

# Refreshing China's Labor Education in the New Era: Policy Review on Education Through Physical Labor

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study reviews China's labor education theories and policies to reveal the main objectives, contents, and methods of the new era, as well as analyzes future development in labor education.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** In addition to reviewing the relevant labor education theories, this study examines China's labor education policies using historical documents and current policy texts. Marxist and traditional approaches to labor education, as well as the historical development of education in China, provide the macroscopic backdrop of this study's analysis of the persistence and innovativeness of China's labor education policies.

**Findings:** China's labor education policy has placed labor education on the same level as that in morality, intellect, sports, and aesthetics, thereby endowing labor education with new meaning. Labor education seeks to cultivate workers with all-round physical and mental development. Becoming more varied over time, labor education now involves the cultivation of skills, technological capacities, creative thinking, labor habits, and emotional development. Approaches and

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methods include formal programs and teaching, education in daily life at home and school, as well as practical activities outside of school.

**Originality/Value:** This study identifies the meaning of labor education in different eras and analyzes the objectives, contents, and methods of China's current policies on labor education, as well as its future developmental trends. In doing so, this study provides a useful reference for the implementation of labor education in elementary and middle schools.

## Keywords

Combination of education and productive labor, comprehensive human development, labor education, Marxist thought in education

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## Introduction

Labor education has long been an important component of the Chinese education system—especially basic education—since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. This type of education serves to enhance human development while promoting productive labor and social development. Labor education has accrued various connotations over time. In the initial stage of the country's founding, education was intended “to serve the workers and peasants, and for production and construction” (Qian, 1950). During 1966–1976, education was combined with productive labor in service to proletarian politics (Lu, 1958; The Central Committee of CPC & The State Council of PRC, 1958). By the 1990s, “education served the socialist cause, and was integrated with social practices” (Jiang, 2000). Since the turn of the 21st century, the National People's Congress of PRC (2016) has argued that “education must serve the modernization of socialism and the people, and must be combined with productive labor and social practices.” At a national education conference held in 2018, Xi Jinping announced the need to place labor education on par with education in the other four life domains, namely morality, intellect, sports, and aesthetics. This was the first time that labor education was given such importance. Xi Jinping emphasized the need to strengthen labor education and invest further efforts in building an education system that comprehensively “Educating Five Domains Simultaneously” (五育并举) to cultivate citizens capable of enhancing and developing socialist China (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). Promulgating *China's Education Modernization 2035*, in 2019, the Chinese government began advancing education policies centered on themes of “methods to reform general high school education” and “intensifying reforms in education and teaching to comprehensively improve the quality of compulsory education” (General Office of the State Council of PRC, 2019; The Central Committee of CPC & The State Council of PRC, 2019; Xinhua News Agency, 2019a). These

directions have provided new ways in which to interpret the meaning of labor education in the new era while advancing new requirements and deployments for the reform and development of labor education in China. Indeed, the “novelty” of labor education in the new era is fully reflected in its objectives, methods, and contents.

## **Objectives: Education “for the workers”**

The primary question of education is “What types of people are to be cultivated?” In terms of educational goals, labor education is designed to cultivate workers. Its motives are to nurture the comprehensive and harmonious development of human physical and mental capabilities. According to Marx, the essence of humans is the ensemble of all social relations (Marx, 1845). Humans form and develop social relationships through the course of productive labor and social practices. In the 1950s, there was a huge demand for production and construction talent in China to help establish socialism. Mao Zedong argued that “our educational policies should enable the students to achieve development in moral and intellectual education, sports, and other aspects, and become cultural workers who are conscious of socialism” (1957, p. 226).

Following the country’s reform and opening-up, and in response to the development of the times, this idea was elevated to “cultivating the builders and successors of socialism” (Jiang, 1990; The Eighth National People’s Congress of the PRC, 1995). The fundamental task in the development of a contemporary Chinese society is the building of a modern country that is prosperous, powerful, democratic, civilized, and harmonious. To achieve social development, there is an urgent need to strengthen labor education and cultivate high-quality workers who are knowledge-based, technically competent, and innovative.

