

# The New Education Initiative: A Transformative Program for Chinese Basic Education

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**Abstract:** *The New Education Initiative (NEI), founded by Professor Yongxin Zhu at Soochow University in 2000, has had a widespread and enduring impact on Chinese basic education. It has transformed the education ecosystem in many regions in China, with its theory and practice inspiring numerous teachers who have suffered excessive pressures under the teaching to test culture. This article is a review of the initiative's background, evolution, and implementation framework and summarizes its major achievements, in the hope of providing implications for future education development in China and beyond.*

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**T**HE EARLY 21st century witnessed worldwide waves of educational reform, which brought systemic transformations to education in multiple dimensions, such as educational philosophy, education policies, and application of educational technology. Every country has launched its own reform initiatives, aiming to build a more open, inclusive, flexible, and innovative ecosystem of education to suit the needs of economic and social development in a fast-changing world (Qian, 2000). Like any other nation, China also saw a surge of innovative experiments in basic education, including but not limited to the New Education Initiative (NEI) founded by Professor Yongxin Zhu, a program championing personal growth and well-being (Zhu, 2019a); the New Basic Education Initiative led by Professor Lan Ye, aiming to construct a student-centered basic education system (Ye, 2006); Dulangkou Middle School's classroom teaching reform, which emphasizes active exploration, cooperation, communication in learning (Ruan, 2009); Beijing National Day School's curriculum reform, pivoted around the concept of personalized education (He & Wu, 2019); Tsinghua University-Affiliated Elementary School's thematic learning, seeking to engage students in interdisciplinary study and practical inquiry for the cultivation of all-round competence and innovative spirit (Li, 2018). This article focuses on the NEI, researching into its theoretical underpinnings, evolution, implementation framework, and major achievements, aiming to showcase its value and significance as an innovative educational experiment.

## **The NIE's Theoretical Underpinnings**

### ***Western New Education Theories***

In 1859, Spencer advanced the question of "what knowledge is the most valuable," which sparked enduring research and debate on the worth of knowledge (Spencer, 2007). As opposed to Spencer's proposition that learning itself is of most worth, Whitehead asserted that education should be based on real-world lives. In his book *The Aims of Education*, Whitehead (2014) writes, "There is only one subject matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations." Based on Russell's statement that diversity is essential to happiness (Russell, 2005), the former Soviet Union's educationist Sukhomlinsky (2010) proposes a pathway to acquiring happiness through education, arguing that education is to help individuals discover their better selves and identify their capacity for creative work, and to enable them to understand and feel human pride.

Inspired by the new philosophies of education, the renowned Scottish educationist Cecil Reddie founded Abbotsholme School in 1889, which

advocates establishing a harmonious, mutually respectful relationship between adults and children, requiring teachers to provide students with an education that focuses on mentorship rather than control. From then on, a host of experimental schools emerged across Europe, such as Bedales School in southern England founded by John Badley in 1893; Westans School in Winchester by Renno Hebe in 1897; the first rural boarding school in Germany by Hermann Lietz in 1898; and the *École des Roches* in France by Edmond Demolins in 1898. In 1921, the New Education Fellowship was established in Calais, France, setting out the core tenets of the new education movement: (i) to center education around children with respect for their individuality and intrinsic potential; (ii) to promote social transformation through education. The establishment of the New Education Fellowship, with its articulation of fundamental principles, had a profound impact on the ensuing development of new education, fostered the exchange and popularization of new education ideas across the world, and accelerated modernization of education in many countries. Also, the child-centered approach and the notion of social transformation through education advocated by the New Education Fellowship have been valuable academic resources for modern education research (Wu, 2008).

## ***Dissemination and Development of the New Education Theory in China***

The dissemination of the new education theory in China began in the early 20th century. In 1912, *My Views on New Education* by Yuanpei Cai was published by *The Education Magazine*, marking the initiation of the introduction of the new education theory in China. In February 1919, the magazine *New Education* was launched in Shanghai, further promoting the new education theory in this country. In July of the same year, Xingzhi Tao delivered his famous speech titled “New Education” at Zhejiang First Normal School, amplifying the concept of new education with more profound connotations. The proposition of “localizing New Education in China” by Zexuan Zhuang in 1929 signals a major step forward in the development of the theory in China (Wang, 2009). In integrating the new education theory with Chinese traditional education culture and introducing it into China’s education system of that time, Chinese educationists developed certain new concepts, such as “life-based education” by Xingzhi Tao, emphasizing close connection between education and life and placing equal weight on teaching, learning, and doing; and “vigorous education” by Heqin Chen, which stresses the dynamic, practical, and creative features of education (Li, 2006).

