

1953

Meetings

Dates of Meeting:

February 1953

Type of Meeting:

1st National Anti-Illiteracy Work Conference

Place of Meeting:

Beijing

Attendance:

Major Agenda Items:

Speeches/Reports:

Conference criticized proponents of the quick literacy method for their naive and 'adventurist' belief that illiteracy could be eliminated on an effortless basis. It was a complex undertaking that could in fact only be accomplished on the basis of 'stable advance'

Despite calling for continued experimentation with the quick literacy method on a carefully controlled basis, this conference actually signalled the collapse of the literacy movement across China. The failure of the quick literacy method strengthened the arguments of professionals within the Ministry of Education that literacy was simply not amenable to campaign- style advances; that only formal schooling could produce stable increases in literacy levels over time; and that therefore all such 'irregular' (bu zhenggui) forms of schooling should be discouraged.

In 1952 regions across the country began to experiment with a new 'quick literacy method' (sucheng shizifa) advocated by a previously obscure cultural commissar in the Yunnan garrison of the PLA. The 'quick literacy method' was briefly touted as a miracle cure for illiteracy: its creator claimed to have taught illiterate army recruits in Yunnan 1,500 characters in the amazingly brief space of just fifteen days, and to have replicated the results among more than 12,000 soldiers. In subsequent weeks and months localities responded to the central state's endorsement of the 'quick literacy method'. The patently exaggerated claims made by local cadres reflected the pressure for quantitative results that was characteristic of campaigns in general. Tianjin factory workers claimed that the method enabled them to learn 2,000 characters in a mere twenty-three days; textile workers in Sichuan claimed to have done the same in just twenty-one days, and so on. Within six months of its inception, however, the quick literacy method was all but dismissed as a hoax.

Other Decisions and/or Actions:

Remarks: