

A State Intellectual Partnership? Roles of Key Players in the Development of National Curriculum in China

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Abstract

This article exams the process of National Curriculum-making in China, with a focus on the English as a Foreign Language subject in Primary Education. The result shows that the practices of curriculum design at the national level involve a complicated State-intellectual partnership. While China's curriculum policy-making is certainly not 'bottom-up', never the less there are opportunities for intellectuals to play a profoundly important part in the production process. The State remains its overarching power while in fact pressures from the side group – intellectuals (national curriculum designers and textbook editors) - are possible and becoming more evident.

Key Words: Education Policy, knowledge production, cultural value, textbook, EFL subject

Main Text

Knowledge, especially school knowledge, always associated with value and power. As Foucault (1980) analysed, school knowledge - which is 'officially approved within a period' - is often an outcome of the power dynamic among interest groups. Not all parties in a society can make their knowledge public. The production of school knowledge is a selecting process of cultural reproduction among social groups. In fact, rather than being 'produced', school knowledge is being 'reproduced' through a cultural selection process, which is bound by power relations. Apple (1993) noted that the opportunity for cultural reproduction is partly dependent upon economic and political conditions. However, as the practice of power, education policy and curriculum making are full of struggles and compromises; the product of these practices, knowledge, emerges from power relations. Therefore, school knowledge, or in other words, the official knowledge, represents a process with conflict and compromises. As a 'compromised knowledge', a study of how school knowledge was made 'official' will reveal the involvement of various interest groups in the 'selecting process' and how they negotiated power. As far as public education is concern, it is the State that traditionally be assumed to have the authority. Without the authority, it is believed that public schooling will not be supported with the adequate resources therefore 'official knowledge' will not last long due to lack of publicity. Bernstein (1977) called the State one of the 're contextualising agents' in this process of knowledge selection, as well as cultural reproduction. Thus, under the 'umbrella' of a State, knowledge is taken out of its original context and 're contextualised' by political rule, in other words, the guiding principles of the dominant groups, and transformed within a new political context.

However, Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard argues, under the condition of globalisation, it is argued that the education processes are changing (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). The function of the State has largely transformed while losing its absolute power in dealing with domestic issues. While the intensified global network weakens the boundaries between nation-states, the rationale of education policy has been increasing shaped by the globalised discourses. The discourses that frame education policymaking, or in other words knowledge production, are no longer located simply in the national space but in an emergent global policy space (Rizzi and Lingard, 2010). Such a rescaled contemporary politics does not only affect the policy text and discourse, but also its production process, including the status of involved stakeholders and how they negotiate power. Often, observations on the contemporary policy context are made on policy movement across the national boundaries, for example, a policy emanating from Global North or an international organisation and its take-up within a nation of the Global South to implementation (Rizzi and Lingard, 2010).

However, arguably, the complexity of the policy context in periphery countries is under investigated. It is particularly the case in the context of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which is often portrayed simply as a centralised education system.

Taking the design of national curriculum as an example, this research examines the education policy process in PRC to explore the involvement of various stakeholder. Rather than curriculum policy itself, focusing on the EFL subject in Primary Education, this research firstly undertook a detailed analysis of current national textbooks. As the primary carriers of school knowledge, the production of textbooks is in fact a process of demonstrating 'how knowledge is made into content for school'. Thus, an investigation into this process would reveal the principles of 're contextualising agents' and the power dynamics of the production of school knowledge. It is in particular the case in the context of primary education in People's Republic of China (PRC), where a textbook is normally the only shared material used in classroom teaching and learning. Unlike many other countries, a textbook has always been used as a guidebook in classrooms of Primary Education in China. To most schools, especially those in less developed areas, a selected volume of textbooks is the only resource available for English teaching and learning. The process of textbook design can be considered as part of the creation of the national curriculum, whilst classroom teachers are left with limited autonomy in tailoring materials. In most cases, an English textbook serves as both a teaching material and a 'content standard' in Chinese schools. In this case, an exploration of the nature of knowledge included in textbooks in use in Chinese schools and its creation process will provide an insight of the education policy making in the country and the power dynamic among stakeholders. Based on the findings of textbook analysis, then, the researcher traced the curriculum making process and textbook production, through interviews with educational administrator, curriculum designers, textbook editors and writers, and teachers, to find out how this school knowledge was created.

