

Persistence and Change: Evolution of the Definitions of “Education” in the Past 40 Years After China’s Reform and Opening-Up*

Fan Ning-xue

Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

In 1978, China began its reform and opening-up, the year 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of China’s reform and opening-up. During 40 years, significant changes have taken place in all areas of society, including education. In China, the different definitions of “education” in important bibliographies and textbooks are important reflection of the changes in national educational policies. This paper lists and explains the representative definitions of “education” which appeared in the history of Chinese education in the past 40 years in chronological order. The study finds that although each definition has something different in expression, the value orientation of education as a social activity for cultivating people has been retained. At the same time, the definition of “education” has also changed: First, it reduces the “banking” in teaching moment. Meanwhile, the idea that students are the subject of education has been strengthened. In addition, the different understanding of education has formed local pedagogy schools. Although the understanding of education in Chinese society and the obvious inappropriateness in definitions of “education” have been changed over the past 40 years, this paper argues that there are still profound and complex educational problems need to be solved, such as the relationship among school, education, and society need to be deeply discussed; we should further realize the nature of pluralistic development, the unconscious oppression of children, and deprivation of people’s freedom of learning in schooling; how to make pedagogy more scientific to guide the development of people; and attention should be paid to the transformation from “Made in China” to “Created in China” in educational theory.

Keywords: education, definitions, schooling, 40 years of China’s reform and opening-up

Introduction

Whether it is learning or teaching research, the first problem to be solved is: What is education? This is an important theoretical issue to be studied in pedagogy, and it is also a problem that educators should be clear about. According to J. A. Comenius, the father of pedagogy, everyone has the seeds of knowledge, virtue, and

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Fan Ning-xue, Ph.D. candidate, School of Education Science, Nanjing Normal University; visiting research student, UC Berkeley.

piety, but the seeds cannot grow spontaneously and need the power of education (Comenius, 1967). John Locke (1693) put forward “theory of tabula rasa”, Rousseau (1979) advocated “back to nature”, Herbart J. F. (1985) proposed a theoretical system of pedagogy as an independent science. “He believed that every child is born with a unique potential, his individuality, but that this potential remained unfulfilled until it was analysed and transformed by education in accordance with what he regarded as the accumulated values of civilization” (Blyth, 1981, pp. 69-79). Dewey J. (1916) believed that “education as a necessity of life”, “education as a social function”, “education as growth”, and “education as conservative and progressive” (Dewey, 1916). Peters R. S. pointed out that the concept of “education” had included the principle that something of value should be acquired. It means that something of value is being passed on in a morally acceptable way (Peters, 2010). According to Jaspers K. (1991), “Education is the education of human soul, not the accumulation of rational knowledge and cognition” (pp. 3-4).

In China’s indigenous pedagogy research, people also believe that only by having a clear and scientific understanding of it, can we establish a strict scientific system of pedagogy and guide people’s educational practice correctly (Lei, 1988; Li, 1998). If China’s pedagogy abandons the fundamental research of its core concepts (such as “education”), it will inevitably mean a potentially fatal academic crisis and theoretical danger of pedagogy (Xiao & Hu, 2010). However, the definition of “education” and “educational science” is still a major problem that puzzles the educational circles in China (Liu, 2007). Many researchers believe that there are lots of answers to the definition of education, and it is difficult to have satisfactory answers. It is an indisputable fact that the definition of education is diversified (Li, 2015; Li, 1998; Cheng & Yao, 2005; Gu, 2003; Xiao & Hu, 2010; Wang, 1990). The reasons why various educational practices are so different, it is related to the politicization and ideologization of education (Li, 1998). Some articles comb and enumerate the important definitions of education in a certain stage (Gu, 2003; Cheng & Yao, 2005; Lei, 1988; Xiao & Hu, 2010; Ye & Wang, 2005; Chen, 2005). Some articles explore the etymological history of education (Xiao & Hu, 2010). Some try to give suggestions or theoretical framework for the definition of education (Cheng & Yao, 2005; Gu, 2003; Xiao & Hu, 2010; Wang & Liu, 2007; Li, 2009; Wang, 1990). The definition of education in the past can be divided into broad and narrow senses (Zhong, 1991; Lei, 1988). It is considered that education is a social practice and an activity of cultivating people for a certain society (class) (Lei, 1988). The study finds that education is regarded as an activity of cultivating people and promoting the development of human body and mind at all times and in all over the world (Xiao & Hu, 2010). The discourse system of Chinese pedagogy takes “learning”, “teacher”, and “politics” as its core (Tan, 2018). Combined with United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) documents, education in the future will face new definitions, new patterns, and new challenges. In internationalization, the “Chinese experience” and “Chinese voice” are not enough to show, we hope that we will write our own “reflections of education” (Li, 2017).

The year of 2018 is the 40th anniversary of China’s reform and opening-up, and China’s education has also experienced 40 years of development. With the development and transformation of society, some fundamental issues concerning education have surfaced, and people have made some changes in the understanding and definition of education, which can lead to profound thinking. The special definition of “education” or the standard definition of “education” is usually considered as prerequisites for the development of this field (Biesta, 2011, p. 185). The article selects the representative definition of “education” that has emerged in China for 40 years, compares these definitions, and probes into the similarities, differences, and evolutionary characteristics of the definitions of “education”, and attempts to explore the attachment behind

these words through definitions. Educational science attempts to reflect on the extent to which the true ideals of human behavior, which can be called “education”, have been reached, and in what way the ideals are expressed to be true (Kenklies, 2012, p. 267). The value orientation of the people has examined the changes in people’s attitude towards education after the reform and opening-up, and provides a reference for the scientific development of pedagogy and education. These definitions take into account factors, such as time and geography as much as possible, but they are still not comprehensive. However, the definitions of education selected in this paper are very representative. They have played an important role in the development of modern and contemporary pedagogy and have gradually influenced schooling in China.

