

Educational Research in China
Youchao Deng *Editor-in-Chief*

Dandan Guo *Editor*

The Frontier of Education Reform and Development in China

Articles from *Educational Research*



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Educational Research in China

Series Editor

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Dandan Guo
Editor

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Editorial Department of Educational Research	

Reversing the Trend Toward Utilitarianism in Education



Youchao Deng and The Research Group

Abstract The trend toward utilitarianism in education, characterized by short-sightedness, lopsidedness, simplicity and infectiousness, excludes the all-round development of students, alienates the educational process, causes the overload of education, and triggers anxiety about education. As a phenomenal problem occurring in a particular historical stage, this trend reflects social utilitarianism in the field of education and constitutes an inevitable pain in the current stage of social development. This results from the instrumental concept of education among members of society, the insufficient supply and structural imbalance of high-quality educational resources, the complicity between the participants of education and society, and the “theater effect.” From an international perspective, one can find that this trend is an educational crisis worldwide. From the perspective of the future changes of China’s economy and society, one can find that challenges and opportunities coexist in the reversion of this trend. There will be a sharper contradiction between technological innovations plus industrial upgrading and utilitarianism in education; changes in the size, distribution and migration pattern of the population dictate the concentration of future educational demands in urban areas and middle-class families, making it difficult to alleviate this utilitarian trend in a short period of time. Although technological developments have brought about opportunities for the reversion of this trend, we need to take active measures, such as extending the concept of cultivating talents by molding people’s high morals from the educational system to the entire society, establishing and improving an education system that features better integration of different stages of instruction, a mechanism allowing transfers between different types of schools, and a credit system allowing lifelong learning.

This paper presents the results of *Research on Education Evaluation Reform to Break the Five Onlys (Excessive Emphasis on Test Scores, College Enrollment Rates, Diplomas, Academic Papers, and Academic Titles)*, a major entrusted project of the special fund for basic scientific research of the National Institute of Educational Sciences in 2019 (Project No.: GYG12019001). The team leader is Cui Baoshi, President of the National Institute of Educational Sciences, Beijing 100088, China. The team includes Deng Youchao, Wan Zuofang, Li Jianmin, Huang Xiaolei, Qin Lin, Weng Qiuyi, Cao Peijie and Du Yunying.

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Keywords Five onlys · Educational utilitarianism · Macro education

Since its founding, the People's Republic of China has achieved impressive success in education. With the overall development level of education entering the upper half of the global rankings, China has stepped on a new journey from a large country of education to a powerful country of education. However, there are still some problems that need to be addressed in education, among which the most prominent problems are the short-sighted and utilitarian practices in running schools and the fact that primary and secondary school students have a hard time and are too tired (Xi, 2020). Obviously, the utilitarian trend deviates from the education policies of the Communist Party of China, deviates from the principles of socialist education with Chinese characteristics, and deviates from the fundamental mission of cultivating talent by molding people's high morals. Therefore, the reversal of the utilitarian trend of education is the key to the future of China's education, and it is the only way to speed up the modernization of education, construct a powerful country in education, and run education to the satisfaction of the Chinese people.

This paper defines the utilitarian trend of education, analyzes its characteristics, harms, and causes, and conducts an comprehensive investigation in the international dimension and temporal dimension. The international comparison helps to evaluate utilitarian trends in China, the prediction section analyzes the trend of utilitarianism in education, and macro strategies are proposed to reverse the utilitarian trend in China.

1 Basic Understanding and Judgment of Utilitarian Trends in Education in China

What is the utilitarian trend of education? What are its characteristics and harms? How should we analyze the trend? The answers to these questions are the starting point of the research.

1.1 Utilitarian Trend of Education and Its Characteristics

The utilitarian trend of education, which is hidden behind education thoughts, education systems, and education practices, exaggerates and absolutizes the instrumental function of education, places instrumental rationality above value rationality, steers people's beliefs and behavior away from the principles and the fundamental mission of education.

The utilitarian trend of education has four basic characteristics. First, short-sightedness refers to prioritizing immediate interests over long-term interests. The trend emphasizes the realization of immediate interests and neglects the positive role

of education in the long-term and sustainable development of individuals and society. As a result, people pursue high scores and key university diplomas as their main goals, and the negligence of education principles and the emphasis on competitive edges at the beginning of schooling have become prevalent practices. Second, lopsidedness refers to attaching importance to benefits in certain aspects while ignoring the overall interests. The essence of education is to promote the overall development of human beings, including the development of everyone and every aspect of human beings. However, the utilitarianism of education narrowly focuses on the role of education in such aspects as personal income, talent selection efficiency and social resource allocation while neglecting the role of education in the pursuit of truth, cultural cultivation, moral quality, personality shaping and physical health, which leads to the imbalance between different aspects of individual development and the imbalance between individuals and society. Third, simplicity means emphasis on the test results and negligence of the process. As education is oriented toward individuals who are live, concrete and complex, the education process should be complicated. However, utilitarianism of education emphasizes the standard mentality underlying industrial society and tends to simplify the complex educational process to achieve utilitarian goals more effectively. This leads to the alienation of the educational process and makes education deviate far from the essence of education. Fourth, infectiousness refers to the trend of pursuing fashion while neglecting rational thinking. It is generally convinced that the best education is the education that suits you best, and careful selection is always needed. However, the utilitarianism trend in education is driving parents into the panic of “lagging behind in education”, irrational competitions in various aspects, and registration of extracurricular classes for their children, regardless of the need or suitability of such classes. Such trends keep their momentum, and one kind of irrational comparison by parents fuels another, resulting in the theater effect in education.

1.2 Major Harms of Utilitarian Trend of Education

The utilitarian trend of education deviates from the essence of education, accelerates the proliferation of the thinking mode of “development using whatever means”, and brings profound negative effects on the development of education.

