

FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING ON EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND REFORMS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Educational policy generating 21st-century skills is accelerating, but Chinese education still employs traditional teaching such as memorizing and test-based instructional practices. The pencil and paper tests, no matter how sophisticated, are hard-pressed to measure interpersonal, intrapersonal skills, and the penetration of educational core values into secondary schools internationally, which is weak. This article aims to navigate the secondary school challenges and proposed reforms through analyzing the over 20 years of the author's experience. Findings show that high stakes cause teachers, school principals, parents, and students to disincentivize deeper learning. The exam-oriented teaching and learning approach causes students who might obtain a high score but lower functional performance. Parents' high hopes cause educational inequality and restrict students to develop their skills. Worse, the school principal utilized the power and authority in leading school development and evaluated teachers' performance based on students' test scores that force teachers to demand students to complete the mock practices and test. Because of test-based accountability, the study suggested that secondary school in China necessitates to abolish the "Gaokao" system instead of using a whole-personal assessment. The school leadership needs to shift from bureaucratic management to transformational, Junzi, and adaptive leadership. School principals advocate parents' commitment and deliver a quality of education to secondary school students. Therefore, future research explores how the "Gaokao" system causes inequality and impacts 21st-century skills for secondary school students' academic, emotional, and behavioral development through a comparative mixed research design.

KEYWORDS

21st century skills, Secondary School, Educational Policy, Gaokao, China

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is to cultivate students to enhance their 21st-century skills, including technical information, communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving [1], facing the challenges in using the technological industry 4.0 [2]. Through a transformative learning approach, education aims to encourage students to understand the meaning of life in mind through learning [3]. A transformative learning describes how the educators transform how they experience, conceptualize, and interact with the world to young students [4]. With transformative learning, students could shape their life values, both internal and external, in advocating honesty, responsibility, and contribution to society with self-sacrifice and dedication [5, 6].

Although the Ministry of Education in China had issued educational guidelines 2035 project and advocated suzhi education, the school still used the traditional exam-oriented teaching and learning approach in increasing students' test-based accountability [7]. All teachers, students, parents, and school principals utilize the factory-style training method to compel students to fulfill homework and mock test preparation, helping students pass the national college entrance exam with a higher score [8]. A higher score yields students ample opportunities to receive a top university offer and have a tremendous future professional career [9]. These conditions lead teachers, students, parents, and school principals to focus on test-driven accountability in teaching students to engage their learning goals [10]. Although educational policy generates 21st-century skills, sometimes called deeper learning, is accelerating, Chinese education still tends to use the traditional teaching such as memorizing and test-based instructional practice [11]. The pencil and paper tests, no matter how sophisticated, are hard-pressed to measure interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and the penetration of 21st-century skills into secondary schools internationally remains weak [8].

High stakes cause teachers to disincentivize deeper learning and narrow students' success. The educational policy addressed suzhi education as a core term all over China [12, 13]. Suzhi refers to the relatively stable quality structure due to knowledge internalization, based on the inherent gifts and influenced by transformative learning and social and educational environment [14]. Suzhi education helps one improve their comprehensive suzhi by longtime personality edifying, knowledge accumulating, ability training, practice, reflection, and internalization [15, 16]. Therefore, this study aims to navigate the secondary school challenges and educational reform in China through analyzing the author's personal experiences as a teacher and school principal from 2000 to 2020 in mainland China and overseas.

2. CHALLENGES OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

2.1. Higher Passing Score, but Lower Performance

Most Chinese secondary schools in mainland China aim to help students pass their national college exams and expect their students to enroll in the top universities. Receiving college offers from top universities through "Gaokao" is the goal of all students, parents, classroom teachers, school principals, and school staff [6]. The Gaokao, recognized as the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), is a large-scale aggressive and selective test, discovering which testers qualify for college. This gaokao machine influenced primary and secondary education, even previously, such as kindergarten in China. Therefore, the gaokao creates a ripple impact by way of the potential of being one of the requirements used to determine whether or not a student attends a particular college. It is common that most secondary schools may only have the opportunity to send one or two students to the top universities, such as Peking University [17]. Students could even not receive any college offers from the leading universities no matter how they receive the factory-style training from the schools. [18]. For example, I selected a quote from my observation journal log, which I noted on the 25th, September 2017. The selection was that one of the vice principals said that "I have been trying my best to work with teachers and parents for five years. However, I still have no chance to send one student to Peking University. I hope I have this chance". This quote indicated that the secondary high school principals always expect they have a chance to send at least one student to the top university. Sending students to the top university increases the school's social reputation and always be welcomed by parents and the community. Besides, one of the teachers said that my goal is to help the students to reach their highest score. I selected the quotes from my journal reflective log, which I noted on the 16th, May 2018. The teacher said: "I always give the mock tests. I expect my student can get the

highest score in the college national entrance exam." Therefore, I confirmed that they pay too much attention to the results on testing.

