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Article

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Editorial

Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning: China's Education Emergency Management Policy in the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak, an emergency policy initiative called “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” was launched by the Chinese government to continue teaching activities as schools across the country were closed to contain the virus. However, there is ambiguity and disagreement about what to teach, how to teach, the workload of teachers and students, the teaching environment, and the implications for education equity. Possible difficulties that the policy faces include: the weakness of the online teaching infrastructure, the inexperience of teachers (including unequal learning outcomes caused by teachers’ varied experience), the information gap, the complex environment at home, and so forth. To tackle the problems, we suggest that the government needs to further promote the construction of the educational information superhighway, consider equipping teachers and students with standardized home-based teaching/learning equipment, conduct online teacher training, include the development of massive online education in the national strategic plan, and support academic research into online education, especially education to help students with online learning difficulties.

Keywords: COVID-19; China; school; emergency management; emergency policy; Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning; online teaching

1. Introduction

“Public Emergency Management” is a major activity of public administration in the face of emergencies (Guo et al. 2008). The COVID-19 outbreak, which began in late 2019, rapidly evolved into a national emergency in China. In response to the outbreak, the Chinese government initiated a series of emergency management mechanisms including social distancing—for example, the lockdown of cities and shutting down schools (McAleer 2020; Wang et al. 2020; Yue et al. 2020). An emergency policy initiative called “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” was launched by the Ministry of Education to switch teaching activities into large-scale online teaching while schools were closed. Notably, promulgated as an emergency policy, “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” did not follow a normal policy-making process, and thus the meaning, implementation conditions, implementation process, and effects of the policy remain unclear. The gains and losses in the implementation process of the policy are worthy of careful consideration and study.

2. What Does “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” Mean?

“Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” aims to fight against the spread of the epidemic by suspending offline teaching at schools and turning to online education. In the government’s own words: “suspending classes without stopping learning and suspending classes without stopping teaching” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2020a). According to the Ministry of Education (2020), the purpose of this policy is to “integrate national and local school teaching resources, provide rich, diverse, selectable, high-quality online resources for all students across the country, and support teachers’ online teaching and children’s online learning” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2020a). However, details about how the policy may be implemented and what effects it may cause are under fierce debate. For example, there are debates about whether online education can adequately replace the traditional offline education, whether the “epidemic” should be one of the educational topics, whether teachers and students may experience work overload, whether the home is a desirable learning environment, and to what extent students and teachers have access to the Internet.

Receiving feedback from various parties, the Chinese Ministry of Education elaborated on the policy and attempted to respond to the questions. It was argued that education in this time of emergency needed to be distinguished from that of a normal period. According to the government, “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” reflected learning in a broad sense, which not only referred to the structured learning of the school curriculum, but covered the learning of a wide range of content. Such learning could be conducted in diverse ways, the aim of which was to support students’ growth. Meanwhile, it was emphasized that “the knowledge of epidemic prevention and control needs to be included in addition to the formal national curricula, with a special emphasis on the popularization of the knowledge of epidemic prevention, expressed through life education classes, public safety education and mental health education” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2020b). Further, it was also highlighted that the smooth transition and connection between these different periods deserves particular attention.

3. Implementing the “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” Policy

The implementation of the policy is a dynamic process, allowing the government to continually receive feedback and make corresponding adjustments. We argue that, in general, the policy has been carried out in an orderly manner and has subsequently generated rich policy experience, despite the existence of several problems. Specifically, the government primarily carried out five moves to implement the policy.

(1) Integrating national resources and planning at the top-level. Firstly, the government took action to guarantee the provision of network service resources. The Ministry of Education, together with several telecom operators including the China Education and Scientific Research Computer Network, China Mobile, China Telecom, China Unicom, and China Satellite Communication, committed to the maintenance of public service platforms and school networks at different levels (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2020c). This approach enabled the provision of fast and stable networks for online education, and guaranteed teachers’, students’, and parents’ access to digital educational resources and online education. Secondly, the government worked on making educational resources accessible to the general public. Relevant statements in policy documents include “open all high-quality online courses and virtual simulation experimental teaching resources for free”, “develop online teaching organization and implementation plans”, “develop online teaching quality standards”, and “provide technical service support”. In addition, efforts were made to increase society’s participation in online education. In particular, the Ministry of Education has approved 37 qualified institutions and Internet companies to provide online teaching services (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2020d).