Methods

This study adopts the methods of literature research and summary, which retrieved the undergraduate textbooks that had great influence on China’s education in the 40 years from 1978 to 2018, as well as the relevant works of famous contemporary educators in China. Data selections are based on discussions with professors, personal experience, and books selling data on the Internet. This study focuses on the evolution of the definition of “education” in China, so it mainly explores the definitions of “education” in the above materials. The article lists the definitions of “education” in 19 books. Because there are fewer monographs on the definition of “education” in recent 10 years’ research, so the author has searched four databases of “Chinese Journal Full Text”, “Chinese Doctoral Dissertation Full Text”, “Chinese Excellent Master’s Dissertation Full Text”, and “Chinese Important Newspaper Full Text”, with the title of “Definition of Education” and the time span from Jan. 1, 2008 to Dec. 31, 2018, this paper analyses and summarizes the literature of this period. The author finds that there are also few studies on the definition of “education”, totaling 28 articles (see Figure 1), and there is no new and prominent definition. So, the author did an extended search and found 98 articles about the definitions of various types of education (see Figure 2), they show that in the past 10 years, people have paid more attention to the development of all kinds of education in China than to the research of metapedagogy. Because they have little related to the theme, the author will not dwell on them in this article.

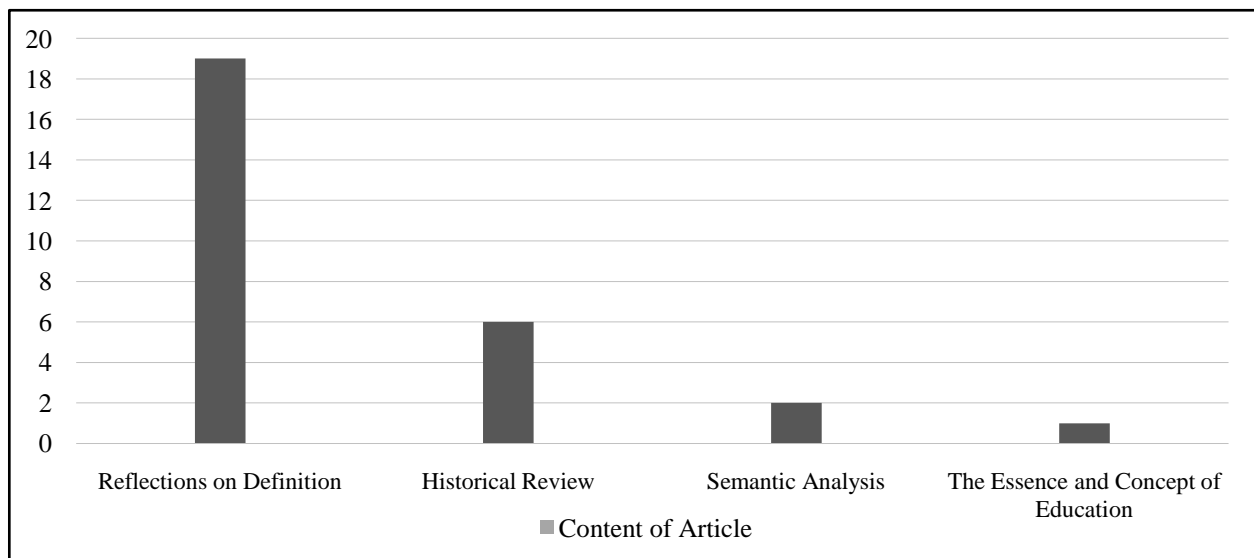


Figure 1. Different dimensions of research on definitions of “education” (from Jan. 1, 2008 to Dec. 31, 2018).

