

The Educational Purpose of the Chinese National College Entrance Examination

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ABSTRACT. *This essay aims to discuss the content of the Chinese National College Entrance Examination system under the theme of educational purposes and policy. In the meantime, the issue of maintaining the social justice and equity in education is also taken into consideration. The first section of the essay will describe how the CEE related to the educational purpose and policy. The second section will present the theoretical approaches found in Foucault (Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison, 1979) and Biesta (Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education, 2009) that have contributed to understanding the educational purposes of CEE. The final part of the essay will compare the two theoretical approaches and articulate a more preferred and persuasive one.*

KEYWORDS: *Educational purpose, Chinese national college, Entrance examination*

1. Introduction

The past forty years have witnessed a burgeoning development of education in China. The establishment of the Chinese National College Entrance Examination (CEE) was in 1952. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the CEE experienced the period of abolition (Liu and Liu, 2017). Since the resumption of the CEE in 1977, the College Entrance Examination System has become the most attention-grabbing topic of the society which is profoundly associated with the individual development and education (Guo and Zhu, 2014). The CEE is an annual examination which served as a crucial test to select high-qualified students for college enrolment (Zhang, 2016). The reason for the fierce competition in CEE is due to the contradiction between the scarcity of higher education resources and the great demand of the high-quality education in China (Du, 2007). In 2017, over nine million candidates had participated in the CEE for the sake of getting the admission of the university (Report of the College Entrance Examination, 2017). To some degree, the fierce competition in the CEE contributes to the formation and development of the exam-oriented education in China (Zheng, 2007). According to Du (2007), the purpose of the National College Entrance Examination system was to systematically select and cultivate the qualified personnel. The policy of the CEE plays an important role in the stability and the prosperity of the country.

2. The Educational Purpose and the Chinese National Entrance Examination

There is a tight connection between education and examination. The Examination is one of the most prevalent practices of education while it is also a fundamental form of the educational procedure (Schröder and Thompson, 2015). The Chinese National College Entrance Examination is one of the most influential tests in China. The National Higher Education Meeting held in 1950 indicated that the higher education and the College Entrance Examination policy aimed at knowledge popularization, capability development and talent cultivation (Du, 2007). The CEE is a unified and standardized examination holds in June each year. In the perspective of social justice, the CEE is based on the equity. It provides an equal opportunity for the students in competing to acquire higher education resources. Scholar indicates that the CEE provides a possible chance for the people from vulnerable groups or lower social class to escalate their social status and improve their qualities of life (Zhang, 2016). For the people from the middle or lower class, passing the CEE and acquiring the opportunity for the higher education is an important means to raise their social status. However, the gap between the development of education in the urban and rural area has made an influence on the students' performance in the CEE. The uneven distribution of educational resources restricts the equity of educational opportunity for the students from the rural area (Du, 2007). Moreover, the imprecise mark adding policy of the CEE fails in view of

fairness. For instance, the students with the identity of minority ethnicity possess a privilege of acquiring the awarded marks. In fact, the admission of college is vastly determined by the candidates' score of the College Entrance Examination. Therefore, for access to the opportunity of acquiring a better higher education, achieving a good performance in the College Entrance Examination has become the first and most important target for numerous students (Zhang, 2016). As a result, to some extent, the students' concentrations on exam preparation partly intensify the formation of an exam-oriented education. On the other hand, a league table according to the rank of enrolment rate of college is made as a referential medium to evaluate the educational quality of schools (Lu, Tang and Luo, 2007). The schools' overemphasis on higher college enrolment rate and the students' yearning aspiration for a higher score of CEE facilitate the extension of the exam-oriented education. The preparation for the CEE and exam-oriented education impose heavy pressure on the students since the test has become the means by which a person's value would be defined (Kirkpatrick and Zang, 2011). Owing to the rigid and uniform educational standard, the exam-oriented education and the excessive emphasis on CEE achievement, the students' innovation and imagination are gradually stifled (Jacob, 2006). Seeking a high score seems to become the top priority and goal to a large number of students. However, the educational purpose should not be limited by the score of an examination. It is insufficient and inappropriate to measure or judge a student as failure or success through a single and structured examination. The exam-oriented education may lead to the neglect of social justice, equity and humanism. For this reason, recognizing the educational purpose and policy is particularly important which could be conducive to identify the direction of the educational processes and practices.

