The Practice of Yantai Yew Wah to Integrate Curricula of Primary and Junior High

In China, how should international education schools integrate the policy on the national curriculum with their own hands-on practices, and combine resources from both the East and the West in order to form their own unique international education curriculum structures and connect them to the world? In response to the question, Yantai Yew Wah International Education School, guided by the vision of “leading the way of internationalization of China’s education”, has integrated its curricula of Primary and Junior High sections. This case study aims at serving as a reference for the development of international education in China by providing an interim study of the content, method and effectiveness of such integration.

A. Background

Since its establishment in 2000, Yantai Yew Wah has been exploring the way of internationalization of China’s education. Its newly-adopted curriculum, basing on the essence of the Chinese culture and taking the best of international education, follows the direction of educational development. It aims at educating children to become citizens with multi-cultural perspectives and conversant with both Chinese and western knowledge.

However, due to insufficient preparation and experience, lack of precedents for reference in the curriculum setting, we were confronted with great difficulties in the implementation of the new curriculum. The difficulties included unavailability of teachers, insufficient confidence of the serving teachers, low quality of students, insufficient amount of teaching material, and the curriculum setting falling short of expectations of the parents. However, educators in the school have overcome the difficulties with their international vision, creativity and professionalism. With much effort, the order of education and teaching has been established, and our own characteristics of teaching in some of the subjects and anticipated effects have been brought out in the implementation of the curriculum.

B. Educational Challenges

In the course of the integration, Yantai Yew Wah has identified the following key questions and concerns:

1. Regarding education vision, method, curriculum setting, rules and systems of school, time-table and activities, the Chinese and foreign teachers will inevitably clash due to their cultural discrepancies. How do we negotiate the differences?
2. Primary education in China emphasizes providing a strong base of learning and developing good behaviours for students. Yet it has ample room for improvement in terms of the content and method of teaching. How do we improve on this?
3. The exam-oriented Junior High curriculum in China has evident flaws. How do we rectify them?
4. Both the international curriculum and the Chinese national curriculum have their strengths and weaknesses. How do the two complement each other?

C. Solutions

Integration of essence of the East and the West in terms of education philosophy and vision: In debates, educators from the East and the West, learning and taking reference from each other, present educational ideas of their own nations and meet the test of the criteria of other nations. Those ideas which pass the test will be kept and the failing ones will be shelved. The end product will be a relatively perfect combination of eastern and western education philosophies.

Integration of essence of the East and the West in terms of curriculum: The school seeks to consolidate and strengthen the edge of junior education of China to ensure students to achieve solid foundation in subjects of Chinese, Math and English. As required by the Chinese national curriculum, both Chinese and international students have to achieve solid foundation in languages and master the calculation skills. At the same time, we improve on our content and method of teaching. We put more emphasis on independent and comprehensive reading by students in language learning; we integrate subjects of Science, Math, Arts and language teaching; and we use thematic teaching as a core approach to cover cultural knowledge in various disciplines and to encourage students to use various senses in integrated learning.

In review of the exam-oriented Junior High curriculum in China, we have decided to combine Geography, History, Politics and Biology into the subject of Social Studies, instructed in English. Appropriate tutoring will be given to individual Chinese students so that they can meet the basic requirement of the national curriculum and at the same time overcome the exam-oriented shortcomings. Students no longer have to recite book knowledge but explore actively, and discuss, design, contemplate, and accomplish projects with teachers’ guidance. In such a way, their understanding of the world will keep expanding, and they will become active learners with their own thinking.

We analyzed the Math programme in the international curriculum and found its guiding principles flexible and its emphasis on training of thinking capability and practical application. Yet it neglects Math as a complete system and tight organization and lacks the depth that we can find in Math in the Chinese national curriculum. Hence, we have combined the Chinese way of teaching Math and Cambridge Math, taught by both Chinese bilingual and foreign teachers and instructed in English. That ensures our students to learn the mode of thinking and core concepts enshrined in Cambridge Math and at the same time tight logics and solid training provided by the Math programme in the Chinese national curriculum. In such a way, students can gain an edge over others in international exams.

Integration of essence of the East and the West in terms of teaching resources: Our Chinese and foreign teachers exhibit their respective strength and explore together the best educational and teaching methods. They support and learn from each other, thus making progress together. In the subjects of languages, Arts and Science in Primary and Junior High, teachers work together to prepare lessons, teach, assess, and share information after class. This is what we called “seamlessly connected
education”. We also launch the “co-class teachers” system in which each class has a Chinese and a foreign teacher to take duties at the same time. Chinese and foreign teachers are working towards the same direction, and are supplementary to each other.