In regard to school education, labor education constitutes an important component of education for students’ comprehensive development. It has irreplaceable and unique educational importance in cultivating the core values of and abilities in labor, as well as improving labor literacy. Marx believed that future education should combine productive labor with instruction and gymnastics, arguing that this was “not only one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but the only method of producing fully developed human beings” (1867, p. 317). The integration of labor, moral, intellectual, sports, and aesthetic education will strengthen students’ education in life practices, labor techniques, and vocational experiences (The Central Committee of CPC & The State Council of PRC, 2019).

According to the policy paper, labor education is believed to enhance social relations and develop students’ moral qualities. It can also cultivate passion among youths regarding labor and production, temper their wills, and improve their abilities to pursue truth and creativity, thereby enhancing their intellects. Students are also encouraged to produce and shape beautiful works to hone their aesthetic abilities, thus enabling them to experience the values and strengths of life through aesthetics. Labor

education in the new era must “enhance the spirit of labor, and strengthen the cultivation of practical, hands-on, collaborative, and innovative capabilities” (Xinhua News Agency, 2019a). Labor is the means through which to develop an individual’s morality, increase their wisdom, strengthen their body, cultivate their sense of aesthetics, and enhance their innovativeness (Ministry of Education et al., 2015). Labor education instills the habit of and passion for labor, while providing the necessary skills (General Office of the State Council of PRC, 2019). Accordingly, labor education ensures comprehensive physical and mental development.

## **Contents: Education “about labor”**

Labor is the most basic and important means of human existence and possesses its own unique educational values (Qu & Liu, 2019). In contemporary society, growing demands for productive labor have resulted in the need to improve the quality of workers. This has led to an increasingly close relationship between education and labor. The connotations of labor education have changed in accordance with the evolution of productive labor, as well as scientific and technological developments.

### *Labor skills and technologies education*

Arguing that the division of labor would hinder artisans from acquiring full knowledge of their professions, Marx (1867) advocated the implementation of technological training (the German text refers to this as “polytechnical training”). According to Marx (1866), such training imparts the general principles of all processes of production while initiating youths in the practical use of the elementary instruments of all trades. With the increasing demand for technological innovation in social production, recent exploratory directions for labor education in the new era include a focus on technology, emphasis on practice, and pursuit of innovation (Li & Qu, 2018). As a component of general education, labor education is linked to productive labor. However, it differs from the education provided by vocational and technical schools, which is the singular form of technical education or vocational and technical education. Rather, labor education involves technological education that allows and helps students to (i) understand the general scientific principles behind modern production; (ii) acquire modern skills and knowledge regarding processes, organization of production, and management; as well as (iii) master the skills and techniques required to use work tools and equipment. With such an extensive foundation in technological training, students can achieve complete and harmonious development.

### *Developing creative thinking and capabilities*

Labor is a receptacle for humans’ practical and creative activities. Accordingly, labor education is essentially innovative education (Xu, 2018). Rapid developments in mobile communication and

artificial intelligence technologies have had significant impacts on labor. Indeed, just as machine production replaced manual labor in the industrial revolution, so procedural labor in production processes is increasingly being replaced by robots with artificial intelligence. This has resulted in an increasing need for technological and innovative talent. To a large extent, STEAM and Maker education—markedly popular among youths and students—reflect the requisite innovative features of labor in the new era. Originating in the U.S. in the 1980s, STEAM education has developed into a comprehensive approach integrating education in science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (National Science Board, 1986). STEAM emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and innovative practice and aims to cultivate students' creative, hands-on, and practical abilities. Meanwhile, Maker education is oriented toward the development of creativity, design, and manufacturing in youths. This approach discovers problems and needs through creative actions and practices and strives to find solutions to practical activities. In the process, students excel in creativity to become creators, inventors, and designers.