The NEI, founded by Yongxin Zhu, inherits the Western tradition of new education and Chinese new education theories in the early 20th century,

with a comparable emphasis on the role of education in increasing children's wellbeing, while also seeking to transform the existing education system and drive social advancement (Zhu, 2021a).

## **The Evolution of the NEI**

Professor Zhu and his team embarked on developing the NEI in the late 20th century and officially launched it in 2000. The program was created and promoted by a group of reform-awareness educators with forward-looking vision of education, under the leadership of Zhu. The maturation of the initiative is the result of the team's relentless exploration and practice over the past two decades (Zhu & Wang, 2020).

### ***Preparation Phase (1986-1999)***

In 1986, Zhu, after five years' effort, published his book *A Study of Chinese Educational Philosophy: Achievements and Contributions of Chinese Education Sciences*. This book seeks to summarize the essentials of traditional Chinese educational theories through a meticulous review of classic works by ancient and modern educationists in order to provide implications for contemporary education practices (Zhu, 1993). Two years later, Zhu published another monograph named *Predicaments and Transcendence: A Survey of Contemporary Chinese Education*, which delves into challenges facing the Chinese education world to explore paths for successful transformation of Chinese education (Zhu, 1990).

Drawing on his research experience in Japan, Zhu, in 1990, edited *Contemporary Japanese Education Series*, which thoroughly analyze the characteristics of Japanese education to offer valuable insights for Chinese educational reform, showcasing the editor's broad educational perspective (Zhu & Wang, 1992).

In 1993, Zhu introduced a few teaching reform initiatives when serving as the Dean of Academic Affairs at Soochow University, including "the must-reading list for university students", "the primary and secondary majors system," and "the credit accreditation system." These reform moves garnered much attention and positive comments from the education community.

Based on his extensive theoretical and practical research in education and inspired by Peter Drucker's management theory, Zhu commenced his experiment in education innovation in 1999, laying groundwork for the development of the construct of the NEI (Zhu, 2019b).

### ***Initial Phase (1999-2002)***

Zhu's work experience at Hutangqiao Elementary School in Wujin, Jiangsu, in 1999, where he acted as a mentor for novice teachers as well as a frontline teacher, prompted him to make further efforts to achieve his educational ideals. His *My Educational Ideals*, published in 2000, is an encapsulation of main ideas of the NEI. Its publication marked the official launch of the initiative (Zhu, 2009).

In 2002, the program's cyber platform "Education Online" was set up, which soon gathered a host of school principals and teachers who share the same educational pursuits and dubbed themselves "a group of like-minded educational practitioners." The platform provided them with opportunities for further professional growth. Teacher users of "Education Online" shared their teaching experiences and challenges on the platform, where they could receive feedback and encouragement from peers. These first participants of the NEI experienced substantial professional development and became a potent force for the advancement of the program (Zhu, 2021a).

### ***Expansion Phase (2002-2013)***

The first nine-year New Education experimental school was established in 2002. Subsequently, the program rapidly developed into a NEI network, numbering thousands of experimental schools. The initial NEI implementation framework established by the earliest participants, which consists of "five basic concepts and six actions," was progressively upgraded to become a more complete framework that features "an overarching goal, four changes, five propositions, and ten actions," as a result of the expansion of NEI teaching forces and strengthened NEI research effort (Zhu & Wang, 2020).

Teacher professional development has been a crucial factor in the successful enactment of the NEI implementation framework. The NEI has developed a teacher growth model that supports the teachers' identification with the teaching profession and career development. In this model, "professional reading, writing, and communication" are counted as the three essential elements, serving to be the steppingstones to their continuous career advancements and ongoing pursuit of excellence (Zhu & Yang, 2020).

