

A Brief Discussion on Strategies for Deepening Vocational Education Reform

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Abstract: In the new era, the Party and the country have attached great importance to the development of vocational education. Educational authorities have successively issued a series of important documents, such as the National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan and the Vocational Education Quality Improvement and Excellence Cultivation Action Plan (2020–2023), which further clarify the guiding ideology, school-running orientation, objectives, tasks, and social functions of vocational education, pointing out the direction for the development of vocational colleges. With social transformation and changes of the times, vocational education has encountered many challenges. It is urgent to promote reforms in terms of fundamentals and institutions, release and develop the productive forces of vocational education, and enable vocational education to better meet the needs of the development of the socialist market economy and the promotion of social harmony and stability.

Keywords: Vocational education; Opportunities and challenges; Vocational education reform

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1. Introduction

Vocational education is an important part of national education and plays a pivotal role in the country's economic and social development. In the face of a series of problems and deficiencies in vocational education, deepening vocational education reform is an important measure to implement the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, as well as the only way to solve problems and promote high-quality development of vocational education. The following is a brief analysis of several issues concerning deepening vocational education reform from the perspective of the practice of vocational education development in Xinjiang (Southern Xinjiang).

2. Opportunities and challenges facing the development of vocational education in southern Xinjiang at present

As a border area of the motherland, vocational education in Xinjiang, especially in southern Xinjiang, not only

shares the common characteristics of vocational education across the country but also has its own particularly prominent uniqueness. On the one hand, like vocational education nationwide, vocational education in southern Xinjiang is ushering in a once-in-a-lifetime development opportunity. This opportunity stems from the major decisions and arrangements made by the Party Central Committee with General Secretary at its core, based on both domestic and international situations from a strategic and overall perspective, which are crucial to the country's economic and social development. Located in a key region of the Belt and Road Initiative, southern Xinjiang boasts relatively superior geographical advantages, policy advantages, resource advantages, and development advantages^[1]. These have created a broad space and paved a bright path for the development of vocational education in southern Xinjiang.

On the other hand, southern Xinjiang has harsh natural environment, complex social factors, a shortage of human resources, and a weak industrial foundation, making it a typical underdeveloped area in the country. At the same time, a series of contradictions and problems that hinder the development of vocational education are in urgent need of solution, such as the fragmented management system of vocational education with excessive administrative interference; the uneven management level of vocational colleges, with occasional chaos in management and failure to accurately grasp their main responsibilities and core businesses; inefficient talent training models and low-quality talent cultivation; and deviations in the working atmosphere of vocational colleges^[2].

3. Problems in the development of vocational education in southern Xinjiang and their analysis

3.1. Intertwined internal systems, lack of management and imbalance

According to the national division of labor in vocational education, vocational education in southern Xinjiang is divided into two categories: one under the education system (education-oriented) and the other under the human resources and social security (HRSS) system (technical worker-oriented). The education-oriented vocational schools are managed by local education administrative departments through vertical management, which conforms to the rules of vertical administration. In contrast, the technical worker-oriented vocational schools under the HRSS system are subject to dual management by both HRSS departments and education administrative departments, which easily falls into the trap of “too many cooks spoil the broth”. This results in a “lopsided” situation where both are “vocational schools” but suffer from uneven management^[3]. Compared with education-system vocational schools, HRSS-system vocational schools face a broader and more complex range of businesses and directly serve various social groups, especially vulnerable groups. This often leaves them struggling to define their core responsibilities, clarify their development direction, or measure their social value. As a result, they rank at the bottom of mainstream social recognition and evaluation systems and rarely appear in the performance records of local governments^[4].

3.2. Obvious tendency toward bureaucratization in vocational education

The tendency toward bureaucratization in education is a common phenomenon, with excessive administrative interference in schools and academic affairs being widespread. As an important part of the national education system, vocational education already suffers from inherent weaknesses in the process of educational modernization, including low social recognition and widespread prejudice. It is therefore even more susceptible to bureaucratization and excessive intervention by administrative power. In southern Xinjiang, many vocational schools prioritize and cater to administrative power, leading to absurd anomalies. This results in an unclear

positioning and a lack of focus on core tasks, creating institutions that are “neither schools, nor government agencies, nor training organizations, nor enterprises”^[5].