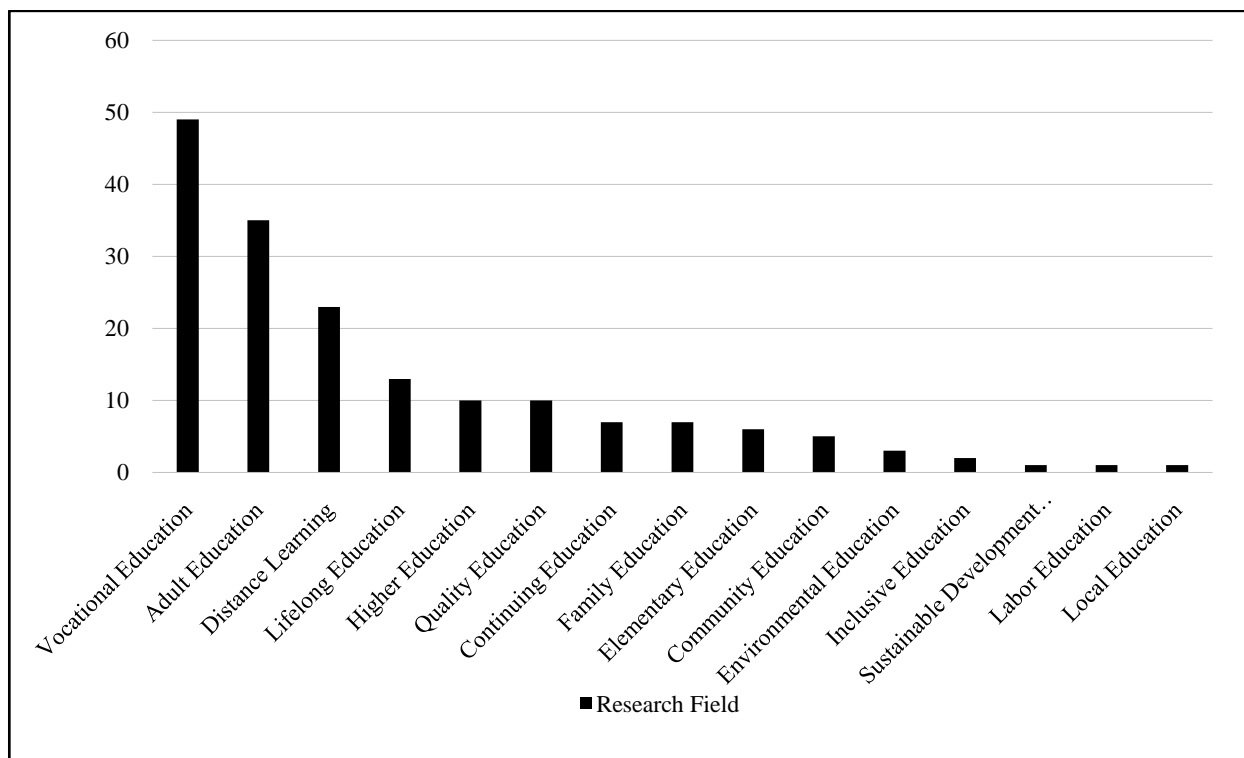


Figure 2. Definitions of “education” under different fields (from Jan. 1, 2008 to Dec. 31, 2018).

Evolution of the Definitions of “Education” in the 40 years (1978-2018)¹

Hegel G. W. F. (1980) believed that the definition is not only pure, but also concrete. The concrete is that it grasps the “unification of different regulations”. Different from the abstract definition, the specific definition contains the relationship between people and things, and reflects the purpose of human beings (Hegel, 1980, pp. 327-328).

1978-1988

In 1980, *Pedagogy*, co-authored by five colleges and universities, such as Central China Normal University, interpreted education as “a purposeful, planned, and organized activity for educators to impart knowledge and skills, cultivate ideological and moral character, develop intelligence and physical strength in order to train the educated to serve a certain society or class according to the requirements of a certain society or class” (Central China Normal University [CCNU], 1980, p. 5). In the revised edition of 1982, it was slightly revised, “Schooling is an activity based on the reality of the certain society and the needs of the future, following the laws of the younger generation of physical and mental development, purposefully and systematically to induce the educated to acquire knowledge and skills, to cultivate ideological and moral character, and to develop intelligence and physical strength, in order to train educated into person who adapt to the needs of a certain society (or a certain class) and promote social development”. “In its broadest sense, all activities that purposefully improve people’s knowledge and skills and influence people’s ideological and

¹ The Chinese scholars listed in this study are all those who have great influence on education in China since 1978. Given the limitations of the author’s abilities, there may be omissions in the listed scholars. Because of the theme of this research, here are many Chinese references.

moral character, whether organized or unorganized, systematic or fragmentary, are education” (CCNU, 1980, p. 37). From the definition of education in this *Pedagogy*, co-authored by the five universities, we can see: Firstly, this edition divides education into two parts: broad sense and narrow sense. The broad meaning of education is very rich, narrow sense refers specifically to schooling. Secondly, the book holds that schooling is based on the requirements of certain social or class requirements. Thirdly, education should impart knowledge and skills and train people with all-round development of morality, intelligence, physical fitness, and beauty. In addition, the change of definition weakens the “class nature”, highlights that education should follow the law of human physical and mental development, and changes from “imparting” knowledge to “guiding” development, which shows the change of people’s attitude towards educational activities in this period.

Chen Yousong (1982) discusses education from the perspective of the relationship between philosophy and education in *Contemporary Western Philosophy of Education*, he says, “In a broad sense, education refers to any action or experience that has a shaping effect on a person’s body, mind, and personality.... In the sense of expertise, education is the process of intentionally passing on the cultural heritage of the previous generation and the accumulated knowledge, value, and skills to the next generation through schools, adult education institutions, and other organized media at all levels” (Chen, 1982, p. 22). Chen also makes a broad and narrow dualistic analysis of education. The broad education emphasizes the shaping effect on physical and mental as well as personality of people, emphasizing the shaping effect of education on people. In a narrow sense, Chen does not clearly define “schooling” in his view. School is not the only place to carry the heavy responsibility of education. In a narrow sense of education, the transmission of culture and knowledge of the previous generation should be its main job, focusing on the cultural function of education.