School Knowledge Presented in the National EFL Textbooks

Two volumes of national EFL textbooks used in Chinese Primary Schools, New Version English (NV English) and PEP Primary English (PEP English), were analysed by focusing focus on cultural values. Both of these two volumes of textbooks are published by the People's Education Press in China, one of the leading publishers of textbooks, between 2003 and 2004. In general, these two volumes of textbooks show an urban middle class trend, through the portrayal of an urban life style and a middle class career orientation. Both volumes contain a large amount of information implying the ideas of 'appropriate behaviours' in various scenarios.

In details, applied Scollon and Scollon (1995)'s cultural framework, six cultural values were identified, patriotism, respect, obedience, diligence, independence, and collectivism. Patriotism is promoted in both volumes of textbooks through the delivery of two concepts, 'national identity,' and 'national pride'. The concept of 'respect to seniors' is strongly emphasised in textbooks. Message explicitly promoting respect to teachers, parents and elders are found. Besides, the concept of 'obedience' is presented in the sense of obeying rules in valorous places, home, school and society. The concept of 'diligence' is shown into two aspects: life and professional field. These ideas are mainly delivered through stories, by setting up hard working role models for children. The idea of being independent is interpreted as 'being capable' and delivered through messages encouraging children to help with housework. The concept of 'collectivism' is interpreted as group harmony. The group scale is varying, including family, class, school, the nation, and the world. In this session, the researcher identified errors in textbooks, revealing the editors and writers' Chinese interpretation of foreign culture.

Although messages hint the modern view of gender equality has been identified, both volumes of textbooks predominately portray a traditional view of gender roles. Female characters are more likely to be a kind/beautiful girl, or a loving mother. Male adults tend to have the roles as moneymaker and have less interaction with children. In professional field, male characters tend to have higher profile jobs in comparison with their female peers. Similar to its previous versions, the 2001 National Curriculum (launched in Year 2001) in China reinforces the importance of 'Moral Education' in schooling. While the focus of Moral Education remained in 'patriotism, collectivism and socialist ideals', it is evident that, the National Curriculum has been implemented in EFL textbooks.

Text Book Production Process

A textbook serves as the primary carrier of school knowledge and works as a medium of cultural transmission in schools. For this reason, dominant groups always attempt to intervene in textbook production and distribution (Apple, 1993).

Besides intense ideological pressure from the State or dominant social groups, the content of textbooks is also influenced by social-economic circumstances. Unlike other publications, as Apple (1985, p86) points out: ‘... the industry of textbook publishing remains perilously poised between the requirements and restraints of commerce and the responsibilities and obligations that it must bear as a prime guardian of the symbolic culture of the nation.’

The vital role played by a national textbook makes its adoption a process of cultural reproduction through confrontation, compromise and the incorporation of contending ideologies and needs between various social groups. In the centralised Chinese educational system, little is left to teachers’ discretion. The State is very prescriptive about the kinds of knowledge that must be taught, the learning outcomes and goals of that teaching, and how it must be carried out. The MoE is in charge of the administration of national curriculum design and its implementation. It also has strong impact on textbook production. Each year, an authorised list of textbooks is issued by the MoE. Local authorities are responsible for selecting one volume of textbooks for schools in their areas.

Although the MoE works as a gatekeeper in the production of a national textbook in China, in practice, the detailed decision-making is completed outside the government, by a group of scholars and textbook editors and writers. With the launch of 2001 EFL curriculum, which will be discussed in detail later, the MoE called for a round of textbook development. This recent production of national textbooks in China followed a ‘project approval-design-censorship-publishing’ routine. Firstly, each applicant submitted a proposal which includes information about the background of the textbook designing team, a framework of textbook design and a few sample chapters. Proposals were evaluated for its suitability in relation to the criteria of the new curriculum. Once the proposal was approved by the State Textbooks Examination and Approval Committee (STEAC), the publisher may start working on their textbook project. Later, the completed design had to be examined and approved by the STEAC in terms of ideological content, scientific spirit and adaptability to classroom instruction.