First, the utilitarian trend of education ignores the overall development of students. The slogan of “training socialist builders and successors with all-round development of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labor” is the foothold of education policy in the new era. However, under the influence of utilitarian trends, the object of education is reduced to “one-dimensional persons” by the excessive emphasis of scores, enrollment rates and diplomas. Accordingly, too much emphasis is placed on scholastic achievement, the attainment of scores outweighs the cultivation of character, and admissions to prestigious schools or universities are regarded as the core of educational goals. It is obvious that test scores are becoming indicators of performance. The rate of admissions to prestigious universities has become a major

indicator for governments to evaluate educational authorities, educational authorities to evaluate schools, and schools to evaluate teachers. Moreover, these views of administrative achievements blend into people's way of thinking and resource allocation, which stimulates education stakeholders to care less about the mission of education. Practices such as "preoccupation with score", "score first" and "score-based seating plan" are common and may even lead to extreme tragedies. In the long run, this will inevitably lead to the failure of the goal of "all-round development".

Second, the utilitarian trend of education alienates the educational process, although the process is the basic attribute of education. As an activity of cultivating people, education exists in the form of a process and unfolds as a process. Without processes, we cannot understand educational activities, let alone achieve educational goals. The process of education is generative and developmental (Guo, 2005), and it contains the possibility of creation (Huang & Li, 2013). However, under the influence of utilitarianism, principles of physical and mental development, as well as principles of education and teaching, are paid lip service only. The education process, which is stuffed by eager quest for quick success and instant benefit, is reduced into merely a teaching process, the teaching process is reduced into merely examinations, and examinations are reduced into simplistic rankings, which makes intensive exercise and rote learning the main ways of learning, resulting in a serious lack of sleep time for students. According to the *Annual Report on Chinese Children's Development (2019): Children's Out-of-School Life Condition*, nearly 80% of primary and secondary school students do not get enough sleep, and homework is the biggest time consumer.¹ Moreover, under the pressure of high-stake examinations, "jump-the-gun" learning, which means learning ahead of what is designated by the curriculum, has become a common phenomenon. For example, junior high school students will learn high school courses in advance, while senior high school courses for three years will be compressed and taught within two years or one year and a half. As a result, curriculum standards and teaching plans are ignored in the process of alienation of education, and teaching order and rhythm are seriously disturbed. Students' individual differences, curiosity and creativity are ignored or even dampened in the process of pursuing high scores and entering a prestigious school or college. Even if high scores are achieved, the cost is too high, as innovative ability, health, aesthetic and humanistic quality are sacrificed.

Third, the utilitarian trend of education gives birth to education overload. As the summative and external embodiment of educational results, a diploma has value, which can be exchanged with social identity, social human resources, social power and personal social relations. Studies have shown that the privileges attached to the diploma itself are still being acknowledged, with different diplomas bringing different proportions of additional benefits (Shen & Zhang, 2015). Under the current

¹ The Ministry of Education and nine other departments jointly issued the *Measures to Reduce the Burden of Primary and Secondary School Students* and the relevant regulations on students' health and hygiene, which stipulates that the primary school students shall sleep for no less than 10 h a day, junior high school students shall sleep for no less than nine hours a day, and students in high schools shall sleep for no less than eight hours a day. Lengths of sleep less than stipulated will not meet the standard.

education system, good academic performance means a greater chance of entering a good university, a prestigious college diploma means a better job prospect, and a good job also largely determines one's social status and future of life. The theater effect accelerates the pace of education: once someone achieves high scores by taking courses in advance, it will inevitably lead to education overload because the collusion of parents and teachers, intentionally or unintentionally, increases students' homework burden, and students' normal social life, such as basic rest and communication, cannot be guaranteed. Teachers of all subjects will try their best to assign homework to obtain excellent performance in examinations. As a result, the assignments are characterized by a lack of overall planning and coordination, a low level of management, and boring content. To obtain more high-quality educational resources, parents constantly make their children learn too much difficult content and learn in an adult's style, regardless of their children's receptive ability, interests, physical and mental development, and personality characteristics. According to the report entitled *Value of Education: Higher and Higher* by HSBC, 93% of Chinese parents pay private tuition, ranking first in the world (HSBC, 2017). Their children are either doing their homework at the desks or shuttling among all kinds of after-school tutoring classes when they are supposed to rest or play with their friends. In the long run, children's interest, self-confidence, potential, emotion and many other nonintellectual factors are gradually overdrawn and consumed in education overload.

Fourth, the utilitarian trend of education leads to educational anxiety. Excessive and persistent anxiety will hinder human development and social progress. Under the influence of the thinking mode of "being troubled by inequality instead of poverty", parents begin to worry about whether their children will obtain high-quality education resources, good job opportunities and higher social status in the future from the moment of their birth. Under the influence of utilitarianism, parents are obsessed with the outcome and process of their children's education. In particular, middle-class parents, who have relatively rich educational resources, prefer their children to receive education in line with the values and standards of the information society, but in reality, they still have to adapt to the existing education systems and standards. This gap between ideal and reality aggravates educational anxiety. Frequently, people choose prestigious schools on the basis of money, power or houses, resulting in a vicious circle of "education resources imbalance- scramble for prestigious schools - more serious imbalance - more intensive scramble for enter prestigious schools". Moreover, the anxiety of "don't lose at the starting line" has spread from the city to the countryside, and it is not uncommon for rural children to go to the city to study at private learning centers in the "third semester", the summer vacation (Feng, 2019). According to the *Report on Chinese Parents' Education Anxiety Index* in 2018, Chinese parents are in a relatively anxious state as a whole, with an overall education anxiety index of 67 points (Smart Study, 2018). The anxiety of parents and society spill over into schools. Both parents and schools are forced to speed up, and all kinds of education activities are moving forward as far as possible, which adds more pressure to students. This development is illustrated by some abnormal slogans appearing on middle school campuses or those in classrooms, such as "getting one more point to kill thousands of candidates" or "learn intensively as long as you

breathe”. Some schools make headlines simply because they are good at sending students to colleges via intensive training. Some parents let their children go to international schools or send their young children to study abroad to escape the domestic education system. Under heavy pressure, students can only alienate the ambition of “gentleman”, forget the value of “benevolence” and become what is known as “refined egoists”, who are calculating, tactful and sophisticated, and take the maximization of personal interests as the only driving force. Ideals, principles and beliefs can be sacrificed to make way for their interests.

