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## **Decentralization, Marketization, and Quality-orientation: Three major pursuits of basic education reform in China since 1985**

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### **Background**

The background of the basic education reform in China after 1980 is shaped by three forces: international tendency of neo-liberal education reform, Chinese societal transformation, and previous educational system. In the third quarter of the 20th century, a wave of neo-liberal education reform has influenced the education policies and systems in individual nation states around the globe (Lindblad, Johannesson & Simola, 2002; Papagiannis, Easton, & Owens, 1992). Decentralization and marketization become two primary goals of many education reforms. Meanwhile, Chinese society has experienced a dramatic transformation toward market economy after the implementation of 'reform and opening-up' policy in 1978. Many neo-liberal changes have taken place in its economics, politics and social cultures. However, the over-centralised basic education system couldn't meet the needs of economic and societal reforms. Many problems emerged in school education. Therefore, since the mid-1980s, Chinese central government initiated a series of neo-liberal-oriented reforms to change and improve the basic education system.

### **Research Questions**

The enquiry focuses on the major pursuits of the basic education reform in China since the mid-1980s. This broad focus implies that this paper has twofold purposes. First, it aims to identify the essential goals of the reform. Second, it's to explain the emergence of these major targets.

### **Methods**

The first focus requires a good knowledge of the reform process and key policies. In this sense, a retrospect of the important policies and movements concerning Chinese basic education will help to exhibit the prominent tendency of the reform. Accordingly, major policy documents are reviewed in the paper.

As for the second focus, an analysis of the reform context will provide a contextual explanation for the emergence of the major pursuits. Therefore, the paper includes an amount of the literature on the three contextual antecedents: international trends of education reform, Chinese societal context, and the basic education system before the reform.

### **Frame**

In accordance with the first focus of the enquiry, a review of the relevant policy documents is presented to exhibit the important ideas overarching all these reform efforts. By virtue of Harbamas' perception of the society (1981), the review analyzes the change in terms of the relationship between the state and the market in the area of basic education in China.

A contextual perspective is used to explain the emergence of the trends guiding the reform. Thus, the analysis involves the contexts at three levels: the international level, the national or societal level, and the specific educational system level.

### **Research findings**

The review indicates that the reform initiatives starting from 1985 generally consists of two phases with different major pursuits. The first phase, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, aims to transform the structure and administration of school education towards decentralisation and marketisation. In the second phase, achieving quality education becomes the upmost pursuit of the education reform since the early 1990s. More efforts have been made to improve the quality of school education, such as reforming school classification system, school curriculum and examination system, and school personnel system.

These pursuits emerge from the international trend of neo-liberal education reform, the requirement of Chinese economic and societal transformation, and the previous basic educational system in China.

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