### *Ideologies of labor*

The fundamental task of education is to develop and cultivate people's abilities, thus elevating them. Labor education guides students' entrance into the labor market, helping them develop a positive attitude toward the reality of labor. Accordingly, labor education in the new era centers on the cultivation of labor values (Tan, 2019), while emphasis is placed on its inherent pedagogic value. Labor education promotes the spirit of labor and labor morality, thus contributing to social construction (Qu, 2019). Labor education promotes students' respect for labor, resulting in the formation of a labor consciousness that views labor as honorable, majestic, mighty, and beautiful. Students also develop an appreciation for labor quality—that is, the virtue of working hard, honestly, and creatively (Xi, 2016). Labor education also serves to hone and temper students' personalities, encouraging the desire and willpower to work hard, overcome difficulties, and dare to struggle—thus helping them develop healthy personalities. Furthermore, labor itself has aesthetic value. In this regard, labor education stimulates students' aesthetic experiences and cultivates their emotional connection to labor, guiding them to enjoy the fruits and pleasures of labor. In doing so, they experience the beauty of labor.

### **Method: Education “through labor”**

Education is a social activity unique to human society. Human education originated from labor and the needs generated by labor practices and was conditional upon the development of human language and consciousness (Kaiipob, 1950). Since its creation, the function of education has been transmitting the production and life-related experiences formed during the labor process. Using “experience” to illustrate the relationship between education and labor, Dewey (1916) defined education as “the continual reorganization, reconstruction, and transformation of

experience” (p. 50). In doing so, he advocated “learning by doing,” establishing “creative workshops” involving the use of various woodworking tools across various grades at the University of Chicago Laboratory School (Mayhew & Edwards, 1965). In the new era, the connotations of “combining education with productive labor” have become even more plentiful, while the means and formats of labor education have become more diversified (He, 2003, pp. 119, 314). These include various types of labor that are production-, service-, and creativity-based (General Office of the State Council of PRC, 2019).

### *Labor education curriculum and teaching*

Specialized courses in labor education should constitute the main means of implementing this type of education. So, it is necessary to design the objectives and contents of the labor education curriculum scientifically based on the physical and mental developmental characteristics of elementary and middle school students. The scientific and technical knowledge and skills of the relevant disciplines required for the cultivation of labor skills and literacy in students of different ages should be systematically designed and developed according to their respective grades. Teaching resources and tools that are compatible with the relevant scientific and technical knowledge and skills should be developed and introduced. Strengthening the curriculumization and systematization of labor education will enhance its purpose and direction. When developing the curriculum resources of labor education in the new era, attention should be paid to the application of new technologies, techniques, and methods. Moreover, it is necessary to ensure effective correlation between the curriculum and local conditions in terms of natural resources so that a diverse range of choices are provided for students’ individualized development based on their personal compatibility with the industrial, agricultural, or commercial sectors.

### *Life at home and in school*

Labor is an important component of life and production. The implementation of the labor education curriculum requires coordination in terms of combining activities in and outside of school as well as a consideration of the diverse forms of labor education applicable to daily life, services, and production. Students’ daily lives encompass the two aspects of family and school. Schools must provide parents with some advice on labor education in the family, and parents should arrange for their children to participate in housework that corresponds with their abilities. Schools must insist on the day-duty system for students and have them conduct various tasks in the school compounds (The Central Committee of CPC & The State Council of PRC, 2019). For instance, elementary and middle school students can sweep and clean the classrooms, perform rostered day duties, assist teachers in preparing the laboratories for lessons, and participate in public welfare activities. Schools should also encourage students to pay attention to the labor opportunities around them.

so that they make good use of the available labor education resources. This includes attending to their own basic tasks in daily life, such as cleaning their rooms, as well as tidying their classroom and schoolyard environments. As such, labor education must be established in everyday life in the school environment, home life, and normal social activities. In this regard, varied forms of practical activities can be organized according to local conditions, such as housework, labor tasks in and outside of school, and voluntary services.