As the first textbook for undergraduate students of education department after the founding of China, *Pedagogy* compiled by Nanjing Normal University in 1984 is a classic. It defines schooling as “activities in which educators exert purposeful, planned, and organized influence on the physical and mental of the educated in accordance with certain social requirements, so as to make the educated change as expected” (Nanjing Normal University, 1984, pp. 18-19). The definition has changed from “class” to “society” and weakened the role of class in education, and it also highlights the influence of educators on the educated, which has a great impact on education in practice. Education should make the educated change as been told in advance, which shows that educational activities are targeted and education should be carried out according to certain goals.

The definition of “education” in the *Encyclopedia of China · Educational Volume* published in 1985 was elaborated from the perspective of the relationship between education and society: “Education is a social phenomenon of cultivating human beings and a necessary means of transferring production experience and social life experience. It comes into being with the emergence of human society and develops with the development of human society. Education is essentially related to social development and is restricted by the scale of physical and mental development of the object of education. It adapts to the needs of social development in a more and more complex form and serves the politics and economy of a certain society” (China Encyclopedia Editorial Board, 1985, p. 1). This definition emphasized the dialectical relationship between education and society, put education in the social context to define, and held that education and social development had essential connection. In addition, the main task of education is to train people, subject to the constraints of the laws of physical and mental development, since then almost all the definitions in China recognize that cultivating people is the essence of education.

Sun Xiting's *Principles of Education* published in 1988 attempted to understand education from two different perspectives of society and individuals: “From the perspective of social development, education is a cultural form designed by human beings according to their own needs; and from the perspective of human development, education is a value limitation for the development of human quality, that is, the development direction, content, and level of development defined by the needs of educators” (Sun, 1988, p. 22). The essential attribute of education, in short, is the activity or the process of cultivating people, according to the needs of a certain society. Sun's definition was a breakthrough at that time in recognizing the two functions of education: society and individuals. Different from the past, the author believed that education was a unique cultural form of human society, stressing that education was a scientific field focusing on the existence and significance of human beings and had strong cultural functions, which implied that education had the functions of transmission, preservation, development, and diffusion. The definition also creatively considered that educational activities need to begin to consider people's demands based on the needs of the educated.

1989-1998

Wang Daojun and Wang Hanlan also define education in *Pedagogy* (New Edition) written in 1989: “Education is to transform the accumulated experience of production struggle and social life into the wisdom, ability, and moral character of the educated, so that their physical and mental development can be developed and become the people needed by society”. In the broad sense of education, the book holds that “in the broad sense, all activities that purposefully promote people's knowledge and skills and influence people's ideological and moral character, whether organized or unorganized, systematic, or fragmentary, are education” (D. Wang & H. Wang, 1989). The definition emphasizes the essence of education to cultivate people and acknowledges the fact that education conveys experience. We think that the distinction between broad education and narrow education is an artificial division in pedagogy for the sake of more convenient research institutes. Broad education regards “promotion” as the characteristic of education and uses “influence” as the function of the ideological and moral character of the educated, which reduces the meaning of compulsory. And in a broad sense, it does not emphasize the form of daily education, making the scope of the definition of “education” more flexible.

In 1992, edited by Gu Mingyuan, the *Dictionary of Education*, which had been written and published over six years, defined education as follows: “Social activities to transfer social life experience and cultivate people” (Gu, 1992, p. 1722). He says that education in a broad sense referred to various activities that affect the formation and development of people's knowledge and skills, physical and mental health, and ideological quality. In a narrow sense, education mainly refers to schooling, according to certain social requirements and the development needs of the educated, exert purposely, planned, and organized influence on the educated to cultivate a certain social (or class) needed people. In the definition of *Dictionary of Education*, it is believed that education has two tasks: transferring experience and cultivating people. Education in a broad sense has an impact on all aspects of human physical and mental, and “influence” is not good or bad, so the definition does not deliberately emphasize that education can certainly lead to positive development. The narrow definition of education has become the most common official definition in textbooks of China, which weakens “discipline” in education.

In his *Contemporary Pedagogy* published in 1998, Yuan Zhenguo believes that “Education is a kind of social activity to cultivate people, and it is the basic way to inherit social culture, transfer production experience,

and social life experience. Schooling is based on certain social requirements, purposeful, planned, and organized to exert influence on the physical and mental health of the educated, expecting them to undergo certain changes” (Yuan, 1998, p. 3). Yuan also acknowledges that education is an activity of cultivating people and a social activity, and emphasized the important value of education in “inheritance” and “transmission”. At the same time, in his other book *New Ideas of Education*, he summarizes the past three ideological trends of education: social idealism, scientism, and humanism. People’s educational ideas are based on the educational ideological trend behind them. He also holds that even the most utilitarian education policy can not completely ignore the ideal of education. In a sense, people talk about education as an ideal education (Yuan, 2002, pp. 126-129).

1999-2008

Ye Lan wrote in the 1999 edition of *Introduction to Education* that the definition of “education” was also interpreted from both broad and narrow perspectives: “(Generalized) Education is a conscious social activity with the direct objective of influencing the physical and mental development of human beings”. Narrow sense of education is schooling: “Schooling is a purposeful, systematic, and organized social activity undertaken by full-time personnel and specialized agencies, with the direct objective of affecting the physical and mental development of enrollees” (Ye, 1999, pp. 8-9). In Ye’s definition, whether in a broad sense or in a narrow sense, the role of education has a “direct goal”. In other words, the author realizes that some seemingly educational activities have indirect or even negative effects on the physical and mental health of the educated. At this time, it should not be attributed to education, for example, the way teachers use indoctrination, the direct purpose of the teacher is to make the students answer the question and get high marks, the indirect effect of this activity may be to make the students form the characteristics that are not good at questioning, the teacher’s practice cannot be called “education” in the strict sense.