3. The Theoretical Approach of Foucault

The establishment of the Chinese National College Entrance Examination is an inevitable outcome of the particular circumstance and social needs (Du, 2007). School is an integral and inseparable part of the society. Hence, it is infeasible to conduct the study on the educational purposes, policy and orientation of the education deviated from the social reality. Michel Foucault, a famous French philosopher and social theorist, had made an in-depth study of the society, discipline, schools and examination. The following section will illustrate some of the key theoretical concepts of Foucault and discuss the theory related to the dimension of education and examination.

Discipline is widespread in the society. According to Foucault (1979), discipline was a particular technique of a power which could shape people's pattern of behaviour and made a transformation in a modest and calculated way. Different from the traditional sovereign force, discipline refers to a mechanism of power that invades and manipulates people's mind and actions in an imperceptible but influential means. There are three important instruments of discipline: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and the examination (Foucault, 1979). Bowdridge and Blenkinsop (2011) pointed out that the in-depth understanding of Foucault's theoretical concept of discipline could be helpful to avoid the formation of the educator's hegemonic power.

3.1 Hierarchical Observation

The execution of discipline could not be separated from the hierarchical observation (Foucault, 1979). The hierarchical observation is a scrupulous apparatus for surveillance. The means of observation is widely used in different locations and architectures including the military camp, the parade ground, hospital buildings, prisons and school buildings. In the great workshops, factories and teaching process, a more specific system of hierarchical supervision embody a further and rigorous surveillance. Multiple methods of surveillance including the setting of different levels of supervisors are integrated into the educational environment and relationships. The hierarchical observation forms an ubiquitous network of surveillance which empowers the discipline to make an internal to external influence as an integrated system (Foucault, 1979). In the contemporary education in China, the mechanism of hierarchical observation is in an extensive use. The phenomenon of exam cheating will seriously destroy the discipline and result in the inequity. In order to prevent cheating in the CEE, video cameras are installed in the examination halls. Any mobile communication facilities or books are prohibited to bring into the exam room. During the period of examination, there are sufficient invigilators carrying out the responsibility for surveillance. Bowdridge and Blenkinsop (2011) believed that a constant observation was contributed to maintaining the discipline. According to Foucault (1979), the widespread and continuous hierarchical observation reminded people to keep alert in order to increase their efficiency. Through the surveillance of hierarchical observation, the discipline provides a mechanism for the examination and the education to maintain smooth operation.

3.2 Normalizing Judgement

According to Foucault (1979), five distinct operations were included in the content of normalizing judgement. Firstly, the punitive function or punishment will be given when the disciplinary apparatus is violated in order to make the violator to understand the offence. Secondly, the punishing is a specific way of discipline which helps to build an order and regulation. Thirdly, the punishment of discipline is conducive to reduce gaps and conduct introspection. Fourthly, reward, as an opposite element to the punishment, equips the mechanism of discipline with the function of encouraging correlation and making progress. Finally, the division of grades or ranking identifies the gaps and creates a hierarchy. At the same time, the ranking has the two-sided function including punishing and rewarding.

The setting of explicit regulations of punishment and rewards enables people to understand their offence, enhances the initiatives and encourages the correction. According to the normalizing judgement, the ranking points out the disparity between differences and makes the hierarchical division. In the disciplinary aspect, the existence of norms indicates the standards and rules which helps to build an order, identify the differences and impose homogeneity. The implementation of normalizing judgement provides measurement and principles to judge and impose a restriction upon the individuals as an instrument of power.

The influence of normalizing judgement is deeply rooted in the process of education. Students obey the regulation of the school to maintain the order. Moreover, the ranking is used as a frequently-used instrument to stimulate the competition among students. Taking on the role as an imperative measurement, the pervasive utilization of normalizing judgement and discipline helps to maintain the order of the society. By means of the establishment of norms and the norms' transformation to a kind of standard in judging an individual, the controlling power of discipline is maintained (Bowdridge and Blenkinsop, 2011). In fact, the CEE is similar to a large-scale of competition and ranking. The CEE results decide whether the candidates could capture the opportunity for higher education or not. Due to the scarcity of higher education resources, the allocation of the admission is depending on the CEE score. This ranking mechanism could be regarded as a kind of normalizing judgement.

3.3 Examination

Foucault (1979) indicated that examination was a mechanism which possesses the function of hierarchical observation and the normalizing judgement. Different from the ostentatious display of traditional power, the examination interweaves the subjects in a mechanism of objectification. Furthermore, Foucault (1979) considered that the rise of the examining education was the mark of the beginning of the age of scientific pedagogy. As one of the core mechanism of discipline, the examination is the integration of the ritual power, the experimental forms, the arrangement of force and the recognition of truth. Under the effect of discipline and examination, the individualization is descending by the anonymous implementation of power. On the other hand, through the process of examination, the writing and the documents have become a means of surveillance.