### ***Maturation Phase (2013 to Present)***

2013's establishment of the New Education Teacher Development Institute was a landmark event in the history of the NEI (Zhu & Wang, 2020). The institute offer free courses, spanning general education and disciplinary knowledge training, to teachers at NEI experimental schools or in the NEI experimental zones, to give them systematic professional support. Also, it regularly sponsors teacher training seminars, peer communication workshops,

and the “Course Demonstration Week” to provide valuable opportunities for teachers to exchange and share expertise and experience (Tao, 2004).

To ensure the quality and effects of the NEI program, the institute developed a third-party evaluation mechanism, which gives objective assessment and timely feedback on its progress, providing solid evidence for future work on its improvement. Also, the institute has been committed to building an online resource bank to realize the wide sharing of curricular resources, aiming to build a mutually beneficial teaching community (Zhu, 2021a).

## **The NEI Implementation Framework**

On the basis of their insights into the essence of education and comprehension of ideal education, Zhu and his research team established “promoting personal growth and well-being of education actors” as the NEI’s overarching goal, emphasizing that the aim of the NEI is two-fold: to foster students’ all-round development, including academic success, physical and mental growth, and emotional and spiritual development; and to support teachers’ pursuit of job satisfaction and professional development to enable them live a fulfilling teaching life (NEI Research Group & Zhang, 2006a). As a result of their two-decades of persistent effort, the NEI research community have developed the NEI Implementation Framework (**Table 1**), which encompasses the NEI’s overarching goal, value orientations, basic principles, and core actions. This framework has served as a solid theoretical base for the NEI’s introduction and implementation (NEI Research Group & Zhang, 2006b).

### ***The Establishment of the NEI’s Overarching Goal***

Initially, the overarching goal of the NEI was represented as “pursuing whole-person education and education for all.” In this expression, “education for all” points to the NEI’s ideal of educational equity and its role as a champion of the right of every child to basic education; “whole-person education” manifests the NEI’s adherence to education for all-round development in students, a practice aimed at promoting the individual’s physical, mental, spiritual growth through multi-dimensional education including moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, labor education, and more.

At 2006’s Sixth NEI Seminar, Professor Zhu proposed to upgrade the initial version of overarching goal to be “promoting personal growth and well-being of education actors,” a more incisive interpretation of the NEI’s spirit (Zhu, 2006). The new expression highlights the value placed on the well-being of the whole education community by the NEI program. Professor Zhu emphasized the NEI’s focus on student all-round development

and teacher professional development, which can be achieved through specific actions, such as building a reading-valued campus, encouraging teacher-student co-writing, and developing interest in the world beyond the campus, to name a few. The revised overarching goal clarifies the direction for NEI's future development.

### ***The Advancement of the Five Propositions***

Educational reform endeavors often begin with the development of transformative ideas. The five basic propositions in the NEI Implementation Framework target the problems with the current education system, aiming to help frontline teachers to break away from outdated, unscientific educational notions (Zhang, 2017). Professor Zhu rates the five propositions as the overriding elements in the theoretical framework of the NEI. According to Professor Zhu's elaboration of them, "teaching knowledge of high value to students' lifelong growth" and "encouraging communication with noble minds in teachers and students" are about the NEI's ethical values, guiding educators to reach higher-order purpose of education, while "promoting mental health by creating successful experiences," "pricing the student's individuality as well as the school's uniqueness," and "having full confidence in the potential of teachers and students" comprise the psychological base of the NEI, stressing the importance of unlocking the potential of teachers and students, cultivating upbeat mentalities in them, and ensuring their rights to individualized growth pathways (Zhu, 2019a)

### ***The Expansion of NEI Actions***

The content and numbers of NEI actions have undergone amplification over the years, resulting in the present 10 ones in the NEI Framework. Based on the five basic propositions, these actions are advanced to ensure the achievement of the overarching goal, i.e., promoting the personal growth and well-being of educators and learners. For example, the action of "forging a desirable classroom environment" aims to create an active, vital learning climate by organizing early-morning recitation, mid-day reading, and late-afternoon reflection of meaningful content that suit the children's interest, and by encouraging students to document their growth stories through writing about classroom experiences. "Cultivating a favorable habit every month" is intended to help students develop habits of lifelong benefits, such as exercising regularly, reading, and keeping diaries. "Creating excellent curricula through research and development" is to motivate teachers to innovate their use of textbooks, in addition to executing the national, regional, and school-based curricula, to make best use of "great knowledge"

to assist the growth of students and themselves (NEI Research Group & Zhang, 2006b).