Chen Guisheng put forward a novel definition of “education” in his book of *Principles of Education* published in 1993, that was, “Education is all kinds of activities that make children (or everyone) good” (Chen, 1993). Chen’s definition differs significantly from the previous definitions, mainly because he applies the definition of “good” or “make it good” to the definition of “education”. He argues that “other definitions deliberately avoid this definition”. In fact, this leads to another question related to education, that is, should the role of education be positive? In his exposition, education has its origin of “good” from ancient times to present, but with the development of society, people endow “good” with different connotations (Chen, 2000, pp. 97-101). At the same time, he also thinks that it is obviously not comprehensive to define education only from this angle, so he specially explains the evolution of the definition of education in another article.

According to Zhang Renjie’s *Big Pedagogy* in 1995, “Education is the conscious practice of human beings to promote their own development. This practice is mainly accomplished through educators’ knowledge imparting, skills training, ideological inculcation, behavior training, and the study and development of the educated” (Zhang, 1995, p. 5). Zhang’s understanding of education is based on human beings as a group. Education is a human-specific activity, Marxist philosophy holds that human beings face the objective world as a whole and human beings as subject treat nature actively. Therefore, this definition incorporates the idea of subject and object into the definition of education. However, the term “ideological indoctrination” is used in the definition, so the author wonder if the researcher wants to emphasize the political function of education. In the process of education, teachers can not directly transfer knowledge to students’ minds without students’

initiative. The use of the term “indoctrination” still needs to be discussed.

It is not easy to define education scientifically, so some scholars grasp it from the perspective of the essence of education. For example, in *Higher Education*, edited in 1995, education is a kind of social activity, and the essential attribute that distinguishes it from other social things is the cultivation of human beings (Editorial China Institute of Education, 1995, p. 32). This definition still affirms the social attribute of education, and the most important thing to understand education is to get its essence. As one of many social activities, its essence is cultivating people. That is to say, no matter how many definitions of education exist, there is only one thing in common, that is, to cultivating people, which is also the most prominent feature of education different from any other social activity.

The research group of subject-object relationship, represented by Wu Zonghuang, published a series of books on *Subject-Object Relations Series*, in which they tried to discuss education from the dimension of subject-object relationship. From this point of view, human beings, like other creatures want to survive, they must seek benefits and avoid disadvantages, and education is the activity of human beings seeking benefits and avoiding disadvantages. They say that “Education or education in a narrow sense should be defined as the accumulation and inheritance of intelligence” (Writing Group of Series of Subject-Object Relations, 2000, pp. 78-81), which are the basic feature of human education and the essence of human education. The research group of “subject-object relationship” inherits the Marxist theory; they believe that the essence of education is “the accumulation and inheritance of intelligence”. This view is influenced by essentialism. It can be seen that the theories of essentialism and externalism at that time have certain influence on education in China. Besides, they also argue that education at that time is still animal-like in nature. From a certain level, behaviorism schools has occupied a dominant position in China’s educational theory for a long time, and the dominant position of human beings is not fully recognized, which leads to the prevalence of stimulation-response mode or teacher-student dynamic.

Influenced by the student’s subjective view in the 1980s and 1990s, Xiang Xianming puts forward a new theory in his doctoral dissertation *Widespread Educational Theory* in 2000. He uses a diamond chart to illustrate the essence of the educational process and reveals that, “Education is the process of developing, possessing and digesting of human’s development resources in the process of common social life by people as subject, so as to generate specific, complete, and socialized individual” (Xiang, 2000, pp. 39-40). Xiang has demonstrated admitted that it is not easy to define education, and at that time, the definition is also an expedient measure. What he wants to express is that people should change their educational definitions and recognize education as human subjects. Therefore, students are also the subject of educational activities, the so-called “banking” in education which has prevailed for many years is untenable. This definition focuses on vindicating for students. In addition, Xiang believes that human development is the most advanced and complex change in all life. The term “reforming” is not enough to generalize the education of human society. Therefore, a comprehensive definition of education should be “generating”.

In the *Fundamental of Pedagogy*, compiled jointly by 12 key normal universities in China, the macro definition of education is, “Education is a practical activity that promotes the socialization of individuals and the individualization of society under a certain social background” (Joint Compilation of 12 Key Normal Universities in China [JCKNUC], 2002, p. 4). This definition firstly holds that education is purposeful and that incidental events without a clear purpose cannot be called education. Secondly, education is a process of coupling, which includes two aspects of “individual socialization” and “social individualization”. Thirdly, it

recognizes that education is a practical activity, “not a pure idea or a set of rules governed by a certain idea” (JCKNUC, 2002, p. 4). Finally, education takes place in a certain social context and is restricted by social economy, politics, and culture in different periods.

Hu Zhongping’s *Modern Pedagogy* still holds that “Education is a conscious social activity with the direct and primary objective of influencing the physical and mental development of human beings” (Hu, 2002, pp. 10-11). Similar to the definition in *Pedagogy* compiled by Nanjing Normal University in 1984, they all see that education affects people’s physical and mental development as a direct goal, and there are other effects, such as the impact on social development. But hu thinks that we pay attention to the education with the direct goal of influencing people’s development, which is different from other social activities.