Integration of essence of the East and the West in terms of languages of teaching: The East-and-West integration in languages of teaching has become a characteristic. By means of co-teaching, local and foreign teachers exhibit their strength in different aspects. Listening, oral, reading and writing in the target language is the way to engage and affect students; grammar and usage exercises in native language enhance their understanding in a direct way. Bilingual teachers try to teach mostly in English, in order to demonstrate the importance of English in the school and not to lose the effectiveness of English teaching. On the other hand to teach in a language more easily understood by students in subject teaching ensures the learning quality.

Awareness enhanced among all teachers in terms of languages of teaching: The student profiles are rather complex in Yantai Yew Wah. There are mainland students who are used to learning under the national curriculum; there are also a large number of Korean students and students from other countries. Both local and foreign teachers have to deal with students of various language abilities and backgrounds. In this way, language teaching becomes a kind of difficulty for the school. The choice of language of teaching becomes our key research question. Firstly, our principle is that an effective language is a good language. Be it English, Chinese, or even Korean, it can be a good language if it can attain the teaching goal in a short time. We emphasize the importance of the target language in language teaching. Secondly, we increase the proportion of foreign teachers in teaching English; we try to implement “all-Chinese teaching” in Chinese learning. Korean students are preferred to be incorporated into classes of Chinese. Moreover, we strengthen teachers’ awareness of language teaching in different subjects. In face of students with difficulties in language learning, language teaching and subject teaching naturally go together. Every teacher in the school has developed such awareness. Our only goal is to create an environment for language learning and usage, to consolidate the base of language skills, and to help students acquire the target language more efficiently.

D. Assessment

Nearly 50 per cent of the Primary curriculum is taught in English, including English, Cambridge Science, Math and overseas Arts. English instruction is particularly prominent in Junior High of which 85 per cent of the classes are taught in English, including English, Cambridge Math, Science, ICT, overseas Arts and Music, and Social Studies. English becomes the official language in the campus and students’ oral English skill is assessed monthly. A good English-speaking environment has been created for students to improve their language proficiency in living and learning.

In the new term of 2006/07, the school has adopted new English teaching material from Australia which is more vivid, dramatic and colourful. Students are liberated from examination preparation, and inspired by a real English-using environment and authentic cultural experience.

Although the school has not fully achieved “seamless connection” in language teaching, Secondary Mathematics and Primary Arts, initial co-teaching is
implemented. In order to achieve comprehensive integration in all subjects, we are still in ample need of bilingual teachers of high calibre and training in accordance with the education philosophy of our school. We put great focus on the training of bilingual teachers not only in terms of language, but more importantly in the terms of knowledge and vision. For Chinese language teachers and teachers of other subjects under perpetual influence of traditional educational vision, it is a considerable responsibility for them to become teachers of international education who embody an international perspective and acquire advanced teaching methods and an educational vision. Our school constantly reviews its work and makes progress with the hope to help bilingual teachers to reach maturity.

In the course of curriculum integration, the traditional strength of the Chinese education is inherited and retained. Our students’ performance in languages and Math has not been affected by the internationalization of education. Instead, progress is kept. Students are now used to conducting exchanges in English and tackling English exam papers. Their skills in English Math are improved because of the teaching by bilingual Math teachers. The multi-disciplinary learning approach and the method of thematic teaching have enabled students to learn one single issue through various channels and perspectives; their knowledge and abilities are strengthened; students now participate and explore more actively, and the classrooms have become more energetic and the campus more lively.

Regarding the language of teaching, the awareness of all teachers has been raised. To facilitate co-operation, all Chinese teachers have started to improve their English. They can now cope with students with less language ability in a better way. Subject teaching is timely adjusted to work simultaneously with language teaching. Moreover, students are now used to classrooms with multi-cultural elements. With appropriate bilingual assistance, students have the most chances to experience an all-English environment and get used to English teaching. Their parents have also gradually accepted bilingual teaching instead of asking for an all-English classroom environment, as they have realized the effectiveness of bilingual teaching. More importantly, local and foreign teachers have now enhanced their co-operation; integration of the eastern and the western languages is expected to grow.

E. Looking Ahead

In order to improve academic performance, bilingual teachers need to help students prepare lessons to ensure they understand the basic content of the teaching material. Secondly, bilingual teachers need to use their strength in the teaching of grammar and vocabulary to make up for the shortcomings of foreign teachers in teaching. Thirdly, bilingual teachers through means of assessment, such as homework, exercises and tests, ensure students understand what has been taught by foreign teachers. Finally and most importantly, bilingual teachers are to integrate the Chinese and western curricula and essence in education, and differentiate, supplement and develop the existing teaching material. We are to form our own Yew Wah style of teaching and learning. Our bilingual teachers need to keep enhancing their own abilities and awareness, exploring and progressing.

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