The schools maintain and increase its reputation, teachers' qualifications, quality of education, and the principals' leadership through students' test results assessment. The testing score is the primary indicator to judge school performance [17]. In my observation journal log noted on 15th October 2016, one of the parents said that "I believe if the school can help students pass the exam with the higher score. With a higher score, the students could enter the top university, such as Peking University. I can say the school is a good school for me. I want to send my children to study there." This educational assessment could not nurture students to develop their independent competency, including problem-solving, critical thinking, personal life value, and positioning [19]. The target of high-scoring teaching and learning causes students to face pressure, dropout, be suicidal, and mislead educational core values in China.

2.2. Parents' High Hope Misleads Quality of Education

Many Chinese parents expect their children to have a chance to pursue their studies in prestigious schools. They believe that the top schools could cultivate their children to become outstanding and lead people in society with prestigious jobs [8]. That is why parents usually neglect their children's interests and force them to study to pass the exam. Within a top testing score, they assume that their children have a chance to receive an offer from the top schools. Usually, parents expect their children to study in the top schools, but they do not pay much attention to their children's needs and interests within their potential talents. Since they expect their children to have a chance to study in the top schools, parents bear the high tuition fee to send their children to learn in the intensive training centers after school. The parents expect the school or the training centers could nurture their children to pass the exam and enroll in the top universities [16]. For example, one of the parents said: "I just want my children to get the highest score. I recognize who is the best teacher. I just evaluate them based on children's testing scores. I believe the higher score shows higher performance." This quote was noted on 23rd November 2017, while I visited one of the top high schools in northern China. This misconception causes parents less time to participate in their children's learning and growth. Therefore, such a family education needs to develop lifelong learning and enhance their skills to contribute their knowledge, expertise, and abilities to help their children holistically.

Even though the school has advanced educational technology and professional teachers, the exam-oriented teaching approach could not help students discover their potential talents and achieve their learning goals [18]. This learning and teaching educational environment could not support students to enhance their skills, aside from passing the exam with a higher score. Only if the students pass the exam with a higher score could ensure they have a great future?

However, parents disregard the core value of learning goals in education. Education is to cultivate students' skills, knowledge, and life values, ensuring that they could make a better life in the future [20]. Since parents only expect to see the higher exam score, they did not pay much attention to their children's needs and learning interests. For example, most traditional Chinese families force their children to follow their family plans and neglect their interests and real-life goals individually. Besides passing the exam with a high score, students wondered where they go, what they need, how they need to do, and why they need to study and where their lives should be [21]. Since parents neglect their children's interests and needs, they impel them to accomplish the school assignment such as homework. This condition makes children lose interest and personal life goal. It is because that learning for students is to pass the exam with a higher score [12]. Therefore, it is a pity for students, parents, teachers, and school principals to advocate high stakes testing in education in China.

In addition, high expectations from parents cause students dishonesty on learning. For instance, some students might cheat in an exam. Parents' high expectation discourages their children in learning and also cause them to be unable to face their education and life challenges. Their high expectation restricts students' learning in developing their 21st-century educational skills [22]. Specifically, not all students could achieve their parents' expectation. As a result, students encounter too many pressures, such as, suicidal tendencies and negative sentiments [23]. Finally, high scores might not guarantee students enter a prestigious school and have a prosperous future. Conversely, high expectation causes students to lose confidence, trust, commitment, and anticipation in life.

2.3. Weak Leadership Causes Limitation of Professional Development and Quality of Education

Since the lower of teachers' salaries constricts school to hire highly qualified teachers, teachers in the exam-oriented educational environment could not supervise students to mature their skills, such as creativity, critical ability, trust, and problem-solving skills [24]. School leaders also tend to use bureaucracy management and limit teachers, students, and staff to discover a new learning strategy. Without a new design, teachers, students, parents, and school principals might have less opportunity to develop students' skills and evaluate their teaching performance fairly.

