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Investigation of the Problems of Vocational Education in China

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Abstract: With the rapid development of China's industrialised society, the state has actively carried out vocational education-related courses and policies, however, there are still serious problems to overcome. This study focuses on analyzing and reflecting on the dilemmas and challenges of vocational development in China, such as the lack of teachers and the high dropout rate in today's vocational education by presenting appropriate views and conducting research. The paper suggests that the low quality of teachers is due to the public's elitist ideology, where good teachers prefer to go to formal schools or private institutions to gain higher social status and salary. The high dropout rate is because more Chinese students choose vocational schools. After all, they do not get into high school and the curriculum is unsatisfactory. In addition, Sweden and Finland, as leading countries in vocational education, were used as a control study, China can learn from the appropriate policies to improve the current dilemma of vocational education in China. However, due to differences in national systems and policies, China still needs to consider its situation while adopting the recommendations.

Keywords: Vocational education, China, Sweden, Finland

1. Introduction

With the development of society, people are increasingly pursuing higher education, which is related to social status and income level. This has directly led to the rejection of vocational education. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2021 enacted a policy of streaming education that significantly impacted tens of millions of students, and there are many voices in society against it. The government continued to improve vocational education by increasing investment and raising social awareness to enhance teaching quality and social recognition [1].

After cross-national comparisons between different countries, this essay uses Sweden and Finland as examples for its argument. Finland has always been a famous education country, and its education system has been the subject of many studies and studies. In Sweden, adult vocational education is very successful in providing opportunities for people who have already graduated to re-learn, which directly implements lifelong learning. Based on this, this essay analyses vocational education problems in China and uses Sweden and Finland as examples to provide reference suggestions for improving these problems.

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2. The Problem of Vocational Education in China

2.1. Lack of Good Teachers

The data shows that only 92.92% of teachers in vocational education have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 98.79% of teachers in regular courses. It is important to note that only full-time teachers are included in this statistic. However, in vocational education schools, the government only requires that more than 70% of teachers be full-time, a requirement that has been in place since its enactment in 2012 [2]. Even the number of teacher-student ratios does not favor vocational education. As shown in table 1, secondary vocational and higher vocational education have a student-teacher ratio of around 20, and the regular courses are much less than that [3].

Table 1: Pupil-Teacher Ratio of Regular Schools by Level [3].

Region	Regular Primary School	Junior Secondary Schools	Regular Senior Secondary Schools	Secondary Vocational Schools	HEIs Offering Degree Programs	Higher Vocational Colleges
China	16.67	12.73	12.9	19.54	17.51	20.28

2.2. High Drop Rate in China

In addition, although China is actively developing vocational education, there is still a non-negligible problem in vocational education, which is the high dropout rate. According to the research [4], the dropout rate in vocational education is even higher in rural areas of China, where even if the students enter high school, the graduation rate is not guaranteed. Approximately 29 to 32 percent of vocational high school students dropped out before completing their studies during 2011-2013. Students who leave school too soon may face very serious repercussions under China's social policies, including high school dropout and detrimental effects on employment, career prospects, and physical wellness [5].

3. Reasons Analysis

3.1. Social Prejudice

Professional teachers are more willing to go to regular schools or private institutions to obtain higher social status and salary. They think that being a teacher in a vocational school is a very dishonorable job. For example, some people think that teaching in vocational schools is because their ability is relatively poor, and they are prone to social criticism. Not only the students but also the teachers are proud to be able to enter the higher education institutions, such as Tsinghua University and Peking University.

The problem leading to the lower quality of teachers and students in vocational education lies in the quest for high wages and social status. The traditional social norm is very difficult to change, as the Chinese tend to have the ideology of meritocracy. A good teacher prefers to attend a regular school rather than a vocational one, even though they graduated from a vocational school. This is also mentioned by Mala K., capable people are always looking for high salaries and other material benefits, and they will hesitate to enter these industries [6].

In addition, the government's promotion of science popularization and the encouragement of news reports have had little effect. Some we-media are also full of prejudice against vocational schools, which leads to media propaganda not playing a positive guiding role but aggravating social prejudice.

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3.2. Lack of Quality of Education

The significant reason for the high dropout rates in vocational education is due to the lack of quality of education. As evidenced by self-reporting or dropping out, more than 60% of students in China's vocational education programs express disappointment with them. As a result, the programs are generally unsatisfactory for students [7]. In addition, most students in China are forced into vocational education, because they do not pass the exams to enter high school or university, which leads them to either vocational education or direct entry into the labor market. Therefore, vocational education in China is similar to being a second-best choice, which has a relatively low requirement for quality.