(2) Training teachers. The education administration department of the government at different levels, schools (including schools’ professional and technical personnel, and experienced teachers), and

teacher training companies worked in a concerted way to provide online teaching training for teachers. The Department of Teacher Education, working with various institutions, produced a resource package for teachers, which covered online teaching strategies, information technology applications, school epidemic prevention cases, local teacher training cases and so forth (Xinhua Net 2020). All of the resources were made free and publicly available. Additionally, an online teaching feedback system to encourage teachers to actively summarize and share their experiences and thoughts, and to discuss with their peers, was established. Schools also appointed online teaching technology consultants to support online teaching.

(3) Enabling local authorities and schools to carry out online teaching in line with local conditions. Regional development is unbalanced in China, and there exist significant differences in information infrastructure between regions. Therefore, the Chinese government called for online education platforms to make their resources free of charge to all schools and individuals across the country. To ensure the reach of information and resources to all students including those in remote areas, the government worked on circulating teaching information in multiple ways, using satellite TV in areas without internet coverage (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2020e). Guangdong province adopted an emergency measure to equip 9262 poor students with tablets (Southcn News 2020). In the teaching process, the teaching pedagogy and time arrangements were constantly adjusted to help students plan for home-based study. The key was to cultivate students' independent learning abilities. For example, the Department of Education of Zhejiang Province issued guidance requiring each class to last for about 20 minutes in primary school and 30 minutes in middle school (The People's Government of Zhejiang Province 2020). Furthermore, the total time length of teaching per day was suggested to be no longer than one hour for lower grades of primary school, two hours for higher grades of primary school, four hours for middle school, and five hours for high school (The People's Government of Zhejiang Province 2020).

(4) Formulating guidelines to prepare for smooth transition back to normal offline education after the epidemic. Teachers were advised to make full use of "the National Elite Online Open Courses" as examples, and to teach in an independent way while drawing on online teaching resources such as those on MOOCs. Various MOOC platforms were also encouraged to develop new modules on epidemiology and infectious diseases, the aim of which was to equip students and the public with relevant knowledge. Moreover, the government urged students to strike a balance between work and rest, continue physical exercise, and protect their eyesight from looking at the screen too much, with an aim to maintain their physical and mental health. An online teaching evaluation system was also established by the government to comprehensively monitor online teaching activities (CCTV News 2020a).

(5) Working out a plan for school reopening after the epidemic. According to the Ministry of Education, the plan needs to comprehensively consider regional epidemic risk levels, traffic conditions, emergency preparedness, school population density, and school age. Corresponding plans to reopen schools in a staggered manner to spread peak demand could therefore be made. Meanwhile, the plan should take into account the progress made in students' home-based learning for the sake of smooth transition (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2020f).

4. Difficulties in Policy Implementation

Despite the careful planning and arrangements by the government, and the concerted efforts made by a wide range of parties in society, including schools and families, the implementation of the policy of "Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning" still faces at least five problems.

(1) Online teaching is constrained by infrastructure. Due to the large-scale teaching needs and personnel visits, online teaching platforms such as Cloud Classrooms, Rain Classrooms, and Ding Talk are often overwhelmed, and network crashes may happen. Meanwhile, differences in information technology infrastructure between regions can be significant. The network coverage in remote areas is insufficient, which may further lead to educational inequity. According to a survey conducted by CCTV (CCTV News 2020b), about 2% of students still have no access to online live teaching. Some

children in mountainous areas even have to walk for hours to find places with stable network signals (Sohu News 2020).

(2) The proportion and efficiency of the use of online teaching resources are still rather low. Although the Chinese government's education administration department had already developed numerous national-, provincial-, and municipal-level online courses, these online courses had only acted as minor supplements to offline education before the outbreak. Also, there existed regional differences, inter-school differences, and subject differences, in the quantity of the selected quality courses (note that there are routinely selections of online courses based on the quality courses in China) (Fang 2018). Therefore, a large proportion of teachers had little use and knowledge of online resources before the outbreak, but had to precipitously copy offline teaching content to the network space, without making appropriate adaptations.