1.3 Basic Understandings of Utilitarian Trend of Education

First, the utilitarian trend of education has long been in existence, and now it is more prominent, becoming a phenomenal problem. With the transformation and development of China’s economy and society, the pragmatism of traditional Chinese culture, such as “there is a golden house in the book, and there is a beauty in the book”, coincides with the logic of modern efficiency, which leads to education industrialization, education investment, education competition and so on. Education is rapidly changing from a process that aims to fully develop everyone’s internal endowment under the guidance of core values to a process that aims to endow everyone with the most suitable external characteristics for social competition (Wang, 2012). Utilitarianism of education infiltrates into the bones of every stakeholder and into every corner of society. Whether one is a school administrator, scholar or supervisor of teaching and learning, they all measure the value of education by performance. The problem of utilitarianism of education is deteriorating and cannot be more serious.

Second, the utilitarian trend of education is the reflection of social utilitarianism in the field of education. As a relatively independent social subsystem, education itself is a complex and large field, inevitably engraved with political, economic, cultural and other social factors (Wu, 2016). There is a trend of “panutilitarianism” in China’s social life, which regards utilitarianism as the standard of measuring, examining, and judging the good and bad, good and evil, beauty and ugliness of everything. The utilitarian social mentality of seeking fame, profit, money and speed and treating people and doing things according to their returns has caused real damage to all aspects of our social body (Li, 2011). Social utilitarianism has gone deep into education, and all participants of education have basically the same views on scores, college admissions, diplomas, publications, titles, etc., which makes the trend of educational utilitarianism surpass some groups and become the collusion of all members of society.

Third, the utilitarian trend of education is inevitable pain in the current stage of social development. During the development of society from one level to a higher level, we are bound to face and solve many contradictions. The *Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China* pointed out that the principal contradiction facing Chinese society had evolved. What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and people’s ever-growing

needs for a better life. The changes in the principal contradictions facing Chinese society pose higher requirements and expectations for the supply of high-quality education resources. However, the current level of education development cannot fully meet the new requirements and expectations. Therefore, the pain of education utilitarianism caused by scrambling for high-quality education resources is often inevitable. In light of the social development stage, the utilitarian trend of education follows a spiral development route, alternating between aggravation and alleviation. Regarding the stage of educational utilitarianism, we should be sober-minded and fully prepared: The pains of education utilitarianism may not be eliminated in a short period of time, and they can but be cured when we have continuous social development.

2 The Mechanism of Utilitarianism of Education in China

The utilitarian trend does not result from the behavior of a single group of education participants but from the collusion of various groups of education participants and society, from the education beliefs of society, the market-based distribution of good education resources, simplification of the education process, and the herd effect of education participants.

2.1 The Traditional Beliefs of “Education Changing Individuals’ Destiny” Are Deeply Rooted, While the Room for Upward Mobility of Society Is Shrinking, Resulting in the Instrumental Education Beliefs of Society

China has a long tradition of emphasizing the social function of education. The conviction of “education changing individuals’ destiny” is embodied by the influence of education on one’s social status, namely, one can have a new identity and a higher social status after receiving education. In China, one’s education level is highly correlated with their income and status, and this has been the case over the last centuries. For a long time after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, one would be a “cadre of the state” upon enrollment in a college or after graduation. Naturally, people were convinced that education would change one’s destiny. After the 1990s, college graduates were regarded as “high-quality workers”. In such a social environment, people more eagerly expect education to change their identity and give them higher social status and higher income (Gu, 2013).

Contrary to traditional beliefs and expectations, the room for upward mobility via education is shrinking in contemporary societies. The Great Gatsby Curve proposed by some economists revealed a positive correlation between the degree of social

inequality and intergenerational elasticity. In other words, the more unequal a society is, the more heavily the development of the offspring depends on their parents' success. In China, both the development of intergenerational social mobility and intergenerational education mobility follow an inverted U-shaped trend, and such trends exist among both urban and rural populations. For those born between the 1930s and the 1960s, intergenerational social mobility and intergenerational education mobility followed an upward trend. For those born after the 1960s, both intergenerational social mobility and intergenerational education mobility steadily declined (Li et al., 2017).

This situation attaches more instrumental value to education. Under the influence of “education changing individuals' destiny”, people rush into the shrinking upward channel more eagerly, emphasize the role of education more than ever, and regard education as the only inexpensive tool to change their destiny. This conception results in the transformation of “education changing individuals' destiny” into the instrumental attitudes of society toward education. People try every means to maximize education's social function. The social conception, which regards education as an instrument of obtaining new identity and social status, constitutes the conceptual basis of utilitarianism in education.

2.2 The Distribution of High-Quality Education Resources Is Made More Market-Oriented by the Deficient and Unbalanced Supply of High-Quality Education Resources, as Well as Parents' Scrambling to Obtain Such Resources and Education Benefits

In 2020, the urbanization rate of the permanent resident population in China exceeded 60% for the first time. Population migration and fast urbanization resulted in the relative shortage of high-quality education resources and an imbalance of supply structure in the inflow area and cities, which can be summarized as “crowded cities, empty towns and weak villages”. The unreasonable distribution of high-quality education resources causes a market-oriented trend. The social atmosphere of the “famous school effect” and “diploma discrimination” aggravates the scramble for high-quality education resources by parents for their children. The lack of public quality education resources has prompted affluent families to spend more money on education services provided by the market, especially those provided by off-campus training institutions. In a survey of Chinese family education finance, the participation rate of students' off-campus training in primary and secondary schools was up to 48.3%, with an annual per capita cost of 2697 yuan (Wang, 2018). For families whose annual consumption expenditures rank among 5%, the per capita cost for off-campus training is 14372 yuan per year, which is approximately 20 times as much as that of families with the lowest consumption expenditure (710 yuan per year) (Wang, 2018).

Parents who invest heavily in education are bound to pursue educational benefits. High-quality educational resources have a high rate of return. Previous studies have shown that graduates with diplomas from famous universities have higher income, and the income gap expands over time. According to the *Chinese Graduate Salary Rankings* (2018), students graduating from “double first-class” universities occupy the top of the list. The future benefits brought by the graduation from famous schools urge families to invest more money in high-quality education resources. The higher the investment, the higher the expectation of the return rate of high-quality education resources.