Macmillan (2009) had conducted a study on Foucault's theory of examination. Macmillan (2009) agreed that the examination was an instrument to measure the individual qualification and make a classification. He considered the examination as core technique which could greatly help to understand and estimate the power of individual constraint. With the purpose of dominating people's behaviour and acquiring the expected outcome, the examination imposes the relation of power and the production of knowledge to the individual (Macmillan, 2009). Furthermore, persevering in punishing the deviation and defining regulation, the discipline is a surveillance focusing on people's behaviour and thought.

The extensive implementation of the examination enhances the power and influence of discipline. The CEE, as the most popular examination in China, is one of the most influential examinations to the individual and society. The generalization of the CEE enables the teachers to impart the knowledge to the students and guarantees such kind of knowledge movement in the educational system. The individual disparity could be observed in the comparison of the score of the exam. The examination could supervise and facilitate the learning of students, increase the competition between individuals and make an effect on the sustaining of the disciplinary order of the schools in an unconscious way. For the purpose of contributing to cultivate people's self-regulation and construct a disciplinary society, the role of education and examination is particularly important.

4. The Theoretical Approach of Biesta

In order to have a deeper exploration of the educational purpose and policy, the theoretical approach of Biesta provides another different vision of understanding the education. Educational purpose is an integrated and comprehensive issue. Biesta (2009) indicated that it was necessary to understand and distinguish the three functions of education before the discussion about the educational purpose which would be helpful to constitute a comprehensive understanding of education. The three different but related functions of education are qualification, socialisation and subjectification.

4.1 Qualification

The qualification is one of the crucial functions of education which equips the students with technical ability, knowledge and understanding (Biesta, 2009). According to Guilherme, Steren dos Santos and Spagnolo (2017), qualification meant that people were qualified to complete a certain task or activity under the influence of education. Education cultivates the labour force, makes the labourers acquire the capability which contributes to the development of economy and society. Education is burdened with the responsibility for educating and shaping the students. By acquiring the education, the students obtain the knowledge related to politics, culture, living techniques and other different kinds of basic or comprehensive knowledge. Furthermore, the education enables people to acquire the ability of learning. Knowledge and skills are transferred to the students in the process of teaching and learning. In the same manner, the College Entrance Examination exerts influence on the empowerment of qualification. The CEE motivates the students' learning initiative and the enhancement of individual comprehensive quality. A vast store of knowledge is not enough to achieve in the CEE. The broad scope of the CEE requires the students to possess a comprehensive capability including reading, writing, listening, speaking, calculating and critical thinking. The CEE, as an important constituent part of education, is making great efforts to equip the students with various abilities. The CEE's function of qualification helps to make the individual and social progress.

4.2 Socialisation

By accepting education, people are linked to the different aspects of the society including cultural, political, social and other elements (Biesta, 2009). In the educational process of spreading value, religion, traditional culture, social convention and regulation, people become a part of the society. Biesta (2009) indicated that education was not neutral. The education was the representative of particular perspectives. The education's function of socialisation makes a significant influence of cultural and traditional continuation. The socialisation refers to the profound interrelation between the people's cognition and the world (Guilherme, Steren dos Santos and Spagnolo, 2017). Moreover, the socialisation could understand as the individuals' integration to the society (Oral, 2016).

The education is not isolated from the society and culture. Students are an integral part of the surrounding historic, social structure and the human interaction. There are different subjects in the CEE including Chinese, English, Mathematics, comprehensive liberal art and comprehensive science. The setting of the examination is deeply connected with the teaching content. Students are required to learn and accumulate the knowledge of history, politics, geography, physical, chemistry, biography in school which establishes a connection between the students and the society. However, compared with the other educational forms such as outdoor practical activities, experiments and interaction, the socialisation function of the CEE still needs improvements.

4.3 Subjectification

Subjectification is one of the functions of education which enables the individual to become a subject. Education makes an impact on the individual. According to Biesta (2009), students acquired the quality of independence, initiative, creativity and self-autonomy in the process of education. As the basic unit of the community, individuals are connected but unique. Under the influence of education, with the accumulation of knowledge and skills, the ability of independence is cultivated. Rodgers and Scott (2008) indicated that respecting and developing the learners' diversity was significant in education. Attaching importance on the subjects of education contributes to the cultivation of individual's independent thinking. Oral (2016) regarded the subjectification as a process to be a subject which meant an individual's independent capability-building when

going through the existing order.