(3) The effect of online education is, to a large extent, contingent on teachers' online teaching ability and experience. As online teaching was not yet a major form of education in Chinese schools, many teachers had no previous experience in online teaching. Although teachers received various types of training during the outbreak, the short-term effect of such training remains arguably minimal. Further, the urban-rural disparity, different levels of knowledge about information technology acquired by teachers, and teachers' differing attitudes towards, and ability to learn, information technology, are all having an impact on the general effectiveness of online education across the country (Zhang et al. 2015).

(4) Students and teachers face problems when studying and teaching at home. First of all, there are a wide range of distractions from teaching and studying at home. For example, the burden of housework and childcare can be heavy for young teachers, which may have a negative impact on their online teaching. Secondly, not all teachers and students are able to find suitable spaces for teaching and studying at home. Third, teaching and studying can be constrained by insufficient hardware and an unstable network at home.

(5) It remains unclear what teaching mode and pedagogy may best work for online education. Although "Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning" aims to avoid precipitous copying of the offline curriculum to online teaching, there is yet to be a consensus that can be widely employed by teachers and students on how such copying may be avoided. Additionally, how to take into account and integrate the unique attributes of online education into daily online teaching and learning still needs further exploration.

5. Discussion

Specifically, there are five issues that deserve further discussion.

(1) Public emergency management is led and coordinated by the government, and widely participated in by schools, enterprises and the general public. It seems that a mechanism, featuring government leadership in its overall coordination, a procedure enabling centralized emergency decision-making and information circulation, and a system for classified management and multi-level response, has emerged for public administration in China in times of emergency (Wang and Li 2015). However, while the government tends to play its role to the full, social forces' (such as non-governmental organizations) participation in such a mechanism remains relatively trivial.

(2) There have been many efforts by the government and society to predict problems that may arise in the process of policy implementation, and to search for corresponding solutions. However, in particular, the problem of the information gap persists. This problem is largely due to the urban-rural disparity caused by economic differences and varying geographical environments, which further prompts inequality in basic infrastructure needed for online education (Kwak 1999).

(3) Despite the encouragement for local authorities and schools to adapt measures to local conditions (e.g. the slogan of "one school, multiple policies"), this is difficult to address under time constraints, due to disparity in teacher quality and education resources across schools, and a lack of mature and detailed plans for large-scale online education in emergency times

(4) It is difficult to predict the duration of the emergency, creating a great challenge for educational activities. Until now, we have not been able to answer questions such as what the characteristics and modes of online education are, and how teaching can be connected during and after the epidemic. At this stage, the task of solving the existing problems is, to a large extent, on teachers' shoulders, with little external guidance.

(5) "Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning" is arguably an experiment in large-scale online education. The experiment demonstrates big differences between, and the irreplaceability of, online and offline education. For example, the environment as a teaching and learning differs between home and school. Though the Internet can be used as a useful tool for teaching, it is less effective as the only platform for teacher-student interaction. There is also a lack of discipline and ritual in online education. Further, long-time online teaching can have a negative impact on students' mental and physical health.

6. Policy Implications and Suggestions

Lastly, we discuss policy implications and how the policy may be further improved in practice.

(1) The government should further promote the construction of the educational information superhighway, and test its functions, as well as assess whether it can meet the demand for online teaching in times of emergency. When necessary, legal regulations need to be issued to prioritize the educational use of high-quality broadband. At the same time, there is a need to accelerate the pace of technology iteration, and optimize the technical application of online education programs.

(2) To equip teachers with standardized home-based teaching equipment across the country, especially with standardized electronic devices to meet the needs of online teaching and individual tutoring in the home environment. Students' need for basic learning equipment should also be considered.

(3) To provide systematic training for teachers. Arguably the use of online platforms for high-quality teaching is an inevitable trend in the Internet era. Thus, preparing teachers with relevant skills through professional development, with legal, financial, and administrative support from the government, becomes crucial.

(4) To support and call for research into online education, at a national level, to enlighten approaches to effective online education. In addition, to encourage and support social organizations and schools to play their roles fully is also of paramount importance.

(5) Arguably, one of the most pressing current tasks is to conduct in-depth investigations into online education, especially concerning student support. The findings of these investigations would enable schools to provide a targeted instruction and counseling service for students with learning difficulties during the epidemic, and support students' successful re-adaptation to offline school education after the epidemic.

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