3.3. Self-imposed restrictions, deviation from rationality, and loss of effectiveness in teaching management

Unlike the academic education system, which has strict, logical, and efficient procedures from preschool to higher education, with clear connections between stages, links, and even individual semesters, such as vocational education, due to its unique circumstances and policy leniency, enjoys greater freedom to adapt to individual needs. This should be an advantage, as it aligns more closely with “the free development of people” and better promotes social and economic development^[6]. However, due to a combination of subjective and objective factors, some vocational schools “abuse their freedom” by imposing numerous arbitrary restrictions. They overemphasize formalities and documentation, using the pretext of “seriousness and completeness” to create self-imposed constraints that hinder progress. Templates and forms proliferate, consuming teachers’ and students’ time, energy, abilities, and potential. The quality and perfection of documentation are used as rigid indicators for evaluating teachers’ performance and determining their benefits. Excessively harsh, unrealistic, and irrational disciplinary systems, such as overstrict “teaching accident” determinations are used to intimidate teachers. For example, some teachers were directly identified as having committed a general teaching accident just because they were a few minutes late for the morning reading due to work reasons. As a result, they had 2,200 yuan deducted in total that year, were directly disqualified from evaluating and selecting excellent staff and advanced individuals that year, and this also affected their professional title promotion in the past three years^[7]. Such practices severely dampen teacher enthusiasm and vitality, which in turn damages the school’s reputation and authority and alienates the staff.

3.4. Arbitrariness in student management

“Teaching is a matter of conscience” is a phrase often repeated by student managers in vocational schools. However, in practice, student management is influenced by deeply rooted and distorted views of students. Whether in systems, mechanisms, or specific guiding principles, there are unhealthy attitudes such as “treating students as machines” or even “treating students as garbage or criminals.” This leads to problems in student management, including disregard for educational laws, ignorance of students’ physical and mental characteristics, indifference to their safety and well-being, suppression of individuality, restriction of development, and arbitrary decision-making. Student management is treated frivolously, resulting in absurd phenomena such as: “five class teachers being replaced in one class within a year,” “forcing students to wear school uniforms over down jackets in freezing winter,” “making adolescents, who care about cleanliness sit on the ground for hours or stand in the scorching sun for hours” and “throwing students’ bedding and luggage on the ground like garbage”^[8]. These practices severely damage teacher-student relations, reduce students’ recognition of teachers, schools and even themselves, harm students’ physical and mental health and growth, and seriously deviate from the original purpose and mission of education.

4. Several suggestions for deepening the reform of vocational education

General Secretary pointed out, “We should deepen the reform of the school-running system and education management, and fully stimulate the vitality of the development of education”. He also emphasized, “We should attach great importance to vocational education, so that graduates of vocational colleges can have broad

prospects in their career development”. To this end, we must firm our political stance, resolutely implement the decisions and arrangements of the Party Central Committee with General Secretary at its core on the reform and development of vocational education, shoulder our political responsibilities, adhere to seeking truth from facts, and make every effort to promote the modernization of vocational education^[9].

4.1. Emancipate the mind and strive to solve fundamental problems in the development of vocational education

Solving ideological problems is the fundamental prerequisite for solving all problems. As an important part of the national education system, deepening the reform of vocational education in southern Xinjiang must first tackle ideological issues, discard outdated ideas, and reshape its image. Currently, the biggest obstacle to the development of vocational education in southern Xinjiang is ideological rigidity and stagnation. This rigidity is mainly manifested as a widespread prejudice against vocational education, which comes not only from the government but also from society^[10]. In short, vocational education is placed in a low position in the value sequence of policymakers and is recognized as inferior in the minds of the public. Even in the new era, some people are still unaware of the existence of vocational schools and vocational education. However, the reality we face is that in today’s era of economic globalization, large-scale social production, and increasingly refined social division of labor, the quality of vocational education has become an important indicator of a country’s economic and social development and a key support for the sustained, healthy, and high-quality development of a country’s economy^[11].