As a result, teachers may receive inequitable treatment in salaries because of bureaucracy and interpersonal social-cultural school contexts. The authoritative bureaucracy makes teachers unwilling to devote themselves to educate the young generation in the classroom [25]. This viewing might increase the rate of teacher turnover and principal turnover.

Although school leaders are afraid of teacher to redesign their job in the competitive labor market, they still treat teachers differently in the real workplace. If the school leaders want to maintain teacher commitment and reduce the rate of teacher turnover, they should offer equal treatment among the school stakeholders, including teachers, school principals, and staff. By doing so, the school leaders could create a trust-based supportive learning community [26]. Without this, schools have no ways to help students become elite [7].

Consequently, the bureaucratic management system causes insufficient support, fairness, justice, and dedication in teaching [27]. Since teachers, students, school principals, and parents could not trust each other because the school evaluation only depends on test-based accountability [28]. This situation causes teachers with no interest and motivation to continuously sharpen their educational research skills to effectively guide students to accomplish their learning goal.

2.4. Common Core Curriculum Limits Creative Implementation in School

Since lacking the funding and academic research team resources, most secondary schools used the national standard core curriculum and textbooks [29]. Utilizing the national core curriculum and textbooks restrains the school's ability to create a new curriculum in terms of students' needs and talents. This phenomenon indicates that many secondary schools might have no ability to create their school curriculum and organize a research team because of the lack of funding. Also, the goal of secondary school is to expect students to pass the national college entrance exam [30]. Therefore, classroom teachers require students always to take the mock test daily. This type of teaching may cause students to lose creativity and motivation for lifelong learning.

3. THE ROAD OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

In the 21st century, education is to cultivate students to develop skills to face the challenges in using the technological industry 4.0 and advocate education for lifelong learning through three types of reform in the exam-oriented educational environment below[31].

3.1. Implementing the Current “Gaokao” College Entrance Assessment System

The college entrance examination system called "Gaokao" causes teachers, school principals, and parents to force students to do mock tests[32]. Students, teachers, and parents believe that the students could increase their test scores through mock practice starting from Grade 10 to Grade 12. Students spent three years doing simulated exercises in order to pass the national college entrance examination with a higher score in the competitive learning environment. This "Gaokao" schooling misleads students, parents, teachers, and principals to develop students' potential ability and enhance their 21st-century skills[33]. China's educational environment helps students pass high stakes testing and neglect the academic core values such as independent thinking ability, critical ability, responsibility, and trust. Therefore, this "Gaokao" system needs to modify and implement because education is for whole-person cultivation. Since the "Gaokao" system mightnot help teachers develop students' critical and innovative skills, the school needs to propose the whole-person assessment for college entrance or advocate various opportunities to the students when choosing what types of colleges, they may expect to study [8, 34].

3.2. Justice and Equality Replace the Interpersonal Recruitment and Performance Bias in Assessment

Due to China's bureaucratic management system and interpersonal culture, some schools might recruit new employees through school interpersonal networks, limiting the school selected highly qualified teachers. The bureaucratic management causes the school to lack justice, respect, and collaboration because the top leaders decide what the students and teachers need to follow[35]. This educational environment cause teaches to lose their creativity, as well as students losing their critical ability. Interpersonal culture causes inequality, such as salaries and welfare in school[36]. Therefore, school principals need to propose justice and equality assessment instead of using the interpersonal contextual social-cultural mindset.

3.3. Enhancing the Quality of Education Through Leadership Reform and Family Commitment

School principals need to shift from the authoritarianism, rationalism, and interpersonal relationship to transformative leadership, Junzi leadership, family commitment, and adaptive leadership in developing students 21st-century skills [37]. Educational leaders need to develop students' creativity, cohesion, perseverance, and responsibility for lifelong learning. Also, school principals need to transform students into empathy and compassion in contributing to what they learn to make a great community[8, 38]. Therefore, transformative leadership, Junzi leadership, and family commitment need to propose in Chinese secondary schools.

4. CONCLUSION

Chinese secondary schools in China could welcome a new page only if the school principal, teachers, parents, and students could work together to implement the current "Gaokao" system [6]. The "Gaokao" system limits school reform, causes injustice, inequality, and makes students

lack creativity, critical ability, and collaboration[39-41]. Therefore, future education research aims to address the "Gaokao" system from the perspectives of parents, teachers, school principals, and students through a comparative mixed research design. Another study may focus on the consequences of the differences in students' skill levels through data-driven pedagogical content knowledge design for 21st-century deep learning.

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