The State’s Leading Role

On the surface, the State plays a significant part within this process, as the MoE organises the approval of textbook design project and textbook censorship. However, each ‘governmental’ action is actually fulfilled by intellectuals such as scholars from universities and research institutions and experienced teaching professionals in Primary and Secondary Education. Most of these intellectuals are also involved in textbook development as chief editors or censors.

To understand the roles of each player, it is necessary to start with how the 2001 EFL curriculum was created. At the end of the 1990s, a discussion on the national curriculum was carried out among various stakeholders in the educational field, including policy makers, educators and parents, to seek a better solution to improve the quality of teaching and learning in Basic Education. Under these circumstances, a comprehensive educational reform was undertaken as of 1999. Two years later, a new national curriculum was eventually launched. As in many other countries, policy making in China starts with a top-down approach. The State took the lead in the curriculum process through agenda making, selection of policy actors, and the production of policy text. The original idea of this curriculum reform was promoted by policy makers, in particular, the vice-Premier at that time, Mr Li Lanqing. With his encouragement and a resolution for change, an educational conference was organised. Although there were different opinions on how the changes should be implemented, as an outcome of the conference, the Ministry of Education decided to call for the design of a new national curriculum which was suitable for international development in the 21st century. Focusing on the policy making process, it can be seen that the policy making process was led by political elites, especially in its early stages.

It is considered that a policy network often exists in the contemporary policy making process. It offers opportunities for grassroots actors to participate in the policy making process. This might be construed as a way in which the central government seeks ‘partners’ to share any problems resulting from policy implementation. China is not exempt from this. If we consider educators as members of grassroots groups, before making a concrete decision in 2001, they were consulted by the Chinese government, in terms of the possible options for developing a new EFL curriculum. In this sense, these experts did participate in the initial stage of policy making; however, to what extent their voices were taken into account is rather doubtful. Experts did voice their unease about the development of EFL teaching in Primary Education throughout the country and the potential difficulties of introducing English lessons to primary schools in less developed areas in China.

However, despite the considerations, the policy makers decided to promote a nationalised movement to introduce EFL subject into all primary schools and improve the existing quality of teaching. We may not be able to say that those concerns raised by experts, as policy feedback, were ignored by political elites. Policy makers explained their rationale for this reform as a ‘long-term development plan of China’, which means ‘temporary difficulties may exist’ but they will be overcome. However, feedback was not made open, possibly, for the purpose of avoiding the public expression of negativity. To a large extent, it kept teachers and parents away from the policy making process. Some teachers were involved in the later stage of curriculum making – textbook design- as writers or feedback providers. However, they were mainly in charge of evaluating whether certain activities designed in textbooks were practical and could be carried out in classrooms.

Chinese political elites won this ‘competition’ by providing an educational strategy that catered to their priorities about the apparent and urgent need to equip Chinese citizens with competent English language skills. This is seen as an important step in ensuring for the country an advantageous position in the future globalised world. Here, the benefit for the State as a whole was the focus, while, the benefit of people in less developed areas was to some extent sacrificed. The concept of ‘State’ and its wellbeing are highly emphasised as priorities. It is representative of the discourse that Chinese policy makers follow in decision making. Indeed, as Ball (1990) has argued, policy making is not always rational as policy makers’ personal values may have some impact on the policy process. That is to say, ‘personal value’, as a constructed discourse of a certain group is influenced by historical, social and political contexts. As noted earlier, the discourse that emerged in the policy making for EFL curriculum in China clearly prioritises the benefit of the State.

Historically speaking, such a discourse is embedded in traditional Chinese culture. In Chinese culture, social members are not perceived as independently acting individuals, but members of social groups. Although social class structure may shift over a period in China; it does not change the ‘Gemeinschaft’ nature into which one becomes a member through the natural process of birth and growth within a family and a community. Traditionally, one is required to follow the rules set out for citizens and to keep relationships balanced. However, when the wellbeing of one group conflicts with another, one is normally encouraged to put the needs of the larger group first. Therefore, in Chinese culture, individual welfare is normally the last thing to be considered.