Moreover, Children of immigrant populations are not able to take the Gaokao exam in other cities, so they have to choose vocational education. Consequently, this reduces the viability of vocational education in terms of access to quality programs, and negative behavior is common among vocational education students. Also, many vocational education students do not have enough progress and general skills in the workplace.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Marketisation of Vocational Education and Training

4.1.1. Marketisation of Vocational Education in Sweden

Marketization is the state by which government controls and restrictions on the economy are reduced so that the entire market is determined by supply and demand, thereby achieving allocative efficiency. Sweden has made the overall standard of vocational education better through marketization. After the government allowed the marketization of vocational education, capital flooded into the market and brought enormous investment. Because the standard of teachers is closely related to the students' learning outcomes, David Johnson's study in Nigeria in 2021 mentioned that the competence of the teachers affects 20% of the students' performance [8]. To attract more students to the school, they will pay the teachers high salaries to attract more professional teachers to teach in the school. As a result, the standard of education can be raised, which in turn leads to higher learning outcomes for the students.

For Sweden, the benefits of conducting marketization of vocational education are flexibility and individualization. Because schools can offer students more resources, it is easier for students to choose what they want to study. At the same time, individual programs can be tailored to suit each person's pace and learning ability. After training in vocational schools, students can enter and start working directly because the knowledge they have learned can be matched with their actual needs. Furthermore, schools can also have a great deal of autonomy in how they decide to run their schools without the government generally interfering. As a result, Sweden has been very successful in adult vocational education, partly because of its well-established education system and its "quality assurance systems." Such monitoring measures have effectively improved the quality and efficiency of teaching [9].

Nevertheless, there are also several drawbacks, such as the fact that in the Pisa test, Swedish students' scores have been gradually declining since 2003 and have only improved in recent years [10]. This is due to the marketization of vocational education, which has resulted in most good teachers going to vocational education. Meanwhile, there needs to be more good teachers in the regular courses. Even in regular classes, private schools still have better teachers than public schools, and the extreme inequality in education has led to a more polarised society. Only students from families with high socio-economic status receive a better education. Moreover, due to the excessive autonomy, teachers are under tremendous pressure to adjust the curriculum content, which they have to do independently, and there still needs to be a systematic framework for them to use. Therefore,

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autonomy is a double-edged sword: it can help students who do not adapt to the mainstream pace to learn better, but it is also affected by the teacher's qualifications, and if the teachers do not have sufficient competence, it will be difficult for them to grasp the overall teaching progress and content effectively.

4.1.2. Marketisation of Vocational Education in China

If the marketization of Vocational Education and Training applies to China, that could have some of the following possible implications. The three most important stakeholders are teachers, students, and the government. The situation of teachers in China is broadly similar to that in Sweden, with the advantage of an increase in their salaries. The students can have more varied study options, which is essential for Chinese students as everyone has different interests, hobbies, and study habits. A uniform teaching style for all would be less effective. Also, they have access to higher-quality teachers who can teach them and, therefore, have better learning outcomes. Meanwhile, it is indisputable that it helps the government reduce financial pressure because education is a high investment, but it takes a long time to see the outcomes.

Nevertheless, there are still several disadvantages for them. The first one is excessive autonomy for teachers. It is not beneficial for students from impoverished families because tuition fees become more expensive and are not affordable, likely leading to high dropout rates. Social stratification and inequality in education are also severe problems, which is an extreme violation of the primary purpose of education. It is because of China's yawning wealth and poverty disparities, that such a measure is bound to bring about memorable and persistent inequality in the distribution of resources, which is not an expected phenomenon in the long run. For the government, they will also face the problem of institutional monopoly. For example, before the Double reduction policy was enacted, many educational institutions used high wages to attract teachers. They won reputations through good teaching results, eventually taking a larger and larger share of the market and forming a monopoly, resulting in absolute price control and generating a huge information gap between teachers, students, and parents. The government needs to spend a lot of workforce and resources in such a situation to solve this problem and prevent the education market from being controlled by a small group of capitalists.

In a nutshell, Sweden's marketization provides enormous amounts of information and details for other countries to learn, but the government should also conduct effective testing and regulation of the market. Suppose China's population decreases and resources become more abundant in the future. In that case, marketization can better improve the standard of education. Still, due to the severe current lack of resources, unquestioning marketization will only make the overall standard of education even more backward. Therefore, in the development process, the Chinese government should focus on combining the actual situation in the local area and not over-marketization. At the same time, the aim of reform should always be to improve the quality of vocational education.