### *Practical activities outside of school*

The implementation of labor education in general elementary and middle schools will inevitably face limitations in terms of the available technology, equipment, environment, and number of professional teachers. To ensure the effective implementation of labor education, schools need to rely on external resources and encourage students to actively participate in practical activities outside of school. In the U.S., STEM education has developed several such implementation approaches, including those related to practice communities, activity design, educational experiences, learning spaces and measurements, and sociocultural environments. These spaces ensure that learners of all ages and types are able to enjoy quality STEM learning experiences (The U.S. Department of Education et al., 2016). In the process of implementing labor education, it is necessary to optimize the curriculum structure for comprehensive practical activities and “ensure that classes related to labor education do not comprise less than half of the total” (The Central Committee of CPC & The State Council of PRC, 2019).

General elementary and middle schools can establish joint cooperation with various external institutions in developing a cluster of experimental zones for labor education, thereby creating a comprehensive mechanism for the sharing of labor education resources. For instance, schools can cooperate with vocational and technical schools to integrate general education with vocational and technical education. Collaborations with relevant organizations in various industries—such as research institutions, colleges, commercial organizations, manufacturing enterprises, farms, creative spaces, and social institutions—will also be beneficial. In addition to breaking through organizational and institutional barriers, such collaborative ventures can aid the establishment of practice bases for labor education outside of schools.

Moreover, positive interactions between labor education and community building can be facilitated by providing students with labor education resources for various professions (Spencer, 2007). The specialized resources and technical strengths of the various organizations can provide students with the appropriate conditions in which to participate in exploratory, comprehensive, and project-based labor. Similarly, arrangements can be made for the pastures, fields, forests, and mountains in the rural areas to become practice bases for learning about agriculture. In this regard, schools in cities and towns should ensure that their students are given opportunities to participate in

agricultural production and gain experiences in the industrial, commercial, and service sectors (The Central Committee of CPC & The State Council of PRC, 2019).

## **Future of labor education in China**

In November 2019, the No. 11 meeting of the CPC Committee on Comprehensively Deepening Reform approved *Opinions on Comprehensively Reinforcing New-Era Labor Education in Primary, Secondary and Higher Education*, which stipulates again that labor education is essential to China's characteristic socialism education, and it should be integrated into the whole process of students' cultivation, spanning across different educational levels and through families, schools, and societies (Xinhua News Agency, 2019b). In constructing a comprehensive labor education system for the new era, close attention must be paid to the impact of intelligent technologies on productive labor and social development. It is essential that society develop its adaptability to new technical labor based on artificial intelligence by cultivating a workforce for the artificial intelligence era, while providing the preparatory workforce with educational opportunities in relevant fields. This will allow all workers to rapidly switch roles in the artificial intelligence era (National Science and Technology Council & Networking and Information Technology Research and Development Subcommittee, 2016).

Meanwhile, the Education Law of the PRC needs to be revised so that "labor education" is incorporated into China's education policies, thus strengthening the legality and rationality of labor education. To meet economic and societal needs in the intelligent era, a system must be established to cultivate the knowledge, abilities, and literacy of workers. In addition to creating a corresponding target system for labor education in schools, guidelines should be formulated for labor education (General Office of the State Council of PRC, 2019; The Central Committee of CPC & The State Council of PRC, 2019). The formulation and implementation of standards for labor education, as well as the corresponding curriculum and instructional documents for teaching, will result in the development of a comprehensive policy system for implementing labor education.

The system through which curriculum content for labor education is developed should integrate multiple disciplines, including science, mathematics, engineering, and art. This should be supported by a resource system for labor education. Students' participation in practical labor activities should be incorporated into the relevant courses in elementary and middle schools and serve as an evaluation criterion of their overall character development. This will create an evaluation system for labor education that is both scientific and rational. Moreover, the education and training of teachers in labor education needs to be improved. This involves revising the structures of their knowledge and abilities to enhance their educational and teaching capabilities. In turn, they can better adapt to the needs of labor education in the new era. Finally, the integrated development of education in and outside of schools should be promoted. Indeed, the educational forces of society as a whole should be mobilized in establishing an open system for labor education with mutual support between schools and society.

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