In this sense, political elites, compared to which, recognise the State as a bigger group any other group in China is considered less important. The researcher argues that, the creation of a ‘large–small’ relationship, which precipitates an ‘important–less important’ power position, distracted citizens from exploring the nature of the State as the representative of dominant group(s). In China’s case, it is rather clear that, limited opportunities were offered to grassroots groups in the initial decision making process. However, by identifying this ‘initial decision making process’, in which power elites made their calls on a national reformation, it is possible that the rest of the curriculum making process may tell a different story.

Scholars and Textbooks Editors and Writers’ Input

As addressed earlier, the production of school knowledge is a power dynamic among interest groups. What became evident is that this is not always a top-down process. As Apple (1993) described, the State does not always support only the knowledge of dominant groups; as it may need to allow a certain level of ‘varieties’, in order to seek the maximum support from other groups on their public politics. Due to the State’s leading role in initial decision-making, it is apparent that EFL curriculum making in China does not follow a bottom-up approach.

The interests of other stakeholders in knowledge production were materialised in an unexpected route - as there were hidden spaces identified, for a side group of scholars and textbook editors and writers to actively participate in EFL textbook production. As we can see, the idea of promoting national curriculum reform was supported strongly by political elites in China. The State was heavily involved in the early stage of decision making on this issue, in terms of strategy making and agenda setting. However, the power of designing a curriculum was shifted down the line. Taking the EFL subject in Chinese Primary Education as an example, the actual curriculum design task was not completed in the MoE. To a large extent, the MoE acts as an administrative organisation for curriculum design activities. In other words, other groups created the curriculum in detail (e.g. syllabi) with differing interests. This is exceptionally important as it allows a hidden policy space to develop in which actual curriculum design is conducted.

It is doubtful whether the agenda of curriculum reform was realistic. In terms of the curriculum change itself, as educators warned, a standardised national movement did not suit the unequally developed EFL curriculum in Chinese Primary Education. This 2001 EFL curriculum was radical since some less developed areas did not have enough teaching resources to introduce the EFL subject in schools. On the other hand, a similar resources problem occurred at both the policy making and implementation stages. In a way, this led to the shift of power from the State to the intellectual group. To some extent, the actual policy making process deviates from its original intention.

Owing to a lack of human resources to design a new EFL curriculum, the MoE invited about 100 experts from the English teaching field. Most of these experts were scholars in higher educational institutions. Some of them were experienced teacher trainers or textbook editors and writers. Although the designing activities were organised by the MoE, the 2001 EFL curriculum was designed by intellectuals from universities, rather than the government or its agencies. The State retained control over the evaluation and publication of the national curriculum; however, one should say that, the national curriculum was designed by these educators rather than civil servants in the MoE. In other words, intellectuals rather than politicians or other ruling groups designed the curriculum. In this case, the national curriculum which carries the responsibility for the production of official knowledge was not created by power elites, such as politicians or establishment intellectuals, but by non-governmental intellectuals in China.

For the implementation of 2001 EFL curriculum, there is a lack of human resources in local educational authorities and schools. This links to what the researcher argued earlier in this article, the design of EFL textbooks should be considered as a part of curriculum policy making, since these textbooks are used as content standards for the curriculum in classrooms. Apart from schools in Shanghai, this 2001 EFL curriculum which was designed outside the MoE is the only national structural standard used throughout China. Most provincial educational authorities were not able to design their own curriculum content standards. This task was in fact handed over to the textbook designers. Therefore, once again, the responsibility of curriculum policy making was shifted down the line to textbook editors and writers. This presents another hidden space in the EFL curriculum policy making process.