Among their scramble for high-quality education resources, parents further intensify the market orientation of education. Private training institutions on the market have alleviated the shortage of high-quality education resources, which are often distributed on the basis of market mechanisms (as reflected by expensive private schools and enrollment quotas based on unreasonably expensive houses). As a result, the role of family economic background has been strengthened in the distribution of educational resources. As high-quality education resources are distributed under the influence of family economic conditions, the market orientation of the high-quality education resource distribution is aggravated, and the scramble for such resources is intensified, leading to the continuous increase in investment in education. The relationship between the market supply of high-quality education and parents’ investment in education generates a utilitarian connection between family education benefits and the distribution of high-quality education resources, constantly fueling the utilitarian trend.

2.3 The Excessive Emphasis on Scores, Admission Rate, Diplomas, Publications and Titles Caters to the Demand of Society, Generates Collusion Between Education Participants and Society, and Results in the Simplification of the Education Process

As there is a mechanism that places an excessive emphasis on scores, admission rate, diplomas, publications and titles, education practice deviates from the fundamental mission of cultivating talent by molding people’s high morals. This mechanism meets the instrumental expectations of education by society and caters to the demands for a simple and effective means of evaluation by society, which provides educational resources in response. Thus, a cycle of collusion comes into being: the more one adheres to the mechanism, the more social resources they will obtain, fueling the extreme utilitarianism behavior of using education as a means to scramble for social resources.

The collusion between education and society makes the mechanism a simplistic criterion for talent cultivation, talent evaluation and talent selection. Education practice is reduced into a talent cultivation process merely based on knowledge learning,

test scores and diplomas. The educational behaviour of schools, parents and teachers has become a kind of utilitarian chase of “scores”, “college admission”, “publications” and “titles”. Talent evaluation and employer selection have also become a simplistic screening process with only “diplomas”, “publications” and “titles”. As a result, school education becomes highly competitive, government management performance becomes overly dependent on indicators, talent selection at the government, colleges and enterprises becomes standardized, the flow of talent between universities becomes a consumption process, and talent becomes commodities with different titles in the labor market. In other words, the collusion between education and society strengthens the utilitarianism of education.

2.4 The Theater Effect Destroys the Education Rules, Raises the Threshold of Education Competition, and Causes the Participants of Education to be Strongly Constrained by the Utilitarian Trend of Education

From the behavioral perspective, utilitarianism of education is a kind of continuous and group behavior. Conformity psychology prompts individuals' behavior to be utilitarian on a continuously deepening basis. Viewed from the practice level, utilitarianism of education is a continuous trend of comparison. Once an individual enters the field, they will be influenced by the “*habitus*” in practice (Bourdieu, 2017), making individuals exhibit the trend of comparison and utilitarianism. Although individuals may realize the consequences of utilitarian behavior, they will still attribute their unreasonable behavior to the current education system and mechanism, which further aggravates the utilitarianism of education.

The theater effect destroys the education rules, constantly raises the threshold of success, and aggravates the competition among individuals, who may be cued psychologically and lead to a loss of personality consciousness and do something contradictory to their own character or habits (Le Bon, 2015). Individuals show obvious conformity psychology in the process of competition. With the rise of the competition threshold, they blindly increase investments in education, aggravating the intensity of education utilitarianism. For example, diplomas constitute an important condition to enter the main labor market. Colleges and universities, governments and enterprises generally base their selection of talent on the diplomas. To obtain high-quality higher education diplomas, people generally scramble for high-quality education resources, pursue jump-the-gun learning, and overload students. With the threshold rising constantly, competition is becoming increasingly fierce. The quality and quantity of publications serve as an important basis for the promotion of professional titles for teachers or researchers. People continue to increase the number of publications and upgrade the level of publications to win the competition. Titles are the basis for the flow of talent and are closely linked to the income of professionals, further intensifying competition for the number and level of titles.

As individuals are coerced in this process, they have to participate in this competition to avoid failures. In the practice field, influenced by “*habitus*” and conformity psychology, individuals’ utilitarian behavior and trends are constantly reproducing and intensifying. Individuals will find themselves bogged down deeper and deeper in this competition, unable to get out of it.

3 Utilitarian Trend of Education Viewed from an International Perspective

Currently, the trend of educational utilitarianism is not a problem unique to China. From an international perspective, developed countries such as Europe, America, Japan and the Republic of Korea also have a certain degree of education utilitarianism under their specific educational concepts, educational systems, educational system structure and social culture. This trend has been expanding and gaining strength in recent years.

3.1 The Global Expansion of Shadow Education Aggravates the Burden of Extracurricular Tutoring and the Utilitarian Trend of Education

Extracurricular tutoring for primary and secondary school students is generally called “shadow education” by international scholars (Bray, 2007). Shadow education has a long history in East and Southeast Asia, which is deeply influenced by Confucian culture and attaches great importance to examination and admission to college. For example, the participation rate of primary and secondary school students in private training institutions in the Republic of Korea and Japan generally exceeds 60% (Liu, 2018). Since 2000, shadow education has been expanding all over the world (Zhu, 2013). From 2005 to 2014, the proportion of students receiving extracurricular tutoring in the UK increased from 18 to 23%, while the proportion in London reached 37% (Sutton Trust, 2014). In the United States, 14 to 21% of high school students take remedial courses before the Scholastic Assessment Test or the American College Test (Dang & Rogers, 2008). Even in Nordic countries, where there is no tradition of extracurricular tutoring, shadow education has been expanding in recent years (Bray, 2020). Generally, extracurricular tutoring is more common in education systems featuring selective examinations and in countries and regions where the personal economic return rate of education investment is higher (Bray, 2012).

The global expansion of shadow education is influenced by multiple factors. First, under the influence of human capital theory, people are increasingly convinced that investment in education will bring greater economic returns. Second, under the trend of globalization, the development of international academic evaluations and

education rankings has boosted the demand for shadow education. Even in Western European countries and northern European countries, where there is no outstanding cultural tradition of competition, the government and the media have paid close attention to the performance of their students in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other assessments in recent years, which has an impact on the educational mentality of society and parents. Third, the development of shadow education in some countries is related to the demand to promote consumption and increase teachers' income under the background of stagnant economic development (Yang, 2012). Different from off-campus learning and specialty training based on interest, shadow education is an extension of school education content, and its main goal is to improve students' academic performance in school, especially in high-stake examinations. This kind of close relationship between education and the test results strengthens the short-sighted behavior of students and parents, and it also leads to blind comparisons, aggravates the family economic burden and anxiety, and further aggravates the utilitarian problem of education.