To this end, local governments should strictly implement national plans related to the development of vocational education, earnestly change their mindset, resolutely shoulder the political task of reforming and developing vocational education with a sense of urgency that “time waits for no one” and a strong sense of social responsibility. They should promptly adjust policy orientations, formulate supporting systems, provide public services, and carry out vigorous publicity to strive to create a favorable atmosphere where “vocational education, vocational schools, and vocational school graduates are also highly sought-after”. They should guide the public to deeply, correctly, rationally, and newly understand vocational education, vocational schools, and vocational school students, and encourage the whole society to sincerely praise vocational education and compete to commend vocational school graduates who serve society with their professional skills. This will make vocational schools a great stage in the new era for displaying talents, learning skills, creating value, and realizing self-worth, and make vocational school graduates “skilled talents” and “blue-collar elites”^[12].

4.2. Deepen reform, adhere to a unified approach to vocational education, allow diverse development, and form synergy

The classification of the vocational education system should adhere to a unified approach. Whether it is vocational schools under the human resources and social security system or those under the education system, they should adhere to the general direction of educational attributes. Professional matters should be assigned to professional departments, and professional standards and principles should be consistently implemented to ensure that vocational schools under different systems are aligned in political direction, school-running purposes, basic operations, daily management, and result orientation, and work together toward the same goals. At the same time, the particularities of different systems should be taken into account to form a symphonic cooperation of vocational education across different systems^[13].

General Secretary pointed out that “schools should run their own affairs”. This requires education

administrative departments and relevant administrative departments to exercise prudence and restraint, reduce interference in schools' main responsibilities and businesses, ease restrictions on vocational schools, guide and promote vocational schools to continuously deepen reforms around the central task of education and teaching, strengthen top-level design, formulate development plans, and strive to improve the quality of talent cultivation.

4.3. Prioritizing effectiveness: unleashing and developing the productive forces of vocational education

“Contradictions possess particularity”. As Comrade Deng Xiaoping put it, “It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, it’s a good cat”. The defining feature that distinguishes vocational education from academic education lies in its flexibility and practicality. Therefore, the development of vocational education can only achieve substantive progress by adhering to its “innate nature” and fulfilling its “divine mission”.

Vocational schools should focus their teaching management on the fundamental task of enhancing teaching effectiveness. This involves constructing teaching management systems that remain open, dynamic, and inclusive. By integrating principle with flexibility, vocational schools should design and implement a comprehensive set of mechanisms to encourage teaching reforms and innovations. These mechanisms should guide and support teachers and students in conducting diverse teaching practices centered on the twin objectives of moral cultivation and skill development. The ultimate and indeed the sole criterion for evaluating teaching quality should be the effectiveness of instruction and the outcomes of student nurturing, thereby eliminating all forms of formalism ^[14].

4.4. Upholding conscience: infusing student management with compassion and strength

The root cause of chaos in student management within vocational schools’ stems from administrators’ erroneous perceptions of students and their lack of empathy. Ideas are the forerunners of actions: correct ideologies propel progress, while misguided ones lead astray. For student managers, flawed perspectives on students can profoundly impact the well-being and mental health of hundreds or even thousands of young individuals. As educators, we must recognize that vocational students are, first and foremost, students and students are, at their core, children who inherently need love. The renowned educator Vasily Sukhomlinsky once stated, “Without love, there is no education”. Indeed, love constitutes the cornerstone of successful education. The essence of student management is not mere control but service, the two are inseparable, like two sides of the same coin. The principle “Care for the young as if they were your own” serves as both the ethical foundation and practical approach for student management. Confucius remarked, “A person who is filial and fraternal is unlikely to be rebellious”. Similarly, genuine care and service toward students foster trust and respect. When students are treated with the same dedication as one’s own children, they will stride confidently toward success, bringing pride to their teachers. Thus, by grounding management systems in love, we ensure they remain true to their purpose and avoid deviation ^[15].

5. Conclusion

In summary, the development of vocational education remains a daunting yet critical endeavor. It requires concerted efforts to reform institutional frameworks, management systems, power dynamics, teaching methodologies, student care, and cultural paradigms. By addressing systemic flaws and rectifying harmful practices, we can safeguard the roots of vocational education with political and scientific rationality. Through

internal and external collaboration, we must empower vocational schools to undergo self-renewal, leveraging their confidence and capabilities to deliver tangible educational outcomes that serve the nation and society.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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