As mentioned previously, the production of a national EFL textbook is completed through a four-step process including: project approval, design, censorship and publishing. According to related regulations, to commence a textbook design project, it has to be approved by the State Textbooks Examination and Approval Committee. It can only be published once it has been examined and approved by the same committee in terms of ideological content, scientific spirit and adaptability to classroom instruction. On the surface, the government, as the MoE organises the approval of textbook development and textbook censorship, regulates textbook production. However, again, although the MoE sets the agenda, each 'governmental' action is actually fulfilled by intellectuals. In this case, they are mainly scholars in universities. STEAC, which is responsible for the project approval and textbook censorship, consists of educators from Higher Education and research institutions, experienced teaching professionals and textbook editors and writers in Basic Education.

In terms of step two – 'textbook design', is led by the national curriculum in principle. The 2001 EFL curriculum contains a brief guideline for textbook design, alongside other components, such as principles, aims, content, outcomes, pedagogy and assessment. Various volumes of textbooks were produced to meet the criteria of the 2001 EFL curriculum. However, even so, there was a large space left to editors and writers due to the lack of detailed guidelines for textbook design.

Most curriculum designers were heavily involved in textbook production as chief editors or textbook censors. Research findings show that if a curriculum designer did not participate in textbook design, he or she would be a member of textbook censorship in most cases. To a large extent, the principles of the 2001 EFL curriculum were delivered in textbook design by these curriculum designers. Chief Editors mainly participate in the creation of a framework for a textbook design project. Here, considering textbook design as a part of curriculum making process, the power of policy making was once again shifted to another group – the textbook editors and writers. They are mainly Chinese and foreign publishers; while some teachers were also involved in the designing activities to be used in EFL classrooms. However, there was no training regarding the curriculum provided to textbook editors and writers. In this way, a great deal of autonomy was left to textbook editors and writers to deal with the interpretation of EFL curriculum and the construction of knowledge for schooling.

By the end of textbook production, these groups also have the responsibility to interpret the national curriculum when introducing their products. Acting as representatives of publishers, these editors and writers normally provide textbook training events to teachers to promote new textbooks as a part of their customer service.

To a large extent, it was editors and writers who transferred the principles of the EFL national curriculum practical teaching guides in to textbook design. In other words, it is the intellectual group, known as scholars, textbooks editors and writers, holding the power to create school knowledge delivered in EFL subject in Primary Education, through curriculum design and textbook production. The portrayal of 'hidden messages of cultural values' in EFL textbooks demonstrates clearly of such a power that held by the intellectual group over knowledge and cultural reproduction. For example, in terms of Moral Education, the key concepts that emerged in English Language textbooks differ from the ones that were promoted by the MoE. 'Patriotism', which appears as the priority of Moral Education, is delivered in EFL textbooks in a rather hidden way through the use of images and narratives involving national symbols.

Although a sense of 'national identity' appears in textbooks, it is mainly transmitted through cultural symbols such as 'places of interests', 'customs' and 'local food'. Editors and writers expressed doubt about the necessity of delivering this rather 'theoretical' term of 'patriotism' to children at primary school age. Meanwhile, the concept of 'collectivism' appeared in EFL textbooks, while 'socialist ideal' was avoided by editors and writers. Editors and writers as promoting the spirit of 'team work' or the approach of collaborative learning referred to the former. Besides core moral concepts emphasised by the MoE, other cultural values, such as diligence, independence, respect/obedience, and stereotyped gender roles were transferred through EFL textbooks. Textbook editors and writers and censors claim it, they rely heavily upon their 'common sense' in the task of textbook design. In fact, such 'common sense' represents the shared culture of their social group – the middle class intellectuals. In a way, the intellectual group's culture is reproduced through the EFL curriculum in Chinese Primary Education.

A State-Intellectual Partnership

This intellectual group in China was heavily involved in the curriculum policy making process, acting as curriculum designers, textbook editors and writers and textbook censors in the process. In a way, the intellectual group worked in partner with the State, within a framework where the State remains the 'overarching' leader. (Figure 1: Curriculum policy making process)

The curriculum policy making process in Chinese Primary Education can be evaluated according to the model above. The State established an 'empty box' (outer circle) by setting up strategies and agendas at the early stage of curriculum policy making. It also influences the end of this policy making process through policy approval and publication. On the other hand, the intellectuals, who practically fill in the 'box' (inner circle), carry out the practice of curriculum design and textbook production. Both curriculum design and textbook production have to work within the state controlled framework. However, to some extent, the inner circle is rather independent from the outer one, in terms of communication and rulemaking.