3.2 The Prevalence of Over-Education as a Manifestation of Utilitarianism

The concept of “over-education”, first put forward by economists in their analysis of the American labor market (Rumberger, 1981), has become a global issue. Overeducation reflects the pursuit of higher education degrees and diplomas by individuals, parents and employers, and underemployment thus incurs a mismatch between skills and posts, as well as an education return rate that is lower than expected. Overeducation highlights the instrumental value of degrees and diplomas, stimulates blind pursuit of high diplomas, inflation of diplomas on employment markets, causes widespread utilitarian behavior and education anxiety, and wastes social education resources.

The United States is a country with an outstanding issue of overeducation. Currently, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in the States has reached 80%. However, research shows that since 1990, 38% to 49% of American college graduates have actually been engaged in jobs that do not require a university degree. Ten years after graduation, the proportion is 30% (Abel & Deitz, 2014), and in recent years, the trend has even expanded (Clark et al., 2017). It is common that they cannot pay off their loans several years or even decades after graduation because American college students generally use loans to pay their college tuition. From 2014 to 2020, US student loan debt increased from US \$1.06 trillion to US \$1.57 trillion. The average debt level reached US \$38,000, resulting in a heavy debt burden and a huge waste of social resources (Kurt, 2021). Nevertheless, Americans are convinced that higher education will bring better jobs and economic benefits and that employers are more inclined to recruit college graduates. Relevant data also show that the

average income of individuals with a university degree is higher than that of individuals without a university degree. Thus, a problem chain takes shape in the United States: the pursuit of a college diploma causes the payment of higher education with loans, and long-term loans result from underemployment and lower-than-expected income”, which has aroused the concern of society.

3.3 Intensive Parenting Causes Educational Anxiety

In recent years, family education anxiety has become an increasingly common problem in major developed countries, as reflected by the fact that “intensive parenting” has become a mainstream education culture. In the 1990s, with the evolution of social and economic structure as well as the development of early childhood development theories, an expensive parenting mode featuring the central position of children, expert guidance, emotional input and labor intensiveness gradually became mainstream in middle-class families in the United States and other countries (Hevs, 1998). This education mode combines the characteristics of authoritative education and arbitrary education. Parents tend to intervene in the whole process of children’s development, and they constantly increase their energy, time and economic input in early care, interest training and after-school supplementary study (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019). This intensive education was originally a way for the upper class and high-income families to maintain family culture and social capital, but it has spilled over into the rest of society. A survey involving 3,642 parents in the United States found that parents of different social classes, races and income levels generally agreed that children should be raised in more expensive ways (Ishizuka, 2019). Economists and sociologists believe that economic anxiety is the most important driving force behind intensive education. In recent years, the economic development of Western countries has slowed down while the uncertainty of future prospects increases. Compared with the “baby boomer” generation after WWII, parents today are concerned about whether their children will be able to maintain their economic status in the future or succeed in climbing the social ladder, and they are convinced that they can help only by increasing their investment in parenting and education. Public media in the Internet era and commercial institutions have greatly promoted this kind of anxiety (Miller, 2018). The spread of shadow education in developed countries in Europe and America also proves the existence of universal education anxiety in these countries.

3.4 *Extreme Education Utilitarian Events Occur from Time to Time*

In developed countries, utilitarianism in education also brings some extreme issues. First, the excessive pursuit of diplomas and degrees leads to fraud and other illegal behaviors. In the beginning of 2019, an enrollment scandal broke out in the United States. It was reported that to send their children to the top universities, dozens of parents paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to bribe examiners and teachers of colleges and universities, faking their children's academic or sports achievements. Involved in the scandal are many business executives, lawyers and celebrities in the performing industry. This scandal exposes the extreme utilitarian choice of family education and the loopholes in the enrollment system of famous universities. Similarly, since 2010, plagiarism has been found in the doctoral dissertations of several political figures in Germany, including the former Federal Minister of Defense, which highlights the problem of extreme pursuit of the instrumental value of diplomas and degrees in a country with a good academic tradition. Second, the performance evaluation in the education system also gives birth to some utilitarian fraud. In 2001, the federal government of the United States promulgated the *No Child Left Behind Act* to improve the quality of basic education. The act stipulates that funding for public schools depends on their performance in standardized unified examinations. Moreover, many states link the results of the unified examinations with teachers' performance evaluation and income. As a result, in 2005, there was a scandal in Texas in which students' grades in 400 schools leaped abnormally due to teachers' fraud. This scandal also shows that utilitarian problems may come from excessive exaggeration of performance evaluation, accountability systems and market-oriented resource competition as well as incentive mechanisms in the education system (Liu, 2017).

The analysis above reveals that the utilitarian trend in education is not unique to China but also a common phenomenon in the world. The trend varies only in the aspects and degree in different countries. It can be said that the utilitarian trend of education is the common enemy of global education and causes a crisis in education across the world. Thus, governments of different countries have to consider how to put education back to the mission of cultivating talent, how to promote the diversified development of talent and how to more effectively allocate education resources.

4 The Utilitarian Trend of Education in China as Reflected by Future Changes in the Economy and Society

The development of education is not isolated but embedded in the economic and social development of a country. The development of the economy requires intellectual support for education. The innovations of science and technology provide new opportunities for educational reform. Changes in population size, structure and

migration pattern affect the allocation of educational resources. In the future, education will evolve according to changes in the economy and society, which challenges and provides opportunities for the reversal of the utilitarian trend in education.

4.1 Utilitarian Education Will Seriously Hinder Technological Innovation and Industrial Upgrading Because It Cannot Cultivate Innovative Talent

In the future, the global economy will be more strikingly multipolarized,² and emerging economies will continue to rise, with the new technology revolution and digital economy accelerating industrialization in developing countries (Li et al., 2018). As an emerging economy, China has become the second largest economy in the world, but there is still a gap between China and developed countries in terms of global competitiveness and innovation.³ At present, China is at a pivotal stage of economic transformation and industrial upgrading, key to which is independent innovation. In the future, its industrial transformation will be driven by technological innovation and the upgrading of human capital (Jin, 2011), especially the support of innovative talent. However, the cultivation of such talent has been seriously hindered by the utilitarian trend of education.