4.2. Promoting Diversity in Vocational Education Programs

4.2.1. The Finnish Approach and Advantages

Since the beginning of the last century, Finland has been actively developing vocational education, which became widespread after the 1980s, and the country has specialized in education reform policies that have created a pathway for articulation from vocational education to other higher education. Currently, almost all young people in Finland who have completed compulsory education are free to choose either vocational or general higher education [11]. In the last 15 years, about 40-45 percent of the pupils transferred to vocational education programs have been graduates of compulsory education [12]. Upper secondary education in Finland comprises both general higher

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education and vocational upper secondary education. According to the data, the rate of students passing through public upper-secondary education has decreased, and the rate of students choosing vocational education has increased in Finland [12].

An important reason vocational education in Finland is so attractive to students is the high quality of education. Firstly, one of the greatest benefits of the Finnish vocational education system is its flexibility. There are no final exams in Finnish vocational education, except for the final exam at the end of the program [13]. The education assessment system was first created to aid in the advancement of education and the enhancement of learning environments. Once a learner has completed all the studies in an individual competence development program, the institution of vocational education grants the whole qualification or one or more of its parts. Almost of programs ensure that students are qualified for higher education. Students receive both general vocational training and specialized training in Finland for various professional responsibilities. The Finnish National Agency for Education develops subject requirements with assistance from representatives of the labor and business communities. These representatives from employers develop Vocational education programs or needs studies to better understand the needs of businesses, so their learning is more relevant than learning traditional skills to achieve a higher quality of education. In addition, students participating in vocational education can take part in the WorldSkills Competition in conjunction with international exchange programs, and these authoritative competitions add variety to the curriculum. Therefore, the flexibility of Finnish vocational education programs leads to high-quality education that attracts more Finnish students.

Secondly, students are free to choose whether to enroll in vocational education programs; these students are not, as in the case of China, due to social stratification, and they can pursue vocational education at any time. It attracts a wide range of students, including those who need technical training and credentials to enter the workforce, adults looking to develop their talents and increase their employability, and students who are free to choose whether to pursue higher education [12]. Moreover, each learner is given a personal development plan at the start of their studies. Learners only learn what they don't already know which means the more knowledge they already understand, they can have the shorter learning period to study. Moreover, this learning can start at any time, depending on the provider's arrangements. Hence, the Finnish vocational education system has no restrictions on the acceptance of students and allows for flexible programs for students, which can effectively improve the quality of education. They provide younger students with the chance to combine traditional higher education and studies in vocational education, and when students complete the three-year program-based qualification, the same higher education qualifications are awarded as for graduates of traditional upper secondary schools. Since the 1990s, dual qualifications (a combination of traditional higher education and vocational education qualifications) have been offered. By combining traditional upper secondary school with vocational education, more students can be attracted, and the quality of education can be ensured [14].

4.2.2. Recommendation for China

Vocational education in China should take reference from the Finnish curriculum to increase the diversity of the curriculum, and students need to actively study general education, i.e., including traditional subjects such as language, mathematics, and English, which are traditionally studied in upper secondary education, in addition to the vocational education professional practice courses. Depending on the policies of the school and the government, the proportion of time courses and general education courses can be adjusted accordingly. The advantage of this practice is that it improves the professionalism of the students. The development of vocational education still requires a wide range of traditional basic knowledge, and students need to be equipped with flexible, solid knowledge to help them enter the workplace better. In Finland, employers are involved in the

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development of vocational education curricula. Vocational education in China can learn from this and encourage companies and employers to participate in the vocational education and training system, rather than just the Education Bureau taking the lead in the development of curricula. This will allow vocational education to better and more directly connect to specific occupations, especially in today's era of rapid economic development in China, where the demands of enterprises on vocational education students are gradually increasing. In addition, vocational education in China can learn from Finland's flexible enrolment system, so that vocational education is no longer limited to enrolment pathways, and every student can enter vocational education to study or improve their vocational skills. Students are free to switch between general higher education and vocational education, providing students with different options for technical practice and traditional education, and adults can also continue to improve their professional skills through vocational education. Finland's vocational education provides Comprehensive vocational education and is not just for those who can't take the entrance exams for migrant peasant children; also, it improves the education quality and decreases the dropout rate.

Vocational education in China can also be learned from Finland's policy. A flexible curriculum and unlimited learning pathways can effectively reduce the current problem of high dropout rates in vocational education in China.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the low quality of teachers and the high dropout rate are critical issues that must be addressed in the future, as they have ramifications that could send vocational education into a negative loop. Marketization and diversified vocational education curricula may address these two problems in some pilot schools or under government regulations. According to the study of MEDCs, their educational systems are more systematized and sounder for the students, teachers, and society, which are worthy of learning the fundamental elements for applying in China. The first one is to implement appropriate marketization of vocational education. The second is to increase the flexibility of the vocational education curriculum in China. Although Sweden and Finland may have some drawbacks and limitations, they still contain numerous benefits to investigate and localize.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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