This model shows that, working alongside the State and its representatives, the intellectuals hold hidden power in the curriculum policy making process in Chinese Primary Education. The relationship between other power elites (including politicians, militaries and state bureaucracies) and intellectuals (as elites with cultural capital) has changed over time. In the past, gaining cultural capital was the only way for the general public to climb up the 'ladder' to maintain a position in the ruling class. In contemporary China, intellectuals have engaged in several major social and political transformations, which were heavily influenced by ideological changes.

As the group associated with 'knowledge, values and meaning', intellectuals actualise social mobility, allowing the public to enter the power group. Apart from being a bridge group, in the case of EFL curriculum creation in Chinese Primary Education, intellectuals actually hold more power in policy making than originally expected. In a way, they form the middle layer of a power pyramid in policy making, between the State maintaining its position at the top level and the grassroots group (including most classroom teachers and parents) who stay at the bottom.

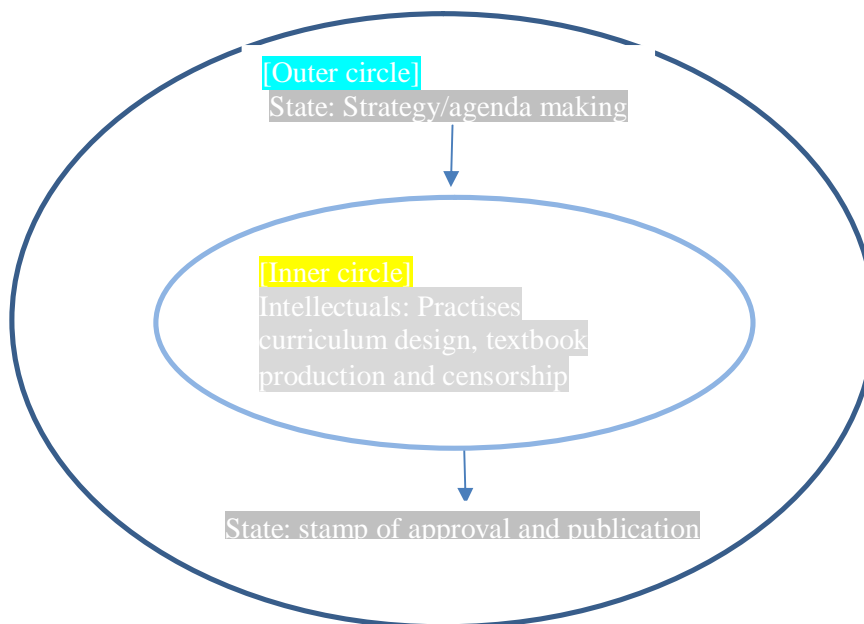
In contrast to Broadhead's (2002) concept of 'collaboration and consultation', in the case of the EFL curriculum in Chinese Primary Education, a partnership between political elites and intellectuals was formed for curriculum policy making. Overall, the State takes the lead in establishing the curriculum creation process by setting an agenda, selecting participant groups and publishing policy.

The State or the political elites' values are reproduced through the discourse of strategy making; meanwhile, a large space is left to another agency – the intellectual group – to explore. The intellectual group does participate in policy process alongside the State. However, it does not change the nature of policy making as mainly a reproduction of values of the ruling group. However, largely, the responsibility of curriculum interpretation, as well as the power of knowledge production is handed over to textbook editors and writers.

Although the political elites called for a nationwide curriculum reform and set up the policy agenda, only very limited human capital can be offered to the curriculum design project within the government. To a large extent, during the curriculum and textbook design, the State only retains control in the administration of curriculum policy making through its representatives, the Ministry of Education. In this case, the power was shifted to educators, editors, and writers, known as the intellectual group, to design and interpret the national curriculum for Primary Education.

Appendix 1:

Figure 1: Curriculum policymaking process



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