First, economic transformation requires better basic research and top-notch innovative talent. Key to such transformation is the upgrading of industrial structure. To realize the transformation from “follower”, “chaser” and “parallel runner” to “innovator” and “leader”, China needs to base its industrial technology on many original, forward-looking and cutting-edge studies. For example, in the past two years, under the background of international trade disputes, the supply problem of some core technologies such as chips has been exposed, which highlights the extreme importance of mastering core technologies in key fields. Only when importance is attached to basic research on a long-term basis can a country have a strong industrial system. At present, utilitarian education is too concerned about students’ scholastic achievement and college admission to be able to foster students’ curiosity and interest and is not conducive to the cultivation of top-notch talents who truly love science and have innovative spirit. The trend of simplistic emphasis on publications and titles affects the research environment and drives researchers into pursuits of short-term, fast research results and market benefits, ignoring long-term and difficult basic research. In this sense, utilitarian education is not compatible with what is needed in the transformation and development of the national economy: the spirit of innovation, devoted research and dedication of scientists.

² The total GDP of developing countries will exceed that of developed economies, and the proportion of developing countries in the global economy and investment will be close to 60%.

³ In 2019, China ranked 28th in the *Global Competitiveness Report* released by the World Economic Forum, and it ranked 14th in the global innovation index (GII) in 2019.

Second, industrial upgrading needs the support of applied technical talent and the cultivation of craftsmanship. The upgrading of industrial structure necessitates the adjustment of talent training systems in China. The degree to which the quantity, structure and type of human capital match China's industrial structure determines the efficiency of industrial structure transformation (Jin, 2010). At the present stage, there is a shortage of applied, compound and skilled talent needed by China's economic and social development, and the reserve of engineering and scientific talent urgently needed by strategic emerging industries is seriously insufficient. The enrollment of science and engineering students declines rapidly, while the manufacturing industry develops quickly, and the demand of the human resource market in the same period runs high (Du, 2015). To meet the needs of industrial upgrading, it is necessary to increase the number of technical and application-oriented innovative talents and improve the training quality, especially to cultivate the craftsman spirit of devoting themselves to research, innovation and excellence in practice. The trend of excessive emphasis of diploma in education draws students' attention to the threshold effect and market value of education rather than personal skills improvement. This trend is contrary to the requirements of the times that technical talent should have a craftsman spirit. Utilitarianism in personal career development is not conducive to the formation of a good professional culture and social atmosphere.

In short, viewed from the perspective of economic development, the utilitarianism trend in education goes against the demands of economic development for talent and against the great mission of revitalizing the Chinese nation and hinders the cultivation of innovative talent and the development of disruptive innovations. The reversal of utilitarianism in education is urgently needed to better facilitate China's industrial upgrading and economic transformation and to realize the centenary goals for the Communist Party of China and the centenary goals for the People's Republic of China.

4.2 The Utilitarianism Trend in Education Will Last in the Near Future Because the Future Education Demand Will Accumulate with the Increase of Student Population, and the Demand Will Also be Concentrated in Cities and Among the Middle-Class Families

Future changes in the size, structure and migration pattern of the population will bring about regional differences between the total amount of educational resources and structural demand. The changes in the school-age population, the migration of the educational population and the increase in the middle-class population will affect the size, structure and regional distribution of the school-age population in different periods and at different education stages. The changes in the relationship between the supply and the demand for enrollment capacity will have an impact on the utilitarian trend in education.

First, the maximum gap between the supply and demand of preschool education resources will not come until 2030 because the preschool-age population will climax before it declines and the demands for enrollment capacity at all levels will reach their peaks in a wavy order. Accordingly, the utilitarian trend of education will not be alleviated in the near future, and pain will continue to be felt during this stage. With the implementation of the universal two-child policy, China's birth population is expected to have significant growth in the short term and then decline after it climaxes. According to the latest forecast results, the number of kindergarten students in China will climax in approximately 2021 (Li et al., 2018), the number of primary school students will climax in approximately 2024, and the number of junior high school students will climax in approximately 2030. After 2035, the school-age populations at all levels will have negative growth to varying degrees. In the short term, the demand for enrollment capacity in basic education will still be strong and sustained. If the contradiction between the increasing demand and insufficient supply of enrollment capacity cannot be solved in time, the enrollment competition pressure brought by the shortage will aggravate the degree of education utilitarianism. This situation will be alleviated to a certain extent with the decline of the school-age population, but problems will still exist. The allocation of educational resources should consider not only the strong enrollment demand in the near future but also the stabilizing trend first and then the declining trend of the enrollment demand that follows (Sun et al., 2018).

Second, both the population migration between regions and that between urban and rural areas are on the decline. The migration between cities and the migration within cities are increasing, and utilitarian education will be increasingly concentrated in cities. Population migration will affect the educational needs of the region. The growth rate of China's population migration tends to slow down at present and in the future,⁴ the migration between cities and the migration within cities will be on the rise, and the migrant populations in cities are settling down in cities (Zhu et al., 2016). With the continuous development of high-skilled service industries such as finance and trade, cities with developed tertiary industries and large cities will absorb more migrant populations in the future, and the trend of population concentration in large cities will intensify (Xia et al., 2015). At the same time, regarding the migrant population accompanied by children, the net inflow trend of migrant children in supercities and type-I cities will be more prominent in the future.⁵ The large-scale migrant children generally exist in large cities, and the carrying pressure of primary school is higher than that of junior middle school (Ding et al., 2018). population mobility will aggravate the shortage of educational resources in some cities, and the

⁴ According to the results of the sampling survey based on 1% of the national population in 2015, the growth of China's migrant population is still growing. However, the future growth rate will slow down compared with the annual increase of 10–13 million migrant population from 2010 to 2014 and the corresponding growth rate.

⁵ A supercity refers to a city with more than 10 million permanent residents. A mega-city refers to a city with 5 to 10 million permanent residents. The type I city refers to a city with a permanent population of 3–5 million. The rate of migrant parents living with children was 26.32% in supercities, 31.43% in megacities cities, 51.39% in type-I cities and 42.86% in type-II cities.

structure of educational demand in inflow areas will change. It is necessary to meet the educational needs of local school-age children and provide enough school opportunities for the children of the floating population. The carrying capacity of educational resources in municipal districts will face challenges. If it cannot be solved well, the problem of urban education utilitarianism will be more concentrated in these cities.