2009-2018

Since the publication of *Efforts for the Establishment of “Life and Practice” Education School* in 2004, the “Life and Practice” Education School led by Ye Lan has been devoting itself to the construction of China’s indigenous education school. Ye (1999) put forward the unique expression of “teaching earth, personnel and cultivating life consciousness” on the basis of understanding traditional education and traditional culture (J. Li & Z. Li, 2015, pp. 157-158). This theory originates from the deep insights on education: Firstly, education cannot be separated from people. “No matter what level of education work, we expect more people who love, respect, and cherish education to join us in realizing self and promoting the value of life of others, and increasing the role of happiness and dignity of life” (J. Li & Z. Li, 2015). Secondly, education contains the intrinsic relationship between people and things, forming the value orientation of “caring for life”, which is different from any kind of educational reform that aims solely at changing things, methods, means, and systems, or only uses people in education as tools, means, and resources, or improving various efficiency and effects (Li, 2015). Zhang Xupei, vice-president of China Education Association, believes that “life-practice” pedagogy clarifies that the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate life consciousness and highlights that the ultimate goal of education is enlightenment (Ye & Li, 2010).

Discussions: The Characteristics and Rethinking of the Evolution

After the reform and opening-up, China’s pedagogy has experienced 40 years of development. In the first 20 years after the reform and opening-up, people discussed more about the concept of education and changed. In the later period, with the great development of all kinds of education which people’s attention inclined to and the study of the concept of education tended to be stable, especially in the last 10 years. According to Rickert (1996), “Nature does not load value and culture is about value”. In the past, people recognized the cultural transmission function of education, and the value of educational activities is obvious. The definition of education contains the social values of different periods, sorting out the changes in the definitions of “education” in the past 40 years, and peeks into the evolution of the deeper value orientation behind them.

Persistence: Social and People

Over the past 40 years of reform and opening-up, China has experienced rapid development. In the new period of development, China is still developing and innovating in various fields, especially in education, which has received unprecedented attention, in the government work report of the second session of the Thirteenth National People’s Congress just held in March 2019, the most important part of education this year, which focuses on “developing more equitable and quality education”, “deepening education and teaching reform”, and

“vigorously developing vocational education” (Government Work Report, 2019-04-20). As a long-standing social activity, education has its essence, which has not changed in the development of 40 years. First of all, education is the activity of cultivating people. This statement implies that educational activities include three factors: people, education, and society. People are the object of education. Society socializes people as the object through education who serve social development. The term “cultivating” contains the implication of providing certain conditions for the occurrence, growth, and reproduction of the object, and changes in the direction of progress rather than in situ. Therefore, although some definitions do not specify “cultivating people”, they believe that education exerts an influence on people’s body and mind to make it satisfy the requirements of society, which can also be understood as supporting the essence of education cultivating people from another aspect.

Secondly, education is a kind of social activity. Educational activities and human social activities come into being at the same time. As a special social activity, education is the product of social development to a certain stage (Sun, 1993, p. 45). Man is the sum of all social relations, who is the person lives in the society, develops in the society, and whose value is reflected in the society. Education plays a mediating role between man and society. Education cultivates natural persons into social persons needed by a certain society, promotes human development, and then serves a certain society. Therefore, education is a purposeful social activity, which belongs to the unique human society. Education reflects the requirements of society, but also affects the development of society and individuals. Therefore, education has the attributes of social activities, and its essence, which is different from other social activities, is to cultivating people.

Besides, the author has to say that the relationship between education and society is still worth discussing. John Dewey once declared in a statement that the ultimate problem of all education was the coordination of psychological and social factors (Dewey, 1972). Schools, the institutions to coordinate the two, are the most important way for children to receive education at present. However, schools that attempt to reconcile the contradiction between society and education and strive for the maximization of the interests of all parties have not maintained the balance in the process of development, but have become the spokesman of the leadership class, making society control schools through “hidden curriculum”² and ultimately control people. First of all, learning is the last behavior to be manipulated by others. It is a natural result, but “hidden curriculum” is like “absent participants”, which cannot be seen, but always dominates the occurrence of schooling. Secondly, the hidden rules of society (or called “curriculum”) tell students to fulfill the tasks assigned by the rule makers as required, “Once the younger generation allows their imagination to be shaped by teaching, they are subject to the restrictions of each teaching institution. These ‘institutions’ control their imagination, so that they cannot diverge, can only be deceived” (Illich, 1971). In this process, their innovative and critical abilities became relatively weak, and many people lost themselves. Therefore, people think that we should change the education in schools to meet the needs of different children by presenting the paradigm and imparting knowledge that is more suitable for children, so as to gain the freedom of learning. But the freedom of learning should not be in the given ten or one hundred ... until more choices are made and tell the children that this is freedom, because

² “Hidden curriculum” means that the state, through the school system and institutions, potentially transfers some value to students for education. Hidden curriculum is a kind of ceremony, which is a formal entrance ceremony established by schools into modern society. This hidden structure constitutes a curriculum that is never controlled by teachers and school boards. It constitutes an unchangeable system framework in which all curriculum changes take place. See Ivan Illich’s *After Deschooling, What?* and *Deschooling Society* for concepts.

even more choices are mingled with artificial limitations. This cannot fundamentally release children’s learning nature and freedom, as long as we enter the prescribed system, the diffusion of power will lead to knowledge stratification, what kind of knowledge we want to learn does not depend on ourselves. Even if Neill tried to make Summer Hill School a “paradise for children to do what they like to do” (Holt, 1976), Summer Hill School still hampered children’s doing. Because children cannot choose the other ways, such as traveling, living alone, starting their own business, etc. They can only go to the school provided by the society for them or other schools. Similar passive choices are not self-directed. So, as long as we recognize that education is the product of society, it is impossible to explain the question of “What education is” without an objective analysis of the relationship among schooling, education, and society, and even impossible to discuss clearly the relationship between man and society.