In fact, the CEE is a standard and unified examination served for the college admission selection. Following the unified standard and rules may tend to the descending of subjectification. In a certain sense, compare with the system of CEE, the independent recruitment of college could be more considerate to the cultivation of subjectification.

4.4 Comparison

After having an understanding of the two theoretical approaches, the Foucault's approach related to the discipline offers more convincing and explanatory power for the purpose of the College Entrance Examination. Examination, as one of the most prevalent practices of education, plays an important role in the procedure of education. According to the theoretical approach of Foucault (1979), the examination is the significant instruments of discipline. Hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and the examination, by means of these three instruments, discipline permeates different domains of life. Discipline is deep-rooted in the society. The influence of discipline takes place throughout the daily life and the process of production and education. Foucault (1979) mentioned that discipline was a power which makes and shapes the individual by different means of instruments. Firstly, the illustration of the arrangement of the College Entrance Examination could be a sufficient demonstration of the implement of discipline. The application of the hierarchical observation could be easily found in the examination room: the installation of the video camera, the setting of the examination invigilators and the separate seating arrangements. The hierarchical surveillance aims to prohibit the cheating in the CEE in order to maintain the discipline and sustain the equity in the examination. Secondly, in the aspect of normalizing judgement, the marking and grading of the CEE follow a unified and standard value. The result will be shown to the candidates as a score. The higher or lower ranking among the score could make an influence on the college enrolment. Due to the scarcity of the higher education resources, the poor performance in CEE may result in the absence of the college offer which is similar to a kind of punishment. Thirdly, the CEE refers to a kind of examination which is an instrument of discipline to investigate the disparity between individual. The CEE served for the selection of the enrolment. With the implement of the policy of CEE, the power of discipline is realised which is also conducive to maintain the stability and the prosperity of the country. The examination, as one of the instruments of discipline, is making its efforts to construct a disciplined order of the society. The theoretical approach of Foucault (1979) offered a clear framework for understanding the educational purpose of the CEE in the perspective of discipline. Being designed to assist in the knowledge popularization, capability development and talent cultivation, the ultimate purpose of the CEE is to provide assistance with the maintenance of social and educational discipline which is in accordance with the disciplinary society.

On the other hand, the theoretical approach of Biesta (2009) explored the education in the aspect of function. The qualification, socialisation and subjectification are empowered to the people who are engaged in education. Education has the function of equipping the individual with knowledge. Similarly, the establishment of the College Entrance Examination aims to facilitate the improvement on people's comprehensive quality. According to Biesta (2009), in the process of education, people became an integrated part of the society while they were also possessed their own autonomy as an independent subject. However, the function of socialisation and subjectification seems not have much of a deep reflection in the CEE. Since the objective questions take up most in quantities and marks in the content of the CEE, on the contrary, the subjective questions occupy a less proportion of the exam. The setting of 'the standard answer' might go against the cultivation of innovation and independent thinking skills. To a large extent, following the standard and unified marking standard and rules of the CEE may lead to the neglect of people's diversity and uniqueness. Furthermore, people are not allowed to talk or communicate in the process of the CEE. Their seat arrangement is separated to guarantee the candidate to accomplish the examination independently. There is stringent regulation throughout the process of the examination to guarantee the equity of competing including limited time and severe surveillance. As a result, the form of the examination seems less satisfied with the function of socialisation. The College Entrance Examination is more like an instrument of discipline rather than an activity emphasising on socialisation and subjectification.

The CEE refers to a specific disciplinary assessment for evaluating people's capability in order to carry out the selected procedure for higher education admission. At the same time, the extensive implementation of the CEE facilitates and motivates the individual development in education. However, it is insufficient and inappropriate to measure or judge a student as failure or success through a single and structured examination. Giving more consideration to the functions of socialisation and the subjectification would be beneficial to enhance the comprehensive development of individuals.

5. Conclusion

As the fundamental form of educational procedure, the examination is closely related to the education. This essay focuses on exploring the Chinese National College Entrance Examination and its educational purpose. Different theorists hold a different way of comprehending. The theoretical approach of Foucault demonstrates that the implementation of hierarchical observation, the normalizing judgements and the examination. Both of them are served for the discipline as instruments. The characteristic of discipline deeply existed in the process of the CEE. The examination promotes the construction of a disciplinary society. On the other hand, Biesta analyses the three function of the education including qualification, socialisation and subjectification. After the comparison, the Foucault's theoretical approach to discipline is more appropriate to explain the educational purpose of the College Entrance Examination in the perspective of discipline. Based on the equity, the College Entrance Examination provides opportunities for the students in competing to acquire higher education resources. The implementation of the examination is also a particular form to maintain the discipline of the society.

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