Third, with the growth of the middle class population, both the demand for high-quality education and education expenditure will grow, and the utilitarian trend of education will further concentrate among the middle class population. Its scale will further expand, and the degree of utilitarianism will deepen. With the advancement of industrialization and urbanization, the number of well-educated urban white-collar jobs is increasing, while the number of blue-collar jobs such as farmers and workers is relatively decreasing, which leads to the growth of the middle class. The report delivered by Xi Jinping at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposes to “expand the middle-income group”. From 2020 to 2035, the proportion of the middle-income group will increase from 30 to 50%, and Chinese society will gradually develop an olive-shaped income distribution pattern. With changes in social structure, the middle class will play an increasingly important role in the future. White-collar workers, represented by entrepreneurs, managers and professional technicians, have accumulated certain professional status, social prestige, property and social influence and articulated increasingly higher requirements for the social environment and more expectations for their children’s education. As most of the middle class obtain the corresponding social status through education, they have the corresponding requirements for the opportunities and quality of their children’s education. They hope that their children can maintain their social class by obtaining high-quality education. With the expansion of the middle class, the demand for better education will be further expanded, and their competition for high-quality education resources will be fiercer. Their competition will sustain education utilitarianism. In other words, the expansion of the middle class is good for social stability and development, but it imposes unprecedented pressure on education.

4.3 The Development of Science and Technology Promises to Alleviate the Utilitarianism Trend in Education to a Certain Extent by Changing the Method of Education, Expanding Educational Resources and Reshaping Educational Evaluation

At present, a new round of scientific and technological development is accelerating, and new technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data, and the Internet of Things (IOT) are constantly emerging, which drives human society into an intelligent era of human–computer symbiosis, cross-border integration, and co-creation and sharing. The popularization of information technology in education provides new tools and means for education and teaching, transforms the concept and

the mode of education, and provides new possibilities for the reform of educational evaluation, which is expected to ease the utilitarian trend of education to a certain extent.

First, the development of science and technology changes the methods of education. The new technology can be used to remove the temporal and spatial barriers of education so that education will no longer be limited to the campus, a multi-dimensional interactive pattern between the school and society will be developed, high-quality information sharing, business cooperation and intelligent service will be realized, the reconstruction of the education process will be promoted, and new learning methods, such as ubiquitous learning, deep learning, adaptive learning, hybrid learning and human-computer interaction learning, will be popularized. Then, we will build an open and flexible education ecosystem that is personalized. This will have the value of standardized tests reexamined by the education evaluating personnel, who will pay more attention to the complex and advanced cognitive skills and implicit noncognitive learning and evaluate education quality with the promotion of people's overall development and their adaptation to economic and social development.

Second, the development of science and technology expands educational resources. We can use big data technology to collect and aggregate high-quality educational resources, promote the convergence and sharing of open resources, build a digital learning environment that is interconnected, accessible to all and covers the whole country, provide schools of all levels and types and all learners with appropriate learning resource services, meet the personalized needs of learners, teachers and administrators, break through the problem of educational balance that is difficult to solve by conventional means, and gradually narrow the gap between regions, the gap between urban and rural areas, and the gap between schools. On the basis of high quality and balanced development of education, we will break the evaluation orientation of "score first" and get out of the dilemma of "whoever reduces the burden first will suffer", and guide schools not to evaluate students by a single criterion, but to incorporate character, behavior, physical health and social practice into the evaluation index portfolio, and strive to reflect the overall performance of students' growth in the evaluation.

Third, the development of science and technology reshapes education evaluation. We can establish a more comprehensive education evaluation system using learning analytics, student portraits, big data and other technical means to set different standards for different students and turn the "one size fits all" standardized tests into personalized evaluations with "one more ruler". The goal of evaluation will shift from screening and selection to improving and promoting students' development. The content of evaluation will shift from simplistic evaluation of knowledge to comprehensive evaluation of knowledge, ability and emotional attitude. The methods of evaluation will be more intelligent, personalized and data-based, and the results will be more accurate, comprehensive and objective. More attention will be paid to students' motivation and sustainable development ability so that every student has the opportunity to excel.

5 Macro strategies to reverse the utilitarian trend in education of China

Utilitarianism in education in China must be reversed. However, the process will be complicated, comprehensive and lasting. Based on the analysis above, we would like to formulate macro strategies from changing the instrumental education beliefs of society, reforming the education system, strengthening the governance of education in cities, enhancing intergovernmental learning ability, etc.

5.1 *Extend the Concept of “Cultivating Talents by Molding people’s High Morals” to the Whole Society*

The report delivered by Xi Jinping at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China points out that the fundamental task of education is to cultivate talents by molding people’s high morals. *The Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Education System and Mechanism* issued by the general office of the CPC Central Committee and the general office of the State Council proposes to improve the systematic implementation mechanism of establishing morality and cultivating talent. In accordance with the requirements of the CPC Central Committee, education administrators and schools are speeding up the implementation of the fundamental task of building morality and cultivating people. To implement the task and reverse the utilitarian trend of education, there are two understandings that need to be further clarified. First, regarding the fundamental task, “education” is not confined to school education, and it should be understood as education in general, covering different social classes, various social sectors and school education at all levels. Second, regarding the systematic implementation of education reform, the word “systematization” refers to not only the overall development of morality, intelligence, sports, beauty and labor in education but also the coordination of school, family and society in the education cause.

We need to extend the fundamental concept of “cultivating talents by molding people’s high morals” to the whole society, upgrade the education concept of the society, and align the educational beliefs of all education participants to the fundamental concept. Government departments should reverse their view of “education achievements as GDP”, keep performance competition from spilling over into education, and resolutely break the mechanism of replacing education quality evaluation with scores and promotion rate. At present, the state attaches increasing importance to family education and has issued several documents, such as the *Guiding Principles on Strengthening Family Education*, which requires the formation of a family education mechanism consisting of “government leadership, department cooperation, parent participation, school organization and social support”. However, the implementation of family education is hindered by problems such as formalism, fragmentation and

polarization, which may become the intermediary variable to intensify social stratification in the long run (Luo et al., 2018). Family education should be improved by establishing a family education guidance mechanism and changing parents' idea of education. Society should establish evaluation standards for different talent, enrich evaluation tools and means, adhere to the evaluation of talent based on their ability and actual achievements and contributions, and build and improve the work-based income distribution system, which is supplemented by various distribution modes under the new era conditions. Correspondingly, we should establish a social culture that promotes "equal dignity and equal confidence despite different industries and different diplomas". At the same time, we should transform educational research achievements and popularize advanced education concepts to society as a whole.

