

Education on the Dalton plan in China

Chen Jinfang

China National Institute for Education Research

The People's Republic of China is a large country in population, as well as in education. As a developing country, the Chinese education is also being developed rapidly. Now, the population has reached 1.3 billion in China, and the enrollment students has reached 0.23 billion in all kinds of education institution including 19 million enrollment students of higher education. Except for few impoverished regions, most Chinese regions have realized the 9-years of compulsory education. In recent years, the vocational education and higher education of China have developed a great deal. The vocational education has been paid much attention to by Chinese government, and a lot of vocational schools have been set up in succession. The rate of students accepting higher education has been up to 21%. I am sure that the education scale of China is the biggest one of the world. No doubt that Chinese current education has made great contribution to the overall advancement of Chinese society, especially to Chinese economic development. However, there are still some problems in Chinese education. It seems to me that the key problem is that the creativity and student thought have been restricted by the very formal, authoritarian, teacher-directed education. It is very common for the both middle schools and primary schools of China to study for the "entrance examination" and to teach for the "entrance examination". Of course, under this situation, there must be complex social reason in history, culture, politics, etc. In any case, the teaching system like this must be changed. The world is entering a new age, and we need new schools with new pedagogical methods to meet the demands of the new era. Today's society is developing at an amazing speed, and a nation without a strong creativity will not be able to face the future competition. In short, in spite of the large scale, the education quality of China is still not good enough. Now, we are taking actions to promote the education quality with great efforts.

In the 80s of 20th century, we began our education reform. And this reform has been going on. In the future, I think, that education reform in China should be more intense and thorough, up to getting a genuine solution for education goals, the education system, and even some cultural problems. Now, Chinese government and Chinese people pay attention to education seriously. Chinese government regards education as a basic policy of the nation, and Chinese people regard education as the major channel to improve

their conditions and their lives.

Within this context, a very accidental opportunity made me aware of the Dalton school and “Education on the Dalton plan”. In October 2000, the former headmaster of Dalton school—Mr. Richard M. Blumenthal was invited to attend the “Forum on secondary school education in the 21st century” hosted by the Attached High School of Peking University (AHSPU). The speech he delivered at the forum was highly regarded and it made a strong impression on me. At that time, I, as an assistant headmaster of AHSPU, attended the forum and accompanied Mr. Richard M. Blumenthal for the related discussion. At that forum, I obtained a copy of “Education on the Dalton plan”. I was deeply attracted by the contents in the book, as well as interested in the experience of a Dalton school and quite agreed with the idea about the school and the education model initiated by Dalton school. I felt it would be a good influence on the current educational reform in China. So, I decided to translate the book “Education on the Dalton plan” into Chinese. Now this book had been published by Peking University Press. Fortunately, this book is being welcomed extensively in China. Not only did the teachers like it, but also the parents enjoyed it as well. The president of China National Institute for Education Research has read it too, she feels it necessary to do experiment at first in some middle and primary schools. If we are met with good results in the pilot, we will carry it forward in larger scope.

Actually, early in 1924, a Chinese version of “Education on the Dalton plan” had been published in China. However partial contents had been translated in this version. It was said, at that time, that Ms Helen Parkhurst had been in China, and some followers of Helen Parkhurst did experiment in some schools. But the effect of the experiment was not good enough. I think the reasons are as follows: First, Chinese society was in a semi-colony and semi-feudal state at that time, and educational field was just like a pond with stagnant water. Second, there wasn't the corresponding social, cultural, and economic foundations. Third, the followers did not understand Dalton plan completely and imitatively. Comparing education reform of China with America, it can be said, 60 years later for China. That it touches both educational ideas and educational systems. There is similar background and content in education reform between two nations, in spite of the different beginning, the former started in 80s of 20th century, the later started in 20s of 20th century.