Changes in the Definitions of “Education”

The previous definition containing something that educators exert influence on the educated. It means that educators “bank” the influence into the educated. The initiative of the educated is not reflected. Nowadays, people gradually realize that education is not a way that someone can transfer knowledge to the other side by banking it. In fact, the educated has always participated in the process of education as an active participant. They will receive more knowledge if they are more interested in it and take more knowledge if he is more suitable for them. These are the active choices of the educated. In the later definition of education, the meaning of banking is intentionally avoided, but the role of guidance is emphasized, such as “promoting” and “generating”.

However, if we put ourselves to school, give up the right of autonomous learning, completely rely on the teaching in the school, it is easy to inculcate that learners become the carrier of knowledge and the object of banking. Indoctrination also occurs because of oppression, which is caused by one party’s demand and expectation for the other party’s interests, which is the purpose of education. It is really difficult to go both ways, especially when the power of definition is unbalanced and one group feels they have the right to control another group. The reason why it is important to discuss the purpose of education is also that when we try to understand what education is, if we do not know what education we are trying to achieve, we cannot make decisions, which are most beneficial and appropriate for students’ development. A key question is who has the most valuable educational purpose. Every educator who tries to explore educational purpose tries to find universal educational purpose. “Without exception, the purpose of education is derived from a specific ethical system (based on philosophy or theology)” (Institute of Education, Tsukuba University, 1986). Over the years, the general understanding of educational purpose in China mainly refers to “The norms of educational purpose determined by the government. This norm is mandatory, unquestionable, or controversial, and its weak voice has limited influence ...” (Chen, 1998). In China’s education system, different levels of “purpose” have been given different titles: educational policy, educational purpose, training objectives, etc., some are very specific. But when the educational purpose is “decentralized” at different levels, whether people can understand the “original words” is obviously another question. From a scientific point of view, a concept should exclude the value problem and only describe the facts. The problem now is that people cannot add a universal and scientific content to the “educational purpose” very accurately, everyone has an inner vision of what kind of people they will strive to become in the future, rather than listing one or two or three specific items.

Secondly, the subject problem in education has attracted Chinese scholars’ attention again. As Peters (1966) said, “Educated people should be different from trained people, educated people are people who have

both knowledge and understanding, and not people who only know how to do it or who only have certain skills” (pp. 3-18). More and more scholars pay attention to the theory of “subject-object” relationship, breaking the situation that teachers are in the dominant position of power in the past, and students’ subject status has been publicized, so education is a process of mutual participation and growth. Because of this, the definitions of the educator and the educated are challenged. The boundaries between them become blurred and there is no absolute knowledge master. Therefore, some scholars put forward the definition of “widespread education”, which pushes education to a broader world.

We have been told that, “Human is subject, natural is object” (The Compilation Bureau of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin’s Works of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1995, p. 3). In fact, most learning is not the result of teaching. It is the result of unimpeded participation in meaningful environments (Illich, 1971, pp. 46-47). People should have interest and freedom in learning. The purpose of learning is for the better development of oneself and society. Separated from the concept of rights and responsibilities of individual freedom, development is embedded in the interaction among different people, society, and nature. In the modern society of global knowledge explosion, different knowledge systems meet today, we need to learn more from each other to discover and understand the world outlook of other societies. Therefore, one of the tasks of education is to let the younger generation accept the possibility of different understandings of reality, respect everyone’s freedom to pursue development and help different people achieve their own success. The premise is to further realize the pluralistic development of education. “Anthropocentrism” has been unable to maintain the sustainable development of resources and environment. In the pedagogy system, education recognizes not only teachers or learners, but also partners who actually create the whole learning environment together (Herlo, 2014). As another group closely related to human life, nature can become our partner against the contradictions of man-machine era, separating nature from man and giving rights to nature. Recognizing the rights of nature means that we regard the earth as a “person” with life and development. Recognizing the right of nature will enable the new generation to accept and treat all kinds of life creatures equally. Learning the knowledge of nature will not realize human development at the expense of earth resources. They will abandon “anthropocentrism” and live in harmony with nature and get sustainable development.

At the same time, with the continuous progress of society, people’s understanding of education is more scientific, and these changes are also reflected in the definitions of “education”. And in the early stage of reform and opening-up, we can also see the shadow of “classification”, such as “according to the requirements of a certain class”, but in the 1980s, it has replaced “class” with “society”. Since then, the term “class” has seldom been seen; this expression is out of date. Behind the education and cultivation of human beings, people did not pay attention to the law of human physical and mental development at first, but emphasized the social discipline and requirements for human beings. In the process of the gradual pedagogy scientific, the law of human development was added as an important consideration. In the later definitions of “education”, most of the definitions not only consider that education needs to comply with the requirements of a certain society, but also follow the laws of physical and mental development of human beings, and the dominant position of human being is gradually highlighted. In addition, there are slightly different definitions of educators and the educated. The object of education is no longer limited to young people or the younger generation, including different age groups, which conforms to the definition of lifelong learning.