5.2 Establishing an Education System that Features Better Integration of Different Stages of Instruction Allows Smooth Transfers Between Different Types of Schools and Facilitates Lifelong Learning

A country's education structure system is related to its national education ability and international education competitiveness. The utilitarian trend of education is related to the total amount of high-quality education resources and the structure of the education system. The expansion of high-quality education resources has been done in recent years and will continue to be done in the future. However, we need to pay more attention to the reform of the education structure system.

Supply side reform should be the perspective in which we consider how to improve the education structure. The aim of the reform should be to break institutional barriers such as excessive emphasis on diplomas and formal education and to establish an education system that features better integration of different stages of instruction, allows transfers between different types of schools, and facilitates lifelong learning. First, the different stages of instruction should be substantially integrated, curricular systems should be connected, and the enrollment exam and evaluation system should be perfected. Second, communication between different types of schools should be strengthened. The key is to strengthen the full communication of curriculum, credit and resources between general education and vocational education while emphasizing vocational education as a type of education and improving the quality of vocational education in the post-popularization era of high school education. We should strengthen the full communication and overall development among tertiary education after middle school, speed up the establishment of the mechanism for credit recognition, accumulation and conversion, and establish and improve the system governing inter-school transfer and transfer between different majors. Third, regarding admission and graduation, the key is to enhance the flexibility of the education structure system, take learners as the center, implement credit systems, and forge

an open and flexible lifelong learning system. In addition, there should be competition within the education structure system, and development with characteristics should be highlighted to enhance the vitality of the system and meet the diversified needs of learners.

5.3 Strengthening the Governance of Education in Cities

Cities, especially large- and medium-sized cities, are most heavily influenced by the utilitarian trend. With the rapid urbanization in China over the last 40 years of reform and opening up, the population has gradually concentrated in cities, especially in a few large- and medium-sized cities.⁶ In the future, urbanization will be furthered, and the focus will shift from “urbanization of land” to “urbanization of people”, which means that the migrant population and urban residents will have the same basic public services in education, employment, medical care, pension, affordable housing and other aspects (Chu, 2015). Accordingly, in a long period of time, it will be difficult to change the educational pattern of “crowded cities, empty towns and weak villages”, and the gap between the supply and demand of education resources in cities will be widened, which will further aggravate the educational anxiety of the urban population. At the same time, the insufficient supply and uneven distribution of high-quality education resources drive up the family’s education and training expenditure, which aggravates the anxiety of the middle class, the main group to spread education anxiety, lead public opinion and intensify the utilitarian trend of education.

Therefore, while adhering to the integration of urban and rural areas and attaching importance to rural education, we should strengthen urban education governance and prioritize the adjustment of education tempo in cities and the alleviation of urban middle class parents’ education anxiety. First, we should enhance the prediction of the demand and supply of urban school enrollment capacity. To effectively forecast the trend of urban population migration, scientifically analyze the changes in the total population and age structure, and estimate the demand for urban school enrollment capacity, we should make good use of information technology and integrate a variety of variables, such as industries, population, environment, talent policy and other factors. Accordingly, the planning and adjustment of school scale, layout and education investment will be carried out to ensure an adequate supply of enrollment capacity. In addition, we should actively explore the transfer payment system of migrant population education funds and gradually enroll the children of the migrant population in cities of different levels. Second, the balanced development of urban education should be promoted substantially. To realize balanced development, we should promote the unification of school-running standards in cities, promote the

⁶ The sixth population census in 2010 shows that China’s migrant population reached 221 million in 2010, and the top 50 cities with the highest proportion of migrant population absorbed 72.74% of the total migrant population in China (Xia et al., 2015).

synchronous and coordinated development of public and private education, and ensure a relatively equal starting point for children from different family backgrounds. At the same time, the supply of high-quality resources should be expanded, the group education system should be implemented substantially, branches of prestigious schools should be established, and the overall level of schools within the groups as well as branches of prestigious schools should be elevated. The overall urban education level should be raised via the exchange of principals and teachers of prestigious schools, the increase of online courses, and other measures. In particular, we should coordinate the resources in city centers, outskirts and outer suburban areas and eliminate the excessive concentration of high-quality education resources and excessive burden of education resources in particular regions (Ding et al., 2018). Third, we should make good use of the complementary role of off-campus education. We should be aware of the roles and values of off-campus education institutions and make good use of them to bridge class differences in education participation and education achievement while adhering to good school education and enhancing the confidence of parents and students in public schools (Yang, 2020). Meanwhile, we should strengthen the governance of off-campus education institutions so that they can better supplement school education. Schools, libraries, galleries, museums, science & technology associations, community colleges and other institutions should be encouraged to provide beneficial services such as student care, learning guidance, and specialty education to alleviate the pressure of parents' training expenditure and promote education equity.

5.4 Strengthening the Implementation Capability of Education Policies

To reverse the utilitarian trend of education, China has issued a series of policies, covering many aspects on a comprehensive basis. Then the implementation becomes particularly important. Domestic and foreign experience shows that although all policies may have their “the first kilometer” in implementation, they may not have the “last kilometer”, and the effect of implementation may be positive or negative. In addition, China is a large country with differences in the quality of education between urban and rural areas, between regions and between schools. In the process of implementing education policies, we should strengthen the “intergovernmental learning capacity” and avoid mechanical implementation, selective implementation and the ostrich phenomenon.

First, we should resolve the conflict between top-level design and grassroots operation, understand the fact that grassroots education relies on educational *habitus*, local social culture, and local government assessment and evaluation, and find the balance points for the creative implementation of policies. Second, we should resolve the conflict between general requirements of policies and specific reality, grasp local characteristics, school conditions and students' foundation, hold fast to the soul of national policies, and find the specific details of local implementation. Third,