-encompassing measures from the viewpoints of policymakers, schools, instructors, students and other stakeholders. By promoting holistic student development, addressing the problems with standardized testing, and equipping students with lifelong learning skills, and relevance to the real world, this innovative framework will be able to prepare students for success in the future.

Possible Challenges and Practical Solutions

While this new framework may be effective in addressing many of the dilemmas of the Chinese educational context, it can be inferred from the lessons learned from international examples what these challenges might include:

Resistance to Change For decades, our education system has relied heavily on traditional teaching methods, standardized testing, and a laser focus on exam results. These practices have become deeply ingrained in our schools, communities, and even the minds of educators and parents (Yan, 2015). However, adopting more flexible, student-centered approaches to learning can face significant resistance from those who are accustomed to the existing system. These reforms may not be fully implemented without the elimination of the test selection system. Therefore, it is crucial that awareness campaigns and seminars be conducted, drawing on the knowledge and data from other nations. Demonstration pilot programs will also highlight the benefits of SBC in regional contexts.

Resource Allocation Implementing an SBC requires a substantial investment of resources (Wang et al., 2019). Funding is required for schools in order to create new curriculum, offer thorough teacher training, and incorporate technology into the classroom. One of the biggest challenges is making sure all schools have access to the tools they need for successful implementation. To obtain more funds and support, it might be beneficial to push for government financing that is expressly designated for the implementation of SBC and to form alliances with businesses, NGOs, and educational institutions.

Teacher Training and Professional Development Teachers are crucial for any educational shift, and their ability to design and implement an SBC curriculum effectively is necessary (Wang et al., 2019). It's essential, but a difficult task, to give instructors the professional growth and assistance they need to adjust to changing responsibilities and teaching techniques. Teacher training programs can be designed and developed by local education departments and schools, with an emphasis on curriculum creation, new pedagogical skills, and evaluation techniques. Encouraging teachers to mentor one another and exchange experiences and best practices through peer learning throughout training can be beneficial to the SBCD as a whole.

Equity and Access Every student deserves access to the benefits of an SBC, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location. Balancing national standards with school-specific curriculum to maintain consistency and quality across schools while allowing flexibility is a complex task (Lee et al., 2016). The national and local leadership may put policies in place that guarantee fair financing and resources for schools in underprivileged communities in order to achieve equity and accessibility. Additionally, providing online resources and leveraging technology to close gaps helps guarantee that every student gains from SBC.

Evaluation and Assessment It is necessary to create new metrics and methodologies for evaluating curriculum efficacy and student development in order to move away from old assessment procedures. To guarantee that assessments are in line with an SBC's objectives, this procedure necessitates considerable thought and modification. Teachers can be given the authority to create alternate forms of assessment, such portfolio

assessments, project-based assessments, and peer evaluations, that support the objectives of SBC (Wang & Hsieh, 2017). To maintain openness in the assessment process, educators should be taught in these new assessment methods in the meantime.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement Successfully implementing an SBC requires buy-in from a broad range of stakeholders, including educators, parents, students, and the community. Fostering an environment that supports innovative educational approaches and building consensus can be challenging. Local leadership and schools should be responsible to organize community forums and discussions to involve parents and community members in the SBC process and establish advisory committees that include stakeholders from various sectors to provide input on curriculum development and implementation.

Designing a Flexible, Comprehensive Curriculum Developing a curriculum that is both flexible and tailored to diverse student needs while ensuring rigor and comprehensiveness is a significant challenge (Yuen et al., 2018). It involves not only the logistical aspects of curriculum design but also ensuring that it aligns with students' real development needs and incorporates local culture and values. Collaborative curriculum development workshops that include educators, curriculum specialists, and community members should be facilitated to integrate local culture, values, and the real development needs of students into the curriculum. Platforms for ongoing curriculum review and feedback should be provided as well.

These challenges underscore the need for a strategic, supportive approach to implementing an SBC in China's compulsory education system. Careful planning, resource allocation, professional development, and stakeholder engagement are crucial to ensure a successful transition towards a more flexible, engaging, and effective educational experience for all students. Regular monitoring and evaluation, coupled with the flexibility to make adjustments based on feedback, will be critical to overcoming these challenges and successfully implementing SBC in China as well.

CONCLUSION

The proposal calls for an SBC paradigm shift from the existing compulsory education setting in China, taking international experiences in Taiwan and the UK as examples, in order to resolve the inherent issues of the current teaching system. It provides an overall evaluation of the importance of reform and determination of possible complications, but also highlights a vision-driven educational model along with hands-on practical solutions of how to organize implementation. Primarily, we begin by outlining the historical context of education reforms in China, and then we point out the problems of the standardized, test-oriented system. Rather than this, we have shown the negative effects of the test-selection system on educational diversity and well-being of the students, which revealed the importance of a system that develops critical thinking, local relevance, and sustainability. Taiwan's example shows that local schools and teachers have to come up with their curriculum in order to meet the local needs which give more ability for students to engage themselves, to be creative, and to solve problems. The UK's method, especially the CfE in Scotland, demonstrates the pivotal role of the adaptable, holistic educational model which is about learning through life, being an active citizen, and personal development. The scheme draws on the international experience and puts forward this pentagonal model, which provides the description of roles for policymakers, schools, teachers, students, and specialists in curriculum. It stresses autonomous curriculum design, teacher empowerment, student active involvement, student engagement, and regular assessment and development. The expected obstacles of the adoption of the technology are identified and solutions for implementing change, resource allocation, teacher training, equity and access, assessment, community engagement, and curriculum development are outlined. Such ones include stakeholder engagement, funds support, professional development programs, fair resource distribution, alternative assessment methods, and collaboration workshops of curriculum. Overall, this plan is to outline a framework for an education system in China that is flexible, accommodative and forwards-looking, propagating the need for joint effort of policymakers, educators, students and other stakeholders to adopt the SBC as the way forward, ensuring an educational journey that is both meaningful and transformative.

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