But these are not enough. The sign of a mature discipline is scientificization. According to Becher and

Trowler (2001), “Pedagogy is regarded as a soft-applied discipline, which seems doomed to cause the ambiguity of the discipline and even affect the process of scientificization of the discipline itself”. Concepts are the precondition for distinguishing and delineating research contents. The reason why we need to define education precisely is that only with precise definitions can we have a clear understanding. It is doubtful whether terms without definitions can be used to lay the foundation for new concepts. Social sciences, unlike natural sciences, have nine classifications of ladybugs in the world, such as *coccinella septempunctata* and *coccinella undecimpunctata*. Although there are subtle differences, we can still distinguish between beneficiary insects and pests according to the “spots” on their wings. However, the difference between “human” educational activities is not so obvious. The education that takes place in China and in the United States can be called “education”. We should put forward a concept of category and study educational phenomena within the boundaries defined. For example, the definitions of education we see now in China generally include educational purposes, educational objects, educational subjects, educational methods, educational systems, and so on. Then, we can first examine which of these dimensions are indispensable for non-education and which are the characteristics of other social activities, and then pursue the qualitative stipulation that education differs from other social activities. Along this line of thinking, man is the subject of social activities, and education is the product of society. If we do not necessarily distinguish the teacher from the student as the subject and only regard men as the main body, then whether the subject of education should not be taken into account as one of the prescriptive contents of the quality of education, but should be regarded as a natural thing? Another example, any activity has its starting point, or purpose, if we put the educational purpose into the concept of education, then we must find out how the educational purpose is different from others.

In addition, the different understanding of education has formed eight different local pedagogy schools (Wu, 2008), and academic controversy has arisen in the study of the basic theory of pedagogy. For example, some scholars believe that education should have a certain purpose, serve a certain society, and train the educated into the people who need the society. Others believe that the scope of education should be broad, and all the activities to promote the development of the physical and mental are education.

But we have to admit that throughout the development of world education history, there are very few educational actions in China with world influence, especially in modern times. It seems that behaviorism is more dominant in current schooling and has a profound impact on China and the world. It is difficult to change in a short time. We know that it is much more difficult to translate words into actions than actions into words, but the former is more important. At present, China lacks the practice of translating words into actions. And as a whole, the papers and works explaining educational theory have long been neglected by educational practitioners, who have kept away from educational theory works (Wu, 2017). The author thinks, on the one hand, there are many theoretical works, but a considerable part of the research is not shocked, many people are eager for quick success for various purposes, which leads to the generation of “academic garbage”. On the other hand, the discourse expression of the concept of education should be understood and accepted. S. Hawking wrote a classic masterpiece *A Brief History of Time* in 1988. However, after the publication of this book, readers told Hawking that some of the most important concepts in the book were very difficult to understand. To this end, Hawking himself wrote “*A Brief History of Time (Popular Edition)*” in 2005 for everyone. Similarly, educational theory should be understood and supported by everyone, and guides practice, plays a substantive positive role in learning and teaching. Only in this way, can we transform theory into practice, and then summarize our own theory from our own practice.

Conclusions

After 40 years of development, the definition of “education” in China’s important literature is different from that in the early stage of reform and opening-up, the understanding of Chinese education and the obvious inappropriateness of the concepts have been changed. The researches on the definition of “education” are always striving for truth. However, in China’s education and schooling, memorizing the definitions of important concepts is often regarded as the task of students. They always understand a certain concept first from the definition. Therefore, it is natural and important for undergraduates in the school of education to grasp the definition of “education”, and they will not question the definitions presented in the book, nor will they have too many opportunities to strive truth through their own efforts. These limit the imagination of young people who may be engaged in education in the future. Soltis (1993) said that although there is no doubt about making value judgments in education, and some value judgments are very important, it is difficult to say that it is wise to make value judgments only by defining them. For the important issue of educational value, we should make a careful judgment, which cannot be decided by a single definition (p. 37).

Moreover, there are still profound and complex educational problems to be solved. Education is the product of society, without an objective analysis of the relationship among schooling, education, and society, it is impossible to explain what education is and to discuss clearly the relationship between people and society; “anthropocentrism” has been unable to maintain the sustainable development of resources and environment, one of the tasks of education is to let the younger generation accept the possibility of different understandings of reality, respect everyone’s freedom to pursue development and help different people achieve their own success; people should have interest and freedom in learning, but schools through careful planning and manipulation to bring the younger generation into a world where educational goal is not their business, the unconscious oppression of children and the deprivation of their freedom of learning; the sign of a mature discipline is scientificization, we should better know how to make pedagogy more scientific that really guides people’s development; at present, the papers and works explaining educational theory have long been neglected by educational practitioners, we need more theories to guide China’s educational practice, moving from “Made in China” to “Created in China” in educational theory is more important than ever. As a whole, the changes of educational value in China are fact, but if we put it into action better or if we want to completely change some problems in current China’s education, we cannot rush to achieve them, it will take more time for the development of pedagogy and education.

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