The former headmaster of Dalton school—Mr. Richard M. Blumenthal pointed out (in his speech at Forum on secondary school education in the 21st century) : “While the schools of tomorrow will certainly look very different from the school of 1920, I hope I have been able to

suggest that some of the basic ideas and principles that were generated at the start of the 20th century may still serve as guidelines for schools at the start of the 21st century.” These are real knowledge and deep insights. Good experience is just like good medicine, therefore some stubborn diseases can be treated very well. So, it can be said that the fruitful education ideas and methods from Dalton school can really offer us effective reference for the current education reform in China. The main reasons are as follows:

1. There is the similar background between the Dalton plan generated in 20s of 20th century and the education reform of China generated in 80s of 20th century. After the First World War, in America, there was a leap development in economy and culture. There was greater development in education. Meanwhile, the ills and hysteresis in education were also obvious: the creativity and independent thoughts of students had been restricted by the very formal, authoritarian, teacher-directed education. Now it is the same with the current situation in China. Under this situation, the students can only sit quietly to listen to a talk, seldom in communication and cooperation between teachers and students. However, the nation is confronted problems presented by rapid industrialization and a population that was quickly changing due to increasing immigration and urbanization. People generally agree with having new schools with new way on teaching to create a better educational environment for bringing more independent citizens. Now, a new stage of China is coming, and all-around construction is being carried forward. The development of the market economy especially has brought huge impact in Chinese education, and, naturally, new requirements have been put forward to Chinese education. The prosperity and rejuvenation of our nation more and more relies on plenty of innovative talents and the workers with high-level skills. It also relies more and more on educational quality and efficiency. Because of various reasons, there is a lot of problems in education and the reform is imperative. As two nations have extremely similar backgrounds in education reform that were generated in different time, the remarkable ideas and methods from other nation can really be an inspiration to China.

2. There is the same goal initiated by both Dalton plan and Chinese education reform: emphasizing the development of students with all-around, active and independent development. The viewpoint of Chinese government is very clear that is the education must serve the students for their all-around development, and must focus educational attention on students' innovation and ability. Key problem is: how to do this? This is the significant program put in front of masses of educators. In fact, some educators of China have

no ideas about it now, and some are exploring how they should do. The goal is the direction of our own behavior, as the goals are really the same, the behavior way must be able to refer to each other.

3. The main ideas of Dalton plan coincide with the substance of Chinese education reform. The main ideas of Dalton plan emphasize on training the creativity of students. As Helen Parkhurst said: "I offer it as a first step towards the evolution of a scheme of education which will develop the creative faculty in both teachers and pupils." (Helen Parkhurst, Education on the Dalton plan, New York, 1922, p. 173.). The theory and practice of Dalton school shows: The education style of Dalton school not only makes excellent students with natural endowment get ample development, but also the ordinary students can develop exceedingly, even become genius students. What is the secret? Maybe it lies in their unique education ideas and methods. They emphasize to excavate children's potential abilities, train the self-confidence of children, make each student become a person that is unique, creative and irreplaceable. In a word, under Dalton plan, students can hover freely in the sky of knowledge, and the potential abilities and cooperative spirits can be trained very well. So, for the current and future education reform of China, I am sure, Dalton plan is a very effective approach. Dalton School is a strong example of an innovative education approach.

As a matter of fact, in order for us to carry out such an innovative valuable approach, we must understand our own institutional and national conditions extremely well. China is a large territory with large population, and it suffers from a weak educational foundation and low productivity as well especially in our innovation. So, China should follow the socialist way that has Chinese characteristics, and the education of China must be also the education that has Chinese characteristics. Mainly, due to the immense population, it is impossible for us to imitate Dalton plan exactly. We should absorb and utilize the method and the principle of Dalton plan creatively. In my opinion, there are three necessary steps to go. The first (very important step) is to learn from the experts that are good at Dalton practice. Just like me, the reason I come to Europe this time is mainly to learn from all of you and exchanging experiences between us. Maybe someday, I shall visit Dalton school in America. The second is to do an experiment in a certain scope. Now, the national conditions of China, including economy, politics, culture, science and technology, etc. is much better than 20s of 20th century. Education especially is being unprecedentedly developed. It is a rare opportunity for educators to do what they want to do. The third is to carry the Dalton plan out in larger scope. How to implement the third step depends on the

situation of the first step and the second step in some ways. I believe, the job will be done very well as long as we do so with creativity and innovation and stay true to the strengths of China's national character.