## **Research, Practice, and Communication**

The NEI was first known as an education research effort and attracted much attention in the education world. In December 2003, the NEI's research project "Introduction and Practice of the New Education Theory" was included as a key project in the "10th Five-Year" National Education Science Development Plan, signaling that the NEI has gained state-level recognition. In 2008, its research project "The New Education Initiative and Competence-Focused Education Strategies" was again selected as a key project by the "11th Five-Year" National Education Science Development Plan, which largely magnified its impact as a significant experiment in Chinese educational reform (Yao, 2012).

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Education of China, Chinese Society of Education, Chinese Society for Tao Xingzhi Studies, and other organizations, the NEI's research outcomes have been put into practice through various devices, such as multi-agency co-ordination, cross-regional collaboration, and project-based cooperation. Particularly, the establishment of NEI experimental zones gave new impetus to the NEI's development. NEI experimental zones have been developed in Rizhao City in Shandong Province, Lanzhou City in Gansu Province, Haimen District of Nantong City in Jiangsu Province, Jiangxian County in Shanxi Province, and many other regions. NEI experiments in these regions have achieved remarkable results, with significant demonstration value for the program's further expansion (Zhu, 2017).

To assist the NEI's advancement, institutions like the Suzhou New Education Research Institute and the Jiangsu Changming Education Foundation (New Education Foundation) have been successively set up, forming a comprehensive system supporting NEI research, training, and development. These institutions are leading various dedicated research teams, such as New Reading Research and New Life Education Research. They all work towards the continual advancement of the NEI, though each with its own research area (Zhu, 2021b)

The NEI community places high value on communication and exchanges in advancing their program. The first NEI seminar took place in 2003 in Kunshan Yufeng Experimental School, the first NEI experimental school. Subsequently, the NEI seminar was held annually by the names of the "New Education Annual Conference," "NEI International Forum," "Sino-American NEI Forum," etc. Each seminar is centered on a distinct theme, such as "teacher-student co-reading, co-writing, and co-living," or "writing the magnificent lives of teachers" and "campus culture, the soul of

the school.” Themes like these not only mirrored the work priorities of the NEI program in different periods but also sparked meaningful conversations in the education world (Zhu, 2021b).

## ***Impacts and Accolades***

As a result of more than two decades of persistent work, the NEI has now become the most impactful non-governmental education reform program, with 196 county-level NEI experimental zones and over 9,000 NEI experimental schools, reaching approximately 8.9 million teachers and students (Zhu, 2022). The program has made a significant change to the educational ecosystem and enhanced the overall quality of education in certain regions while also making distinctive contributions to the improvement of educational equity and access as well as high-quality development of education in China. On the other hand, the NEI’s implementation has had challenges and difficulties in the context of China’s exam-focused culture, where the NEI’s philosophy appears somewhat idealistic with its emphasis on the students’ holistic development as well as their individuality. Moreover, regional disparities in educational resources, funding, and teaching quality also add complications to the spread of the NEI. Addressing these issues warrants not only innovative endeavors of the NEI community but also backing from the government and society at large.

On top of its reputation as a progressive educational program in China, the NEI has also won high praise in the international education community. In April 2014, the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) listed the NEI among the world’s top 15 educational programs in that year, in recognition of its effort to innovate education (Zhu, 2021b). The Yidan Prize, known as the highest education accolade on earth, awarded its Prize for Education Development 2022 to Professor Zhu for his work in improving teaching quality and transforming learning outcomes in China (Zhu, 2022). This accolade is seen as praise for not only Zhu’s creative work but also for the NEI community’s contribution to education development. So far, Zhu’s monographs on education have been translated into 28 languages and published in more than 40 countries in the world. These publications have facilitated the world’s understanding of the NEI, serving as inspirations for his global peers in